

# A Five-headed Wooden Elephant : A Case Study

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fig. 1 : Elephant (wooden) with five trunks

The Museum für Indische Kunst, Berlin houses a caparisoned wooden elephant hailing from Gujarat, assignable to c. 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> century<sup>1</sup> (fig. 1). Being of unusual type with five heads, the figure has usually been taken as outcome of 'sculptor's fantasy'.<sup>1</sup> But it actually needs more attention for its proper identification.

Besides the main trunk suspended in front, the elephant has been provided with four additional heads with trunks. Of them, the lower one on right carries a wreath with prominent central pendant, while the upper one is perhaps devoid of any such thing. On the corresponding side the trunk of the upper one head holds possibly a piece of cloth, while the lower one coils the tusk of the main head. Thus it is the case of 'five in one'. For proper understanding of this figure we will have to turn to sculptures and literature as well.

In sculptural art from about 7<sup>th</sup> century AD, onward the elephant-headed god Gaṇeśa often comes to be associated with the number 'five'. Not only that we find his images with

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five trunks and four or more hands, but also in panels as five Gaṇapati figures in a row. This type is mostly noticed in U.P., M.P. and Rajasthan. This group of five is of two types. One depicts all the five in anthropomorphic forms, usually seated or some of them also as dancing. Such panels have been found on three stone slabs depicting the sacred city Varanasi,<sup>2</sup> or even on such other slabs which are modelled after Varanasi slabs in general, but carved in honour of other deities<sup>3</sup> like Viṣṇu from U.P., Viṣṇu as Vaikuṅṭha from Kālañjar, and Śiva as Andhakāri from Tripuri (M.P.). One partly similar slab from Vidisha (M.P.), but without any chief deity also depicts five Gaṇapatis in a line.<sup>4</sup> The second type is more interesting. Here one of the five Gaṇapatis is shown as 'elephant' standing enface. In such a case from Jamaroli in Rajasthan this elephant too has *prabhāmaṇḍala* like other four.<sup>5</sup> This clearly shows that he is also a divine figure, and not mere decorative element. These different depictions reveal two major points. First is association of number 'five' with Gaṇeśa, and the second is appearance of Gaṇeśa in theriomorphic form as an elephant, standing enface in some cases.

For proper understanding of these two points, we will have to look into the literary evidence. The word 'Pañca-vināyaka' for five Gaṇapatis finds mention in the Kāśikhanda of the *Skandapurāṇa*.<sup>6</sup> This work referring to fifty-six Gaṇapatis in Varanasi<sup>7</sup> names five as 'ādyā' (original) forms of Dhunḍivināyaka and enlists them as Bhagīratha Gaṇeśa (G) Hariśchandra G., Kaparda G., Bindu G. and Dhunḍī himself.<sup>8</sup> The work records another list of Pañca-Vināyakas,<sup>9</sup> wherein along with Dhunḍī four others have been named. Barring these two lists, one appears in the Marāṭhi work *Gurucaritra* of Saraswatī Gaṅgādhara.<sup>10</sup> Besides these, traditional figures of five Gaṇapatis, known as Dūdhavināyaka, Dadhivināyaka, etc. are famous in Varanasi.

So far the second point that is Gaṇapati in the form of an elephant is concerned, we have sufficient literary data in support. One of the names of Gaṇeśa is *Gajavināyaka*.<sup>11</sup> The *Gaṇeśapurāṇa*<sup>12</sup> in its *Gaṇeśa-sahasranāma* describes the god as an elephant with its tail (*lāṅgula*), tying posts or tying rope (*ālana*), chains (*nigada*) and also refers to a pond for merry making (*keli-sarovara*). The *Narasimhapurāṇa* also refers to this form of Gaṇeśa.<sup>13</sup> According to *Suprabhedāgama*<sup>14</sup> Gaṇeśa was produced as a result of amorous activities of Śiva-Pārvatī in the form of an elephant couple. As per *Vāyupurāṇa*<sup>15</sup> Brahmā occupied Dharmaśilā at Gaya in the form of Gajavināyaka.

In the light of the above evidences of art and literature, the five-headed wooden elephant under reference can well be identified as Gajavināyaka with five figures of Gaṇapati, all in one. The sculptor, familiar with two traditions current in the neighbouring territories skilfully, mixed them together and carved this unique figure.

One may be tempted to take this figure as Airāvata, the mount of Indra, as sometimes in miniature paintings Airāvata appears with five trunks; but literary evidence goes against this. According to the *Mahābhārata*<sup>16</sup> and *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*<sup>17</sup> Airāvata has four tusks only (*caturdanta*). It is to be borne in mind that the white elephant in painting appears with single head and five trunks, while our elephant has five distinct heads, which is a noteworthy feature.

## References

- \* On 4<sup>th</sup> December, 2006 the "Museum für Indische Kunst, Berlin" lost its independent status and was merged with the former "Museum für Ostasiatische Kunst" into the new "Museum für Asiatische Kunst". The former collections of the Museum für Indische Kunst now form the "Kunstsammlung Süd-, Südost- und Zentralasiens" of the "Museum für Asiatische Kunst-Staatliche Museen zu Berlin" (*South, Southeast and Central Asia Art Collections in the Asian Art Museum-National Museums in Berlin*). [Editor]
1. Härtel/Auboyer 1971 : 178, pl. 97
  2. Joshi 1989.
  3. Agrawala 1977 : panels illustrated in figs. 3, 12 and 13, *śikhara* illustrated in figs. 4 and 9.
  4. See Joshi 1989.
  5. See Agrawala 1977 : 142, referring to Agrawala, R.C. 1971 : pls. I-II.
  6. *Skandapurāṇa, Kāśīkhaṇḍa*, 100.77, p. 695; 100.94, p. 696.
  7. *Ibid.*, 57.58-115, pp. 395-399.
  8. *Ibid.* 57.123-125, p. 399.
  9. *Ibid.* 100.86-88, p. 696.
  10. *Gurucaritra*, 41.84.
  11. *Skandapurāṇa, Kāśīkhaṇḍa*, 57.104, p. 398.
  12. *Gaṇeśapurāṇa, pūrvārdha*, 46.31-32.
  13. *Narasimhapurāṇa*, 25.13, varṣa 45/1-2 Kalyāṇa, p. 73.
  14. Gopinatha Rao 1914 : 44-45.
  15. *Vāyupurāṇa, upasamhāra*, 106.57, p. 579.
  16. *Mahābhārata, Ādiparvan*, 18.40.
  17. *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, VIII. 8.4.

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*Narasimhapurāṇa*, 'Kalyāṇa', varṣa 45, aṅka 1, Gorakhpur, January 1971.

*Skandapurāṇa* (1991) Mora Edition. Kolkata.

*Vāyupurāṇa*, Sam 2016 Mora Edition. Kolkata.

