

# Religious and Social Context of Animals and Birds in Chandella Art

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The Chandellas were the rulers of Jejakabhukti (present Bundelkhand region of M.P. and U.P.). The region is rich in natural resources with rich flora and fauna, which are set against beautiful and picturesque landscape.<sup>1</sup> The flowing rivers, the majestic Vindhyan mountains, the fecund forests, the trees with the green leaves and flowers are all rich, which all have been source of joy and inspiration for the Chandella artists, who had an abiding love for environment. The animals, no less than trees and plants, have been taken as friends and companions. The deer in the hermitage is one of the inmates treated with utmost affection. The birds were not of any less concern. The *Vedic* hymns invoke the grace of the celestials for the welfare of the four-footed and two-footed ie, the animals as well as men.<sup>2</sup>

Chandella sculptures may be divided into two sections :<sup>3</sup>

1. Stone sculptures
2. Rock-cut sculptures

The stone sculptures were carved on the stone slabs brought by the labourers from near by stone quarries. We find a beautiful illustration on one panel sculpture at Khajurāho, where a stone slab is depicted as being brought by the labourers and the sculptor is shown sitting and carving the sculptures.<sup>4</sup> This panel indicates the sculpture making process at Khajurāho. The stone sculptures were mostly the component of temple architecture in Chandella art. Sculptures are classified by Krishnadeva<sup>5</sup> into five categories. Devangana Desai<sup>6</sup> classified them into eight categories. Generally art historians accept the classification of Krishnadeva. The fifth category of Krishnadeva's classification pertains to the sculptures of animals including the *Vyāla* or *Śārdūla*, a heraldic and fabulous animal with head of elephant, man, horse, parrot, boar, etc. This sculptural theme of Chandella art is related with deep symbolism.<sup>7</sup> The Chandella artist has also depicted the *Vyāla* haunt, different types of animals, birds, reptiles and others for decorative purpose. We find an artistic and ornamental

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decoration of snakes at the Ajaigarh fort temple.<sup>8</sup> Chandella art is rich in the rendering of fauna and flora.

The rock-cut Chandella sculptures are less studied by art historians. The rock-cut sculptures were carved at Ajaigarh, Kalanjara, Mahoba and Deogarh. The characteristic feature of these is that they are not the part of temple architecture yet we find sufficient depiction of animals and birds in rock-cut sculptures.

Much work has been done on Chandella sculptures by various scholars.<sup>9</sup> But so far no systematic study of the figures of animals and birds in Chandella art has been attempted and hence this paper.<sup>10</sup>

Jejakabhukti region, over which Chandellas ruled for more than six centuries<sup>11</sup>, is full of thick forest. It provided shelter to different types of animals and birds. This aspect is nicely reflected in Chandella sculptures in various types and forms of flora and fauna renderings. The Chandella artist depicted different types of animals and birds to decorate their temples at Khajurāho and other places. The depiction of animals and birds in Chandella sculptures is also related to contemporary socio-economic and religious milieu. The depictions of animals in Chandella art are as under. Hunting and the chase of animals have been related with human life from earliest times. The representations of animals as found in the sculpture of Chandellas include hunting, man-animal fights, animal combats and pet keeping.

### 1. Hunting Scenes

During the Chandella period hunting became a significant part of royal and aristocrat society as referred to by the contemporary literature.<sup>12</sup> Proficiency in the chase was considered to be an achievement.<sup>13</sup> The depiction of hunting scenes in Chandella sculptures are carved in the narrow friezes of *jagatī* and the *adhiṣṭhāna*. One very beautiful panel of hunting scene is exhibited in the Khajuraho Museum. In the hunting parties appear to have started after a great preparation along with a large paraphernalia which includes several hunters, some on mounts and some on foot. It has been graphically described by Stella Kramrich in these words : A Scene of "antelope sticking" with two of the animals impaled, while an antelope, a bull, a ram (?) and two other animals are taken on leads toward the impaled victims. The bearded hunter and the younger ones following him carry bows, dart and sword. A small and kneeling figure in front allows the long lead of the one of the two smaller animals (?) to pass between the legs of captured bull. A horse follows the hunter. What is the story? This narrative relief in its composition does not essentially differ from early Indian examples. But the modelling of men and animals is particularly of Chandella style; plastically inert in this example, the volumes are stuck within their own weight. The

marching rhythm, however, carved by these onerous shapes still has flux."<sup>14</sup> In this scene, the hunters are shown going on foot and the tamed animals are held by them by means of ropes and bands. The purpose of taking trained animals was to attract the wild beast.<sup>15</sup> Getting the smell of these animals the beasts used to come out of their bushes and were instantaneously attacked by the hunters. The dogs, with their sense of smell could easily detect the hide out of the wild beasts.<sup>16</sup>

Mounted hunters mostly used a spear in attacking the animal.<sup>17</sup> Whenever necessary they threw it at the fast running beast.<sup>18</sup> The hunter also carried a sword, but instead of hanging from the waist band, it used to be fixed on left of the seat on the horse, and was used only in an emergency, when the animals attacked the hunter. Generally several hunters riding on horses surrounded the animals from all sides and gradually narrowing the circle, pierced them with the spears.<sup>19</sup> In one of the scenes<sup>20</sup> a horse rider is chasing a boar with speed. His right hand is uplifted to throw the spear at the animal. On the other side, another hunter is ready with bow to charge arrow.<sup>21</sup> After the beast fell, it was trampled on by the horse.<sup>22</sup> This assured the death of the animal and gave courage to the hunting horses. The scenes of boar hunting are the largest in number at Khajurāho.<sup>23</sup> This indicate that boar hunting was the most popular and also possibly that the region was, full of boars. Next comes the hunting of deer.<sup>24</sup> The birds were also hunted. Some of them were quite big and heavy, such as peacock.<sup>25</sup>

After the hunt was over, the rejoicing party returned with the kill.<sup>26</sup> The hunted animal was slung by its feet from a pole and carried home by two or four persons, depending on the weight of the animal.<sup>27</sup> Lighter animals were tied to one end of the pole and carried by only one person. A frieze in the Kandariyā Mahādeva temple depicts a hunter returning with a peacock.<sup>28</sup> He has tied its beak to one end of the stick. *Prithvīrāja Rāso* corroborates these modes of transportation, but it mentions other means also, such as carts, camels, elephants, etc.<sup>29</sup> In one of the depictions of the hunting scenes,<sup>30</sup> two men are carrying boar tied to the middle of the pole, while a man with a bow is shown leading. It appears that sometimes the hunter used to employ labourers also to carry the animal, since the persons carrying the animal do not bear any weapons.

## 2. Animal Combats

During the medieval period animal combats became quite popular. There are many scenes of animal combat in Chandella sculptures. Duels between elephants or between a lion and an elephant were depicted at Khajurāho.<sup>31</sup> Generally in such scenes, only the participating animals are depicted. In few examples some human figures also appear, but none of them can be recognised as a king or a person of an equally high status.

### 3. Man and Animal Combat

At Khajurāho a few scenes pertain to fight between man and elephant. The man though weaker in strength manage to resist the animal due to his smartness and intelligence. In some scenes, the man is shown engaged in a fight with an elephant who is fully decorated. The man is seen charging with a spear.<sup>32</sup> Sometimes a man is depicted as holding the tusk of the elephant and charging with a dagger or sword.<sup>33</sup> Likewise warriors with dagger are shown fighting with leogryphs (*vyāla*) in numerous examples.

### 4. Animal Pets

The Chandella sculptures reflect that the people took pleasure in keeping pets, both birds and animals. The women liked to keep a parrot in their homes and passed their lonely time by talking with the birds. Many sculptures depict a woman standing with a parrot perched on her left wrist and holding a bunch of fruits in her right hand.<sup>34</sup> In some cases the fruit is absent and women are shown standing only with the bird on their wrist.<sup>35</sup> Their expression shows that they are talking to the birds.<sup>36</sup> The cage is depicted in one rock sculpture at Kalanjara.<sup>37</sup> A small bird perhaps a *Sārikā* is sitting on the back of the palm of a woman depicted inside the Jagadambī temple (Khajurāho)<sup>38</sup>, who is carefully trying to shield the bird from the wind or light with her right hand, which is held like a canopy over it. A bird is held in the left hand of woman,<sup>39</sup> who is looking fondly at it with her right hand held in the pose of offering something to the bird. In another depiction woman is holding mangoes by their stalks in her right hand while on the wrist of her left hand is sitting a parrot.<sup>40</sup> Among animals, the monkey is tamed like birds. They too were allowed to be quite free and were loved. They could freely roam about in the home. In a scene in the temple at Khajurāho, a monkey is depicted even in the private chamber of the husband and wife.<sup>41</sup> Here a couple has been shown in embrace and a monkey stands near by. He is holding an iron crook, held by the man on the other side. The lady has turned slightly to see the mischief of their pet. In case of monkey pets also, it was the women who took more interest and treated the animals with care and love. In a scene a woman is shown standing with monkey climbing up her right leg.<sup>42</sup> The woman does not appear to mind this. In another scene, the monkey has climbed her left thigh.<sup>43</sup> She is again unmoved, watching her pet with amusement. Ultimately, as depicted in the temples of Khajurāho the women have taken the pet in their lap.<sup>44</sup> Depiction of domesticated animals like horse, the bull, the cow, the buffalo, the elephant, the dog, the monkey, the goat, the ram, the deer, the camel and ass shows that the cattle rearing and the taming was popular and formed one of occupations of the people. Similarly birds like parrot, peacock, swan, owl in the hands of women give glimpse of contemporary means of amusement and pet keeping.

## 5. Animals and Birds associated with Religion

Animals and birds were also associated closely with different cults prevalent during the Chandella period. Animals and birds as *vāhanas* of gods and goddesses became the part of religious imagery. Mostly the *vāhanas* to gods and goddesses were assigned, according to the nature of their masters.

(a) **Lion** : The lion is a royal animal, the king of forest. He has great royal qualities symbolising strength, power and dignity<sup>45</sup>. Lion is depicted in the Chandella art in various ways and forms. Lion is depicted mostly as the *vāhana* of Durgā in various examples in Chandella sculptures at Khajurāho and other places.<sup>46</sup> Lion is also depicted in some images at Khajurāho as the *vāhana* of Lakṣmī.<sup>47</sup> According to B.C. Bhattacharya<sup>48</sup> Lakṣmī can have the lion as her vehicle but he further states that no such image has come down to us. Khajurāho however supplies the rare example.<sup>49</sup> At Khajurāho we find the images of *simha-vāhanā* Durgā at several places.<sup>50</sup> We also find lion as *vāhana* of Umā in the Umā-Maheśvara images.<sup>51</sup> Similarly in the Mahiṣāmardinī images of Durgā also lion is depicted as *vāhana*.<sup>52</sup> At Kalanjara we find the depiction of lion face in case of Kāla Bhairava image.<sup>53</sup> Thus lion is also associated with Śiva images. Lion is also connected with Viṣṇu. We find depiction of lion face Neṛsimha images.<sup>54</sup> The depiction of lion face in the three-faced and four-faced images of Vaikunṭha Viṣṇu are also found at Khajurāho<sup>55</sup> and Kalanjara<sup>56</sup>. Thus lion is associated with royalty and regal power<sup>57</sup>. Lion is also connected with the Jaina Tīrthaṅkara Mahāvīra as his cognizance<sup>58</sup>. We find the depiction of lion in famous image of Bodhisattva Simhanāda Avalokiteśvara from Mahoba.<sup>59</sup>

**Vyāla** (Mythical Creatures) : It is originally derived from Persian art. This composite creature, with body of a lion and the face of an elephant, goat, parrot, horse and other animals and the birds was known in India from at least second century B.C.E.<sup>60</sup>. *Vyāla* enjoyed great popularity in medieval Indian temples. It was considered to be a protective motif, and was depicted in recesses of the walls, and on the brackets of pillars, at Khajurāho.<sup>61</sup> A warrior is often depicted fighting a rampant *Vyāla*. *Śilpa* texts describe different varieties of *Vyāla* images. The *Aparājitapṛcchā* (12 century C.E.) describes sixteen types of *Vyālas* with faces of different creatures<sup>62</sup> and adds that there are further variations due to their diverse body forms. At Khajurāho the Parśvanātha<sup>63</sup>, Devī Jagadambī<sup>64</sup> and other temples have a number of *Vyāla* figures on their outer walls.

At Khajurāho we find several independent images of lion carved in the Lakṣmaṇa, Viśvanātha<sup>65</sup> and Devī Jagadambī temples.

**(b) Elephant :** After lion, the elephant was most important animal at Khajurāho, which is associated with different religions. The elephant is a noble and inspiring animal, majestic in stature, yet gentle. It is embodiment of strength and self sacrifice. The trumpeting of the elephants on the battlefield strike terror in the enemy.<sup>66</sup> Elephant symbolized power, wealth, dignity and royalty, that is why it was considered as the royal vehicle for king. Similarly, elephant is the *vāhana* of *Devarāja* Indra. Elephant is also conceived as the *vāhana* of Rudra.<sup>67</sup> It is also associated with Lakṣmī and we find its depiction as lustrating Lakṣmī. Such images of *Abhiṣeka*-Lakṣmī are found in Chandella art.<sup>68</sup> It is also associated with Gaṇeśa, who is *Gajānana* having the head of an elephant. Elephant is also depicted in *Gajāsurasamhāra-mūrti* of Śiva at Khajurāho.<sup>69</sup> It is also connected with Indrāṇī in Saptamātrkā images.<sup>70</sup> Elephant is associated as symbol of Jaina Tīrthaṅkara Ajitanātha.<sup>71</sup> Elephant is also related with Jaina *yakṣa* and *yakṣī* images.<sup>72</sup> We find some independent image of elephant at Khajurāho. Elephant is depicted in the Kṛṣṇa-*līlā* sculptures at Khajurāho also. Thus associated with all the religions, elephant is repeatedly represented in scenes of royal procession of march of army on the *adhiṣṭhāna* of Lakṣmaṇa Temple (c. 950 C.E.).

**(c) Horse :** Horse is depicted in Chandella art at various places in different ways and forms. Horse, associated with the Sun, finds depiction in Sūrya images.<sup>73</sup> Horse is also connected with *Kalki*, incarnatory form of Viṣṇu. Hayagrīva, the horse headed *avatāra* of Viṣṇu (associated with learning) saved the *Vedas* from the demons. These figures are placed in cardinal niches of Lakṣmaṇa and Vāmana temples.<sup>74</sup> There is also a four-faced Vaikunṭha image with one face being that of horse. Horse is associated with Sambhavanātha, the third Tīrthaṅkara.<sup>75</sup> It is also related with Jain *yakṣi* Manovegā.<sup>76</sup> At Kalanjara we find the depiction of horse in scene of Samudramanathan.<sup>77</sup>

**(d) Nandī :** Nandī is associated with Śiva as his *vāhana*. At Kalanjara we find some unique images of Nandī bearing a Śiva *liṅga* or *pañcha-liṅgas* on his back<sup>78</sup>. We find independent depiction of Nandī at Ajaigarh, Kalanjara<sup>79</sup> and Khajurāho. We find a separate temple of Nandī at Khajurāho in front of Viśvanātha temple. Bull is invariably depicted as *vāhana* of Śiva in Umā-Maheśvara images carved at Ajaigarh, Kalanjara<sup>80</sup> and Khajurāho. Nandī is also carved at Kalanjara in human form having a bull head.<sup>81</sup> We find various decorated Nandī images at Khajurāho. Nandī is also treated as a *gaṇa* of Śiva. At Khajurāho we find images of Aṣṭavasus having the face of bull. Nandī is generally depicted in seating posture in front of Śiva temple. Nandī is also associated with Jainism. It is the symbol of Jaina Tīrthaṅkara Ādinātha.

(c) **Varāha** : Varāha is one of the ten incarnations of Viṣṇu. In the Chandella sculptural art we find the depiction of Varāha in different forms. At Khajurāho there is separate temple of Varāha in front of the Lakṣmaṇa temple, enshrining big image of Varāha. According to Devangana Desai it is most powerful icon of Varāha in India.<sup>82</sup> Here he is portrayed in animal form. This magnificent sculpture in the round is positioned in the centre of the shrine with space for walking around. This Varāha image carries on its body more than six hundred seventy five miniature figures carved in twelve rows. The figure contains all the important Brahmanical divinities including Gaṇeśa, the seven Mothers, the seven sages, the eight Guardians of space, the nine planetary divinities, the river goddesses, Rudras and different forms of Viṣṇu.<sup>83</sup> This Varāha represents the cosmic form, *Viśvarūpa*. There was also a figure of *Bhūdevī*, which is not available now. This image is related to the victory of Yaśovarman.<sup>84</sup> At Kalānjara we find a Varāha image in black stone in theriomorphic form, now much broken.<sup>85</sup> There is also a Varāha image having human body and face of Varāha lying near Nīlakaṇṭha temple.<sup>86</sup> At Ajaigarh we also find images of Varāha in both forms.<sup>87</sup> We also find face of Varāha in the Vaikuṇṭha images at Khajurāho<sup>88</sup> and Kalānjara.<sup>89</sup> The popularity of Varāha images during the Chandella period is associated with victory of the king.

Likewise we find the renderings of other animals such as cow, buffalo, dog, *garuḍa*, deer, monkey, rat, ram, donkey, parrot and peacock in different religious and cultural context which suggest broad base of Chandella art.

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