
The Symbolic Meaning Of Animals In The Buddhist Religion, Indus Valley Civilization And Mauryan Empire

The connection between Buddhism and animal life is inseparable, especially in Vedic age India. Buddhist values were reflected through sculpture, carvings, and architecture in two major civilizations: The Indus Valley Civilization and the Mauryan Empire. Buddhists believed that morality and nature are connected; that one's natural resources are linked to one's morals, which is why animals were highly worshipped and glorified. In this sense, the art of this period highly reflects those values. After Buddhism, "a new respect for life and kindness to animals emerged" (Varghese, 2008, page 266).

The Indus Valley Civilization, also known as the Harappan Civilization, was one of the most prominent and expansive urban civilizations in Ancient India. It dates back to 3300 BCE and diminished around 1300 BCE. The large civilization surrounded the Indus Valley River, which is where four major cities were located. The western and northern borders contain a mountainous region, as well as many valleys. The seasonal temperatures and precipitation brought agricultural success to the inhabitants of the Indus Valley Civilization. Because of the fertile climate, nature was extremely important to the Harappans. During this time period, we also can see the earliest examples of religious worshipping, most prominently towards nature and animals. As well as the Hindu religion, "there is evidence to show that Buddhism may have acquired some of its roots in the Indus River Valley" (Greene, 2014, p.3). This is shown in the many Indus seals made from ceramics or clay. The seals were most likely used to fasten jars, imprint fabrics or label traded goods. "Most, though not all, of the narrative images contain supernatural or animal image as the focus- all motifs are drawn from nature" (Wright, 2010, pg. 290). This can be seen in Figure 1, which displays The Pasupati Seal, discovered during the excavation of the Mohenjodaro site. This seal, made from steatite, displays a seated figure wearing a horned head-dress. The icon is seated in a position that is often referenced to Buddha, making this seal one of [image:]the earliest examples of Buddhist practices/meditation. Surrounding the figure, there are four different animals: buffalo, tiger, elephant, and rhinoceros. As stated by Arputha Rani Sengupta, "The deified human is in harmonious relationship with the animals" (Mani, 2008, pg. 43). Also, Buddha is often known to have metamorphosed into an elephant, which is shown in the seal. This further proves that the Harappan people highly respected and worshipped the animals in their surrounding environment. These pictorial seals were also thought to be used for script, though the symbols have not yet been deciphered by archeologists. The Indus Valley Civilization was very well known for their highly developed towns, which often featured exquisite architecture: "The builders of Indus cities were master crafters of landscape and architecture, refashioning nature to a material form that took its place in nature" (Wright, 2010, pg. 305). A well-known archeological site, located in Mohenjo-Daro [image:]contains a large Buddhist stupa, which are large earth/stone mounds in a spherical shape, which are used for meditation and have "karmic benefits" (Shelby, 2014). The stupa, seen in Figure 2, was built in 3rd century BCE and was built next to The Great Bath, who's use is unknown, though it is thought to have been used for the religious worship of water. Overall, the Harappans were extremely centered around culture through religion. They created many different forms of pottery, figurines, seals, and architecture which all had the common theme of nature and animals. Around 1300 BCE, the Indus Valley Civilization started to diminish due to what was thought to be an environmental crisis, the climate had started to cool down and the

Indus River had started to flood. The inhabitants started to relocate, as the climate change “had catastrophic effects on agricultural activity, making the economy no longer sustainable and breaking the civic order of the cities” (Violatti, 2013, p. 5), making this the end of the Indus Valley Civilization.

The Mauryan Empire was a strong, religious and political dominated time period, from 322-185 BCE. The empire is known to be, “one of the most significant periods in Indian history” (Tanabe, 2016, p. 3), due to agricultural and economic success. The civilization was situated on rich soil and was near many mineral deposits, which was prime for trade. One of the most prominent emperors was Ashoka, who provided social harmony and religious insight to the people of The Mauryan Empire. Ashoka abandoned traditional military and violent ways of protection and turned to Buddhism to protect the people of his empire. As Francis Watson states, “Ashoka’s abandonment of the royal tradition of the chase was in line with the reverence for animal life that he showed by a vegetarian table” (Watson, 2002, page 50). His devotion to the Buddhist teachings can be shown in the many stupas he built throughout India: “Legend says that Ashoka built 84,000 stupas” (Robinson, 1997, page 42). Along with the stupas, he also built a large temple in Sarnath which features The Ashoka Lion Capital, shown in Figure 3. The details of the capital and how it relates to Buddhism are explained by C.M. Mani:

“The inverted lotus is so exquisitely sculpted that each petal could be clearly counted and completely symmetrical. The lotus has been traditionally representing knowledge and all things beautiful. The pedestal carries four wheels, one in each [image: Image result for lion capital of ashoka]direction, which represents Dhammacakra Pabattana (turning the wheel of Dharma), the first sermon of the Buddha at Sarnath and its spread in all directions. The fact that Ashoka was a cakravarti king is proclaimed by the four lions at the top one in each direction. The four animals engraved on the pedestal, viz, elephant, horse, bull, and lion are symbols of the Buddha” (Mani, 2008, page 104).

The capital represents Buddhism at its peak, and the importance Ashoka placed on the religion. The Mauryan Empire also used sculpture to represent their beliefs. Instead of referencing Buddhism directly, it was, “referenced through a variety of symbols, using what is known as ‘aniconic depiction’” (Neelis, 2013, p.1). An example of this is the Buddhapada (Figure 4). This stone carving displays the footprints of Buddha, with 3 circles in the middle of them. The circles represent the three Jewels of Buddhism: The Dharma (Buddhist laws), The Sangha (Buddhist monks) and The Buddha. Surrounding the footprints are different floral and leaf designs, then there is a yaksha in the bottom right corner. Yakshas are, “nature spirits who are the custodians of treasures that are hidden in the earth and in the roots of trees” (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2018, p.1). Yakshas were important symbols in Buddhist art and were later featured in many Buddhist texts. After Emperor Ashoka died in 232 BCE, The Mauryan Empire started its decline due to weak rulers and invasions. Figure 3: The Lion Capital of Ashoka, polished sandstone (250 BCE)

Buddhism places importance on compassion for all life forms, which is shown through the symbolic animals and nature used in their art. Both the Indus Valley Civilization and the Mauryan Empire drew the substance of their aesthetic from religion. Buddhism helped to teach the inhabitants of both civilizations to refrain from violence, which is why there is very little evidence of weapons from both time periods. Although much has changed since these civilizations existed, India is still a country that is highly influenced by religion. The art from

ancient India demonstrates this influence and how symbolic animals truly were for the inhabitants of the Indus Valley Civilization and the Mauryan Empire.

References:

1. Britannica, T. E. of E. (2018, September 12). Yaksha Hindu Mythology. Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/yaksha>.
2. Greene, E. (2014, March 20). Modern impact of Indus Valley religion and ideology. Retrieved from <http://anthropology.msu.edu/anp363-ss14/2014/03/20/modern-impact-of-indus-valley-religion-and-ideology/>.
3. Joshi, M. C., & Mani, B. R. (2008). Expressions in Indian art. Delhi: Agam Kala Prakashan.
4. Neelis, J. (2013). The Mauryan Empire. Retrieved from <https://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/exhibit/mauryans/mauryans.html>.
5. New World, T. E. of E. (Ed.). (2018, September 5). Maurya Empire. Retrieved from https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Maurya_Empire.
6. Robinson, R. H., & Johnson, W. (1997). The Buddhist religion. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
7. Shelby, K. (2015, August 9). The Stupa. Retrieved from <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/ap-art-history/south-east-se-asia/india-art/a/the-stupa>.
8. Varghese, A. P. (2008). India: history, religion, vision and contribution to the world. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers & Distributors.
9. Violatti, C. (2013, September 26). Indus Valley Civilization. Retrieved from https://www.ancient.eu/Indus_Valley_Civilization/.
10. Watson, F. (2002). India: a concise history. London: Thames and Hudson.
11. Wright, R. P. (2010). The ancient Indus: urbanism, economy, and society. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.