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Airavatam Gajendranam

Shefalika Awasthi

Introduction

उच्चैःश्रवसमश्वानां विद्धि माममृतोद्भवम् ।
ऐरावतं गजेन्द्राणां नराणां च नराधिपम् ॥

*Uchchaihshravasamashvanam viddhi mamamritodbhavam /
Airavatam gajendranam naranam cha naradhipam / /¹*

Bhagvad Geeta, 10.27

In twenty-seventh *shloka* of the tenth chapter of *Bhagvad Geeta*, Krishna says, 'of horses know me as *Uchchashrava*, born of nectar. Among kingly elephants I am Airavata, among men, I am the King'.

The seeds of my elephant love were sown while I was working as Curator (Collections Manager) in Maharaja Sawai Man Singh II Museum, The City Palace, Jaipur. When I began working on the painting collection I was intrigued by the elephant imagery in courtly literature. Women had the gait of an elephant (*Gajagamini*), thighs like elephant trunks and breasts like elephant head bumps; while men were like mountain raging elephants.

Depiction of elephants in paintings, sculptures, sketches, etc. has given him a place of honour in Indian Art. While complex myths and legends of India were carved on temples in every corner of the country and travelled with traders and pilgrims to faraway lands, we also find the elephant images in folklore. By seeing all this I also became enchanted by elephant (Airavata) for not because of his cuteness but for being simultaneously animal and divine.

I am not alone in my fascination for this aesthetically delightful animal. Its appeal may be rooted in its distinctive appearance - trunk, flapping ears, wrinkled

skin and size, all of which attracts the children and adults alike.

After seeing the wooden model of Airavata displayed in the first floor of Kutch Museum, Bhuj my elephant obsession set in. I was hooked. Eventually, I felt something more needed to be done and began writing a paper on the cultural history and importance of the celestial animal Airavata. From the Indus valley civilization where the majestic form of an elephant first appears in art in a famous seal from the Harappan period, they have appeared in art, iconography and folk images as well as stories in Buddhist, Jaina and Hindu mythology.

According to the *Kurmapurana*² when Gods and demons churned the milky ocean (*Ksheer-sagar*) Airavata was one of the fourteen treasures that emerged. He was the first elephant and was claimed by Indra. Airavata, the descendant of the lineage of sage Kashyapa is also the nephew of Indra, as Indra was Kashyapa's son by Aditi. Kashyapa married Daksha's ten daughters - Mrigi, Mrigamanda, Harl, Bhadramata, Aditi, Sharduli, Shveta, Surabhi, Sarasa and Kadru. Out of these, Bhadramata had a daughter named Iravati whose son was Airavata. 'Another version of the birth of Airavata stated that he was born from the cosmic golden egg (*hiranyagarbha*) out of which the sun emerged. At the request of the sages, Brahma took the two halves of the broken shell in his hands and breathed life into them. Out of the one came Airavata and seven other male elephants, i.e. Pundarika, Kumuda, Vamana, Anjan, Pushpaduta, Sarvabhauma and Supratika. While out of the second spring, eight female elephants emerged which became the consorts of the former. These eight pairs known as *Diggajas*³ stand in the eight quarter of the sky and bear it in their sturdy backs. Airavata and his mate Abharamu guard the eastern direction. Thus, the mythical account of these *Diggajas* gave birth to the notion that elephants support the earth'.⁴ These eight elephants, all white indicating their celestial nature came together when Gods churned the ocean of milk to obtain nectar and welcome Lakshmi, the Goddess of wealth. They raised their trunk and sprayed her with water. This was the *Abhisheka* ritual; the pouring of water which is again indicative of rain. With rain comes vegetation and with vegetation comes wealth and with wealth comes power.

There is another notion of the birth of Airavata. As per the Hindu mythology 'Airavata was the main cause of the churning of milky ocean. It is said that once sage Durvasa came to meet Indra. As Indra got down from his elephant and bowed down to him the happy sage gave him divine floral garland which Indra put on the elephant's tusk. Meanwhile the fragrance of the garland invited thousands of bees which irritated the elephant who threw it down and crushed it under his feet. This enraged the sage as the garland was to be treated with great respect and honour since it was a *Prasada*.⁵ Durvasa cursed Indra and all the Gods to be bereft of all strength, energy and fortune. Indra and other Gods ran to Vishnu, lying in the *Ksheer-sagar* who suggested that *Amrita* (nectar) that would emerge from *Samudra-manthan* (churning of ocean) alone can cure them from the affect of this curse. Gods then befriended with the demons and with their help they churned the ocean of milk. Obtained the nectar, drank it and regained their youth'.⁶

The story of the churning of ocean found place in almost all the *Puranas*. There is one more version of the emergence of *Airavata* from the ocean. The story appeared in the eighteenth chapter of the *Adi Parva* of *Mahabharata*. The explanation given there is that when Durvasa cursed the Gods, Airavata got oppressed with a sense of guilt as he was responsible for the curse. So he took refuge in the ocean and started propitiating Vishnu. There is however no warrant of such an explanation in the *Puranas* but the explanation sounds plausible because it explains the absence of Airavata during the interval between Durvasa's curse and the churning of ocean. Airavata who is represented as snow white elephant is white probably because of his long stay in the milky ocean. It is also said that Indra rides atop on Airavata in to battle and husk his thunderbolt at dark rain bearing monsoon clouds forcing them to release rain. Indra's white elephant symbolizes the white clouds that embellish the sky when the rain clouds have passed.

According to a tradition, initially all elephants had wings in the time of yore. One day a number of elephants alighted on the branch of a tree to listen to the sage Dirghatamas⁷ while he was giving a discourse to his disciples. The bough

broke under the heavy burden, disturbed the saint and killed some of his students. The sage cursed the elephants so that they lost their wings and also their power of changing shape at will.

Airavata is also the King of elephants. In the *Vishnupurana*⁸ it is being told that when the *Maharshis* had crowned Prithu as the sovereign King, Brahma gave new posts of honour to many of the Gods. He made Soma (Moon) the lord of stars, planets, Brahmins and herbs. Kubera was made the over Lord of all Kings, Varuna was made the Lord of waters, Vishnu the Lord of *Adityas* and Pavaka (fire) the Lord of the *Vasus*. Along with these, Brahma made Airavata the Lord of all elephants.

Airavata has found mention in the tenth canto of *Bhagvatpurana* as well. After the Govardhan incident, Indra came to *Brija-mandala*, alighted from his elephant and worshipped Lord Krishna. He was joined by the divine cow Surabhi who also performed the *Abhisheka* of the Supreme Lord. All the Gods and Goddesses who came down from heaven also bathed Krishna. After this, Airavata took the holy water in his trunk and poured it on to the Lord. He lifted garlands of flowers with his trunk and placed them around the neck of Krishna. The water got collected in the form of a tank (*kunda*). Since the collected water was formed by Airavata the *kunda* is known as *Airavata-kunda* which is located in the Govardhan town of Uttar Pradesh. The *kunda* had a flight of steps along one side to walk down and bathe.

At Darasuram near Tanjore temple, it is believed that Airavat worshipped the *Lingam*, which is named after him as *Airavateshvara*. This temple was built by Raja Raja Chola II in 1146-73 CE.⁹

White elephants are also intricately linked to Buddhist cosmology. The mount of Sakka's (a Buddhist deity and ruler of the Tavatimsa heaven) is a three-headed white elephant named Airavata. According to Buddhist texts; Shakyamuni Buddha's mother Queen Mahamaya dreamt that a white elephant with six tusks entered her womb; a sign of divine conception. Thus a white elephant has long been synonymous with the Buddha himself.

As per the *Jataka* stories, Buddha in his previous life was Vesantara, Prince of Shivi, who had in his stables a magical elephant that drew rainclouds whenever it was required. And therefore when there was a drought in Kalinga, the King requested that Vesantara's elephant be sent there and draw the rain. Such type of stories already indicates that in India and South East Asia the elephant Airavata is associated with rain and fertility.

Airavata and Indra hold an important place in Jaina cosmology too. As per the Jaina tradition the dream of a white elephant is associated with the birth of Jaina *Tirthanakara* and other prominent people. In Jainism, Indra who is also known as Svadharmendra along with Airavata most commonly appears in stories related to Mahavira in which Indra himself manages and celebrates the *Tirthankara's* life such as *Garbha-Kalyanak*, *Janma-Kalyanak*, *Diksha-Kalyanak*, *Kevalajnana-Kalyanak* and *Moksha-Kalyanak*. The wooden painted model of Airavata displayed in the Kutch Museum, Bhuj too belonged to the Jaina community and was used during procession (Figs.1-2).

The elephant is an 18th century masterpiece which was brought into the Museum around 1975 from Tapagachha, the Jain *Derasar* in Mandvi. Originally made in Cochin, the importance of the model lies in the fact that the local *Kamagiri* painting in the form of flowers and creepers has been done on the snow white wooden elephant. The trustees of *Derasar*, who already decided to sell it to some businessman in princely sum of Rs. 10,000, gave it to the Museum on the persuasion of the then Collector Shri R. Balkrishnana and a leading social worker Shri Zumakh Lal Mehta, which was ultimately sold to the Museum in 8000 rupees. Each of the elephant trunks is crowned by a temple and each temple contains an image of Jain *Tirthanakara*. This model shows that Indra mounted on the back of Airavata goes to celebrate the event of a birth of Jaina *Tirthankara*. On the completion of its centenary year in 1978 the Government of India issued a postal stamp depicting this Airavata under the postal series 'Treasures of Museum' (Figs.3-4).

Thus, I must say that it has been a challenging journey for Airavata who was tired of the delicacies in heaven and therefore flown down to the earth and

remained in the ocean for quite some time. Risen from the waters, the statue (displayed in the Museum) of the divine elephant can be seen still watching over the western direction as if he is looking back at his footprints in the sand where now he can walk with his memories; never with his footsteps.

References & Notes

1. *Shreemad Bhagvat Geeta*, Gita Press Gorakhpur, 1965, p.135.
2. *Ksheer-sagar* : In Hindu cosmology the ocean of milk is a place where Vishnu reclines over Sheshanaga along with his consort Lakshmi.
3. *Diggajas* are the elephants that are supporting the directions.
4. S.P. Gupta, *Elephant in Indian Art and Mythology*, 1983, p.7.
5. *Prasada* is a religious offering in both Hinduism and Sikhism.
6. Vettam Mani, *Puranic Encyclopaedia: A comprehensive dictionary with special reference to the epic and puranic literature*, 1975.
7. Dirghatamas was an ancient sage well known for his philosophical verses in the *Rigveda*.
8. *Vishnupurana*, Chap.22.
9. <https://wikivisually.com/wiki/Airavata>.

The figures of elephants are very much popular since ancient times, which is still continuing in wood, terracotta and painting. On the auspicious occasions the figures of elephants are painted on the outer walls of houses. It is also kept in the *mandapas* on the occasion of marriages, especially in eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. - Editor



Fig.1 : Wooden model of Airavata, Kutch Museum, Bhuj



Fig.2 : Another angle of Fig.1

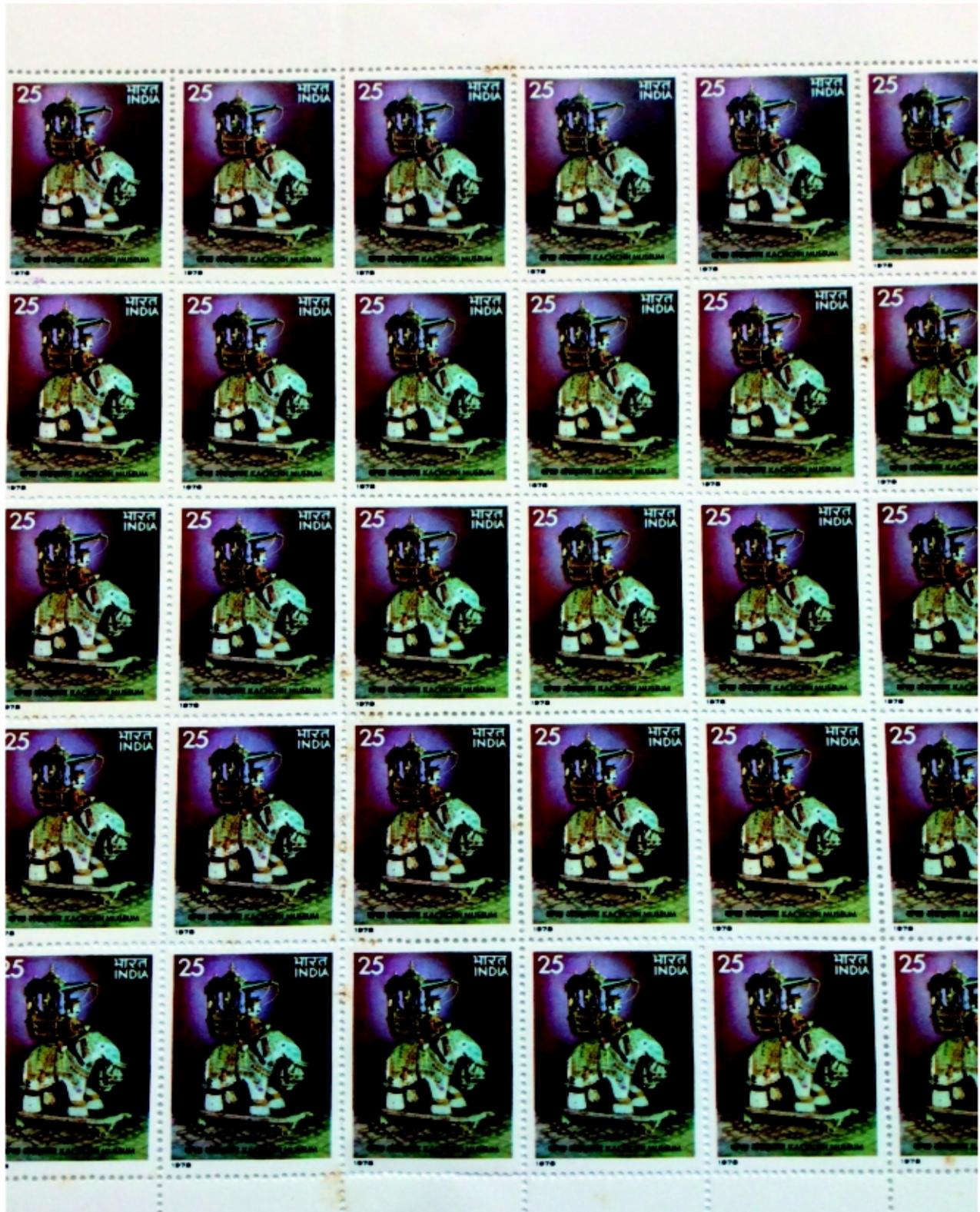


Fig.3 : Stamp issued by the Government of India in 1978



Fig.4 : Greeting card of the stamp