

Sacred Fauna in Stone: An Iconographic Study of Animal Depiction in the Temples of Panchbaktra, Trilokinath, Bhutnath and Ardhnarishwara in Mandi, Himachal Pradesh

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Abstract

In Indian temple art, depiction of fauna extends beyond mere decoration. Their depiction serves as a strong visual language through which religious, philosophical and cultural ideas are expressed. The worlds of animals and birds is closely tied to compassion, dharma, discipline, loyalty, sacrifice and wisdom. Indian epics like Puranic stories, Panchatantra and Jatak tales etc. contributes to creating a symbolic world in which animals were considered human like intelligent and having moral depth. This is the reason behind understanding animal imagery in Indian temple art as visual language of faith, ethics and metaphysics. The Research work examines the iconography and significance of animal representation carved in stone at four major temples in Mandi, Himachal Pradesh. Namely: Trilokinatha, Bhutnath, Panchbaktra and Ardhnarishwara. Combining the textual sources, field documentation and stylistic analysis, the ritual, symbolic and socio-cultural meanings in context to Himalayan Temples is studied. Their placement and composition in temple architecture, sculptural techniques and Narratives are also discussed. This study situates animal imagery within broader North Indian temple tradition while foregrounding distinctive features shaped by, patronage, topography and devotional practice. It provides insights into how animal imagery functions as both theological signifier and repository of regional identity.

Keywords: Animal iconography, Temple sculpture, Mandi, Himachal Pradesh, Sacred animals

INTRODUCTION:

The origin of image worship in India appears to be very ancient and its causes are not exactly known. Many believes it to be the result of the followers of Gautama Buddha adorning their master and worshipping him in the form of images on his apotheosis after death. However, there are indications of the prevalence of image worship among the Hindus long before the time of Gautama Buddha (Rao, 1914). In Indian temple art, depiction of animal extends beyond mere decoration. Their depiction serves as a strong visual language through which philosophical, religious and cultural ideas are expressed. Depiction of animal figures have occupied an important place throughout the history of Hindu temple architecture. They appear as divine vehicles (vahanas), symbolic representation of cosmic forces, guardians, and decorative motifs. Indian religious thought of intimate relationship between humans, nature and the sacred is reflected in the depiction of animals in temple art. Animals like lion, bull, serpent, elephant and mythical

composite creatures are carved in stone and attached into architectural fabric of temples. They show virtues, protective powers, divine attributes and cosmological principles. Their depiction on temple stones transforms the space into symbolic and sacred landscapes where supernatural and natural realms converge. In the temple tradition of Mandi, Himachal Pradesh, particularly Trilokinath, Bhutnath, Panchbaktra and Ardhnarishwara, depiction of animal imagery plays an important role. But this is understudied aspect of artistic expression. An iconographic interpretation of these representations not only enhances our understanding of significance of animal depiction in temples but also enhances the understanding of regional temple art and religious meanings and cultural values attached to the sacred fauna in context of Mandi, Himachal Pradesh.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses qualitative and descriptive research methodology. Iconography, artistic representation and symbolism of animal depiction is examined through field surveys, iconographic analysis and visual documentation.

- **Primary Data collection:** First hand primary Data is collected by on-site visits to the mentioned temples. Detailed observation of Fauna motifs on exterior and interior walls of the temples is undertaken. Photographic documentation carried out to record minute details, exact process, stylistic features and the present condition of carvings.
- **Secondary Data Collection:** Secondary sources includes books, temple records, and published literature related to Architecture, Himachal Pradesh, Temples of Mandi and Iconography. To understand traditional iconography and symbolic significance Puranic literature is also consulted.

SCOPE

The study explores the relationship between local cultural traditions, Hindu mythology, and the representation of animal in stone carvings. Through analysis, it contributes to a deeper understanding of the artistic and cultural heritage of Mandi's temple architecture.

This research study is limited to animal depiction only and specifically in the four major temples of Mandi, Himachal Pradesh namely Trilokinath, Panchbaktra, Bhutnath and Ardhnarishwara.

BRIEF HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF MANDI AND ITS TEMPLES

Mandi is situated in the central part of Himachal Pradesh. It is one of the most historically and culturally concentrated regions of the western Himalayas. Located near the banks of River Beas, the town has strategic location that connected the hill state with the plains of norther India. Also, the goods are bought and sold here in the earlier times, when transportation, import and export are not like today. Thus, the name “Mandi” seems meaningful. In the sixteenth century Raja Ajbar Sen founded the princely state and established Mandi as the capital of kingdom. With the passage of time, the rulers of Mandi from far Bengal as mentioned by J.C. French in his book “Himalayan Art”, patronized the construction of temples, public structures and palaces contributing significantly to the architectural and aesthetic heritage.

Geographically, Mandi has diverse mountainous landscape having river valleys, forest slopes, and rugged hill ranges. The River Beas and Suketi plays a crucial role in shaping the economy, settlement patterns, economy and religious life of the place. Environment of Mandi provides rich resources and inspired local cultural and artistic traditions. In the past few years, Mandi is exposed to natural hazards like floods,

landslides and extreme rainfalls. Recent incidents of cloudbursts and flash floods have highlighted the region's cultural heritage's vulnerability to environmental challenges.

In Himachal Pradesh, Mandi has earned its special status of "Varanasi of Hills" due to density of temples and sacred architecture has major social implications. Temples are repositories of ritual, art, Patronage and collective memory. There are centuries old temples still present in Mandi. Some important historic temples in Mandi are Trilokinath Temple, Bhutnath temple, Panchbaktra Temple, Bhimakali Temple, Sidh Ganesha Temple, Sidh Kali Temple, Ekadrashurdra temple and Ardhnarishwara temple. There are other historic temples as well only few are mentioned here.

The socio-cultural fabric of Mandi reflects Hindu religious traditions, Himalayan cultural practices and Local folk beliefs. Temple rituals, festivals, community gatherings and fairs continue to play an important role in the lives of the local people. The rich heritage of Mandi is evident in stone carved temples, metal sculptures, mural traditions and wood carvings. Much of these works incorporates symbolic representation of Flora, Fauna, Geometrical patterns, Narrative and Mythological events. These iconographic and symbolic artistic expressions give valuable insights into the ecological consciousness, cultural identity and religious overview of the people of Mandi town.

ANIMAL SYMBOLISM IN INDIAN TEMPLE ART

Animal depiction and symbolism occupy an important place in Indian art. Animals are never treated as mere decorative icons in Indian Art but they are treated as carriers of ideas, cosmological principles, moral values and religious meanings. C. Sivaramamurti's study on Birds and Animals in Indian Sculpture shows that in Indian temple art and sculpture, animals were presented as living symbols of human virtues, divine presence rather than as simple naturalistic forms and spiritual ideals. This is one of the major reason of animals appearing repeatedly in temple architecture, coins, narrative sculpture, panels, pillars, railings and ritual spaces.

Indian art looks at nature with reverence rather than domination. The worlds of animals and birds is closely tied to compassion, dharma, discipline, loyalty, sacrifice and wisdom. Indian epics like Puranic stories, Panchatantra and Jatak tales etc. contributes to creating a symbolic world in which animals were considered human like intelligent and having moral depth. This is the reason behind understanding animal imagery in Indian temple art as visual language of faith, ethics and metaphysics.

The author also shows that animals were believed to embody qualities that humans should imitate. Some animals represent self-control, some represent patience, some courage, and some devotion. Others function as warnings against ego, ignorance, or uncontrolled instinct. This dual role is important: animals can be symbols of virtue, but they can also represent negative traits that sacred teaching seeks to overcome (C.Sivaramamurti, 1974).

ANALYSIS OF ANIMAL DEPICTIONS AND SIGNIFICANCE

The stone carved temples of Mandi have rich sculptural heritage in which animal depiction holds great place. This research study focuses specifically on animal depiction in temple of Trilokinath, Bhutnath, Panchbaktra and Ardhnarishwara. This examination is confined to the analysis within temple context and does not extend to the study of animals inhabiting in the geographical region of Mandi, Himachal Pradesh, except where such animals are represented in the temple carvings.

Deer

Deer in Indian temple symbolism shows gentleness, beauty, innocence, sacred calm and sensitivity. In the

temple of Trilokinath, a column in the temple complex shows a row of animals. One of them is shown deer. Depicted in the central panel of the pillar and executed in low relief carving technique. It demonstrates the ability of the sculptor to achieve naturalistic representation of the deer in limited space. The deer is shown in profile, a method commonly used in Indian sculptural tradition to give easy recognition and clarity of form. Neck is elongated, slender legs and curves of body are graceful, all of these qualities together convey effectively the elegance and agility associated with deer. The body contours are defined with shallow yet precise incisions, modelling of the torso is achieved through surface rounding rather than deep carving technique. This treatment of sandstone creates a sense of volume without interfering the overall harmony.

Deer in many hermitage scenes, in books and narrative stories move peacefully near sages and ascetics, depicting a world where violence, fear and cruelty is absent. Deer is thus connected to the concept of holy space where spiritual environment transforms all beings to peaceful state. Golden Deer is mentioned in Ramayana as well. In Buddhist traditions, Deer is considered sacred because the turning of Dharma wheel at Sarnath is linked with Deer Park. Deer flanking the wheel became an important emblem of Buddha's first sermon. Many Jatak tales also mention Deer and through this displays sacrifice, compassion and nobility. In temple architectural carvings, deer thus stands for non-violence, innocence and sacrificial virtue. This animal also has aesthetic significance. Indian sculpture and poetry compare the deer's eye with beautiful eyes of women. The grace of deer is considered as model for artistic beauty.



Figure 1 Deer, Trilokinath Temple

Elephant

Elephants, though not at all found in the hilly areas of Himachal Pradesh are carved on stone in most of the temples of Mandi, Himachal Pradesh. Elephant is described as majestic, strong, intelligent, noble and capable of self-restraint. In temple art and Buddhist iconography, Jatak Tales, elephant shows battlefield strength, royal power and spiritual discipline. According to Indian Iconography, elephant is associated with Airavata, vehicle of Indra. Elephant is also associated with Ganesha, elephant headed deity. In Buddhism, Chhaddant Jatak is very known as tale of six-tusked elephant.

Elephant is carved in Panchbaktra and Trilokinath temple repeatedly. In Panchbaktra temple, elephant is carved in low relief. Shown in recessed rectangular slab, demonstrates the craftsman's preference for symbolic expression, clarity and durability rather than naturalistic representation. Here, the elephant is shown with sturdy cylindrical legs, compact body and a prominent raised trunk which is a traditional symbol of strength, prosperity and auspiciousness in Indian art. The facial features are rendered in simple geometric forms. Shallow incisions reflect the stylized medieval Himalayan Sculptures. A decorative saddle cloth is shown on the back of elephant, having geometric motifs indicating elephant as royal or ceremonial rather than wild. Minimal undercutting is done. Visual prominence and stability is visible. This carving reflects North Indian tradition of temple carvings and artistic conventions in the hills, where

preference is given to the symbolic significance rather than anatomical accuracy. Influence of Rajasthani motifs is also seen. It seems like elephant of royal procession, courtly culture or religious culture. In Indian temple carvings, elephant stands for prosperity, protection and royal dignity. Elephant's role is significant in battlefield.



Figure 2 Elephant, Panchbaktra Temple

Lion

Lion in Indian art is the symbol of sovereignty, strength, courage and unchallenged majesty. C. Sivaramamurti considers the lion as “royal beast”. Lion does not lower its power to lesser forms of life and attacks only the most powerful. Lion appears repeatedly in temple carvings as symbol of victory, kingship and dharma. It has significance in Buddhist and Mauryan art as well, especially in the Lion capital. In temples of India, lion often appears as guardians at gateways, many times carved in high relief and of great size. But in the temples of Mandi like Panchbaktra and Ardhnarishwara, Lions are carved in low relief and not as individual sculptures but in the rows and slabs of stones in limited space. Lions also appear on pillar bases and protective composite forms. In royal iconography, the king is often compared to the lion. Thus, this animal acts both as natural animal and also as an ideal symbol of spiritual authority and political power. In Indian Iconography, lion is the vehicle of goddess Durga, thus turning animal power to sacred power.

In the temple of Panchbaktra Lions are carved multiple times. Images are carved in low relief within square or rectangular panels beneath the pillars and temple superstructure. Body is made compact and muscular, head is comparatively large than body. Again, emphasis is on the expressive facial feature rather than proportion. The mane is presented through the incised lines, flowing rhythmically, that extends from neck to body. Tail has curve upward in spiral. (fig. 3) Lion is carved in Bhutnath temple as fighting with deer. Attacking the deer on neck. A narrative scene is shown with great expertise. (fig.4). The sculptor employed limited undercutting and shallow modelling, ensuring that the figures remain structurally integrated. The limbs are simplified and sturdy. Details such as the eyes, and mane are created with engraved lines. This treatment shows the technical requirements of architectural sculpture. Durability and visibility are prioritized over naturalistic depiction.



Figure 3 Lion, Panchbaktra Temple



Figure 4 Lion fighting with deer, Bhutnath temple

The bull

The bull is another central animal in Indian temple art especially in Shiva. Bull stands for auspiciousness, fertility, strength and steadfastness. According to Hindu iconography, the bull is associated with Shiva as Nandi. The sacred vehicle and devoted attendant of Lord Shiva. Nandi is placed facing the sanctum of Shiva. Emphasizing mainly alertness, devotion and constant service. Cow and bull has significance in agrarian culture of India therefore they are linked with prosperity and sacred motherhood. They both occupy place of honour. The hump of the bull also has great meaning. It is connected to the marker of grandeur and vitality.

The book also highlights the majestic hump of the bull as an important visual sign. The bull's body, especially its powerful hump, becomes a marker of vitality and grandeur. In many sculptures, the bull is shown as dignified and calm, not merely as a working animal, but as a divine and auspicious presence. In this way, the bull becomes one of the most enduring symbols of Indian temple culture.

In the temples of Mandi, especially shiva temples, we found large life size idols of Bull standing in front of temples. In case of Panchbaktra and Trilokinath bull is placed inside the temple, in the main hall. In the other temples like Bhutnath, Ekadrshudra and Mahamritumajay, bull is placed in the courtyard. A unique dwarf figure is placed at the back of bull holding its tail. A decorative textile with geometrical patterns and intricately carved patterns is shown on the back of bull connecting it with auspiciousness and royalty. The figure of bull is executed in high relief and close to single block method of carving. Animal's mass and solidity is emphasized, strength, permanence and stability is effectively conveyed.

Sculptor skill fully differentiated between the soft, smooth body and decorative textile elements through depth and carving techniques. The facial features are comparatively simplified. Technically, the sculpture

demonstrates successful combination of decorative refinement, monumental form and iconographic significance making it best example of temple sculpture in Mandi.



Figure 5 Bull, Panchbaktra temple

The horse as speed and loyalty

Horse symbolizes nobility, speed, movement and fidelity. Horse is an animal of heroic narrative, action, war and royal procession. It has chariot imagery. Horse is generally seen in the scenes of warriors, kings and royal processions. It has disciplined energy and dynamic force. Horse is considered as transport animal, but it is not merely for transport but it is a sign of royal ambition and purposeful movement. In the stories of Buddha, horse plays an important role. Indian epics like Mahabharata and Ramayana also highlights the significance of horse. It stands for both speed and devotion.

In the temples of Mandi, Horses are mainly depicted in narrative scenes. In the Trilokinath temple narrative scene is depicted. Relief shows horse rider in active motion. It seems like royal or martial journey. The stretched legs and tension is visible. The composition is set in rectangular niche, giving it a look of framed artifact. Fine carving on the ornaments, saddle and drapery shows close attention to details and adds realism. Figures are made in low relief with selective depth and strong contours creating contrast between background and main subject.



Figure 6 Horse and rider, Trilokinath temple

Serpents and naga symbolism

Although this research is related to animals in general, serpent symbolism is very important to omit. Nagas occupies a major place in Indian art and are more often shown as multi-headed cobras, protective hoods, or semi-divine beings. They stand for fertility, cosmic waters, protection and rebirth. In temple art, serpent imagery appears at water structures, thresholds and devotional compositions as it expresses both danger

and guardianship. In Hindu iconography, serpents are linked with Lord Shiva and Vishnu. In Buddhist and Jain art they have protective and auspicious functions. The ability of serpent to shed its skin makes it a natural symbol of renewal, rebirth and cyclical life. In Indian temple art, the naga becomes a sign of cosmic continuity and guardian of sacred space.



Figure 7 Serpent, Panchbaktra Temple

In the Shiva temples of Mandi, Himachal Pradesh, Serpent images are found mainly on the entrance doorways in small and large sizes. As in Panchbaktra Mahadev Temple a huge serpent is carved in the interior side of entrance doorway. It seems like cobra and carved in vertical shape with attention to the body texture (Fig 7). In Bhutnath temple coiled serpent is made on the roof of entrance porch. Here, it is carved in square space and is coiled. Again, attention to the detail of texture is very skillfully applied (Fig.8). In trilokinath temple a compact form of serpent is carved on the pillar, adjusting to the limited space.



Figure 8 Serpent, Bhutnath Temple

Bird symbolism

Bird symbolism is inseparable from animal symbolism. The swan is a symbol of purity and discriminative wisdom, especially in relation to Goddess Saraswati. The peacock represents grace, festivity, beauty and divine splendor. The crow may carry meanings connected with ancestors, ritual memory, and sometimes inauspiciousness. In the Ardhnarishwara temple peacock is depicted multiple times. The feathers are carved with great curves and rhythmic lines with great details. Border to the slab is carved in same pattern

as of the bird's feather. Giving overall carving a composite look within a square block (Fig.9). On the other hand, some simplified bird symbols and pair of bird facing each other are carved in Panchbaktra temple with little detail.



Figure 9 Peacock, Ardhnarishwara temple

Conclusion:

To understand the temple art, best way is to look at every carving as it has a deep meaning attached to it. Depiction of Fauna plays multiple roles in temple art. They are used for decorative purpose but much more important than that they have protective, narrative and instructive roles as well. They connect the worshippers or devotees with cosmology, mythology and ethical ideas. When placed intentionally on pillars, entrances, sanctum areas, they became an essential part of temple's sacred and spiritual architecture. Their creation by the sculptors in the historic times is not random, but they carry divine order. The presence of Animal motifs in temple also suggests that divine, humans, animals and cosmic are deeply connected with each other. Visual forms becomes a language of belief. The animal symbolism in this research shows that the animals, even not found in hilly areas and specifically in Mandi are also carved in the temples irrespective of their geographical familiarity. There is a strong research angle that shows depiction of animals in Temples of Mandi, Himachal Pradesh reflects belief system that saw nature as spiritually alive. Animals are not isolated motifs but a part of broader cultural and religious significance and imagination. Their presence in temples is not random or accidental but intensional, layered and having deep meanings. Thus, this research demonstrates that animals in Indian art are not peripheral decorations but essential carriers of religious and moral meaning. There is future scope of interpreting and analysing more such Fauna present in other temples also in wooden medium.

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