

HINDU ANIMAL AND PLANT ICONOGRAPHY

Iconography

Iconography can be defined as the study of images (paintings, mosaics or sculptures) of deities or saints that are worshipped by the followers of a religion (Banerjea 1, 2, 6). It involves examining the various art forms, noting the types of images used and interpreting the meanings of the various images (Banerjea 2). Especially in the Hindu tradition, these images are diverse and vary from region to region and across time, such that there are many differences in the images associated with particular deities. Studying the images that followers of a particular religion create, especially those recovered from archeological excavations, can give us great insight not only into the types of gods and goddesses worshipped but possibly the ways in which they were worshipped and values important to the society (Banerjea 7, 8, 175; Nagar 129).

Depictions of animals and plants in the Hindu tradition date back to the Indus Valley Civilizations in the cities of Mohenjodaro and Harappa. Many of the clay seals and coins created during this period, some believed to be as much as four or five thousand years old (Banerjea 158), incorporate some combination of animal, plant and human images (Nagar 4). Among these are images of male and female figures surrounded by animals and/or plants or taking full- or part- animal form (Nagar 4). In particular, one terracotta seal depicts a three-faced (*trimukha*) male figure sitting down in a forest setting, wearing a horned headdress and surrounded by an elephant, a tiger, a rhinoceros, a buffalo and two deer (Nagar 55, 57; Banerjea 159). This figure is thought to be an early representation of Siva, an important god that is still worshipped today and is often referred to as the “Lord of the Beasts” (Nagar 60). Other seals have been found that show a male figure that is standing by or on an acacia tree attacking a tiger and another with a male figure holding two tigers by their throats on either side of him (Nagar 62, pl. 51). Another

seal shows a feminine deity - known as the Tree Goddess - standing with two tree branches on either side of her and a composite animal made up of a bull and a goat, with the face of a human standing nearby (Banerjea 168; Nagar 48). A number of forest deities (most often female) are also thought to have worshipped in ancient India (Nagar 101-104; Zimmer 69), including: the Tree Goddess, a goddess said to have a complexion as green as grass, another with a lighting-bright complexion, seated on a lotus and others with their arms wrapped around the trunk of a tree. In addition, trees were given human form and characteristics, often as dryad-like figures (Nagar 104). Snake or serpent deities (Nagas and Naginis) also likely had followers in ancient India (Nagar 94; Banerjea 347); these gods and goddesses are often portrayed as multi-headed, with jewels on their hoods, two-tongued and having hands (Banerjea 348).

Composite animal forms are quite commonly depicted on items found at Harappan and Mohenjodaroan sites (Nagar 73). There are human-animal forms, animals with human heads or faces, humans with horns, multi-headed animals, and other composite animals (Nagar 73-79): half human-half serpent (*nagas*), half human-half bull and half woman-half tiger are the most common human-animal forms found on ancient Indian clay seals; elephants, ox-like creatures, goats, rams, tigers and composite forms of these animals are those depicted with human faces; a male figure with a tail, two horns and a bow in one hand was found on a copper tablet in Mohenjodaro and other similar figures have been found on terracotta pottery and seals; an example of the multi-headed animals has the body and head of a urus-like animal (a now-extinct large cattle species) with two additional heads - that of an antelope and a short-horned bull; composite animals include chimera-like animals consisting of bison, unicorn and ibex parts. There are also portrayals of animals themselves on clay seals and figurines: unicorn-like figures, humped and humpless bulls, buffalos, goats, lions, tigers, serpents, crocodiles, peacocks, doves,

monkeys (including one of a monkey holding a baby), rhinoceroses, and elephants (Nagar 7-8, pl. 42-50). Plant and vegetation designs, including lotuses, palmyra, date palms, acacias and other trees, are also commonly seen on ancient seals associated with goddesses or being carried by human figures (Banerjea 173).

Plant and animal images are so connected to Hindu deities that they are often identified by or differentiated between by the images around them (Banerjea 134). Deities are also depicted as having multiple arms in which they hold a range of objects, including various plants or flowers.

Animal Forms: Some Hindu deities currently worshipped that date back to the Vedic period have animal manifestations. The god Visnu is a prime example; of his ten incarnations (*avatars*), five are animal or part animal - the Fish (*Matsya*), the Tortoise (*Kurma*), the Boar (*Varaha*), the Man-Lion (*Narsimha*) and the White Charger (*Kalki*) (Swali 22). The goddess Sri-Lakshmi is thought to take the form of a golden antelope adorned with gold and silver garlands (Banerjea 134) and the great god Siva frequently takes the form of his bull mount Nandi (Banerjea 535). The pot-bellied, child-like god Ganesa, the son of Siva and his consort Parvati, is a particularly well-known and much adored figure in modern India (Nagar 10). He has an elephant head in all of his depictions (Zimmer 70; Banerjea 357) and is also depicted holding a radish, with a tiger skin garment and a sacred thread made of a snake (Banerjea 360). Hanuman, the monkey deity of the *Ramayana* epic, is another god in animal form. Garuda, Visnu's vehicle, is usually represented as a large bird-like figure with wings, human arms, legs of a vulture and a beak-like nose (Banerjea 531; Zimmer 75).

Vahanas: Depictions of gods and goddesses in the Hindu tradition typically include an animal, or sometimes a plant, that sits beneath and carries the deity's human form; this is called

their vehicle or *vahana* (Zimmer 70). Some of these *vahanas*, which are representative of the character and the energy of the deity they are seated beneath (Zimmer 70), are listed below.

Agni: ram (Banerjea 485)

Brahma: swan (Banerjea 514) or a lotus (Zimmer 51)

Durga/Devi: lion/tiger (Zimmer 48,70)

Ganesa: rat/mouse (Zimmer 70)

Indra: white elephant called Airavara (Zimmer 48, 53)

Krsna: sometimes he is seated on a horse made out of *gopis* (Swali 29)

Kubera: a crouching man (Zimmer 70)

Laksmi: lotus (Zimmer 92)

Parvati: lion (Banerjea 469; Zimmer 70), alligator/iguana in some medieval images (Banerjea 172, 501)

Siva: white humped bull named Nandi (Zimmer 48; Banerjea 135)

Skanda (who is said to be another of Siva's sons): peacock (Banerjea 365)

Surya: a chariot pulled by seven horses (Banerjea 516) or a lotus (Banerjea 137)

Visnu: eagle/Garuda (Zimmer 76) or a serpent called Ananta (Zimmer 37, 59)

Yama: buffalo (Nagar 81)

Other Associated Images: Aside from their animal forms or vehicles, there are often certain images that commonly appear in representation of deities, only a few of which are listed here. A bull is sometimes seen alongside Parvati as she is one of Siva's consorts and the bull is Siva's mount (Banerjea 407, 470). As mentioned above, Siva is called the Lord of the Beasts and has many animals surrounding him as well as a necklace and bracelets made from snakes (Nagar 94; Zimmer 183). The goddess Laksmi, when in her human form, is bathed by two elephants and surrounded by lotus flowers (Banerjea 375).

A number of animals and plants have certain significance in the Hindu tradition and are commonly represented in religious art. Some of these and their images are discussed below.

Lotus: The lotus is a particularly common and important motif in Hindu art. Deities are often depicted sitting on lotus flowers (including Laksmi, Brahma and Surya) or holding lotus flowers (Banerjea 304); in fact, this is one of the most common items they are shown to hold in sculptures (Banerjea 138). The lotus flower, also called *padma*, is said to represent the sun, creativity (Banerjea 138, 304) and enlightenment (Zimmer 146) and is associated with the creation of Brahma and the universe (Zimmer 90). Many representations of the god Visnu show a lotus projecting from his navel, which carries Brahma on its petals (Zimmer 61).

Monkey: Monkeys are regarded as sacred in modern India and may have been regarded as sacred in ancient times as evidenced by the relatively large number of models of monkeys that have been found in the Indus Valley Civilization sites (Nagar 86). Hanuman, the much-loved monkey god discussed above is an example of the special place that monkeys have in Hinduism; he is described as being a loyal servant (of Rama in the *Ramayana*) skilled in magic (including the ability to change size), grammar and healing and statues of him are situated at the entrances of forts, towns and villages (Nagar 87).

Bull: Due to its close association with the god, Siva's followers often worship the bull but the bull is also thought to have had its own cult in ancient times (Nagar 87). It is a symbol of strength and fertility (Nagar 56, 87).

Swan/Gander: As the mount of Brahma, the gander or swan is a symbol of freedom from the cycle of rebirths (*samsara*) and also of the divine essence and the "creative principle" (Zimmer 48). It is even said that when a Hindu attains liberation, he or she attains the rank of "gander"/*hamsa* (Zimmer 48).

Snake/Serpent: Images of serpents (*nagas*) are also common in Hindu art and have a number of symbolic meanings. Some of these include water (Zimmer 37), life energy, guardianship and

cleverness (Zimmer 63). They are often associated with images of eagles with the two in opposition as the former represents more earthly qualities and the latter the heavens and freedom (Zimmer 75).

Tree: Trees are worshipped in the form of goddesses but some are also considered sacred in and of themselves, and are worshipped in their natural form (Banerjea 173; Nagar 104). Pipal (Ficus) or nimba trees are regarded as holy or sacred to Hindus and idols are placed underneath them (Zimmer 72; Nagar 98). There is one particular tree (the *asoka* tree), which is said only to bloom if a girl or young woman touches or kicks it (Zimmer 69). In the creation of the universe, one of the forms of the “life-maintaining element” is sap from a cosmic tree (Zimmer 34). To Hindus, ancient and more modern, trees symbolize beauty, knowledge, life and fertility (Nagar 98, 103; Zimmer 69).

Elephant: Elephants, too, are a common motif in Hindu art and have been an important part of Indian society. Kings sought to own and domesticate elephants and they were used for battle and ceremonial purposes to carry people. According to myth, elephants came into being at the very beginning of time, with Indra’s mount Airavata being the first elephant to emerge from the cosmic egg held by Brahma. Elephants are also said to “support the universe at the four quarters and the four points between” (Zimmer 103, 104). In addition to Airavata, the two elephants associated with Laksmi and the elephant-headed god Ganesa are both prominent representations of elephants in Hindu art. Elephants, partly because they are associated with Laksmi (the Lotus Goddess of fortune and prosperity) and partly due to their long life span, are symbols of fertility, good harvest and other “earthly blessings” and thus must be treated with care and worshipped (Zimmer 108, 109).

REFERENCES AND FURTHER RECOMMENDED READING

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