
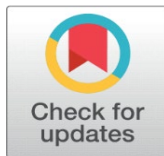


UNTAMED AND DISCIPLINED: CONTEXTUAL ICONOGRAPHY AND THE TRANSFORMATION FROM VINĀYAKA TO GAṆEŚA IN EARLY SOUTH ASIAN SCULPTURE

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ABSTRACT

This research paper re-examines the iconography of Gaṇeśa through a contextual and interdisciplinary framework that integrates textual traditions, archaeological materials, and theories of embodied cognition. Rather than viewing Gaṇeśa solely as a mythological figure, the study investigates how elephant and nāga symbolism, early Vināyaka imagery, and visualisation practices contributed to the development of a stabilised sculptural form. Drawing on examples from the earliest iconographical representations, the paper proposes a contextual methodology for decoding iconography, in which narrative setting, sculptural placement and artistic strategies shape meaning. Particular attention is given to visual narratives depicting the negotiation between untamed and disciplined states of awareness. By analysing attributes such as the pāśa and aṅkuśa alongside narrative motifs of obstruction and transformation, the study suggests that Gaṇeśa's form reflects an evolving dialogue between scriptural metaphors and artistic practice. The study contributes to South Asian iconographic scholarship by demonstrating how sacred imagery operates as a relational visual language grounded in material culture rather than fixed symbolic interpretation.

Keywords: Gaṇeśa, Vināyaka, Contextual Iconography, South Asian Sculpture, Elephant Symbolism, Visualisation

1. INTRODUCTION

The elephant-headed figure of Gaṇeśa is among the most recognisable symbols within South Asian visual culture (Rangarajan, 2014). However, its iconography has frequently been interpreted predominantly through mythological narratives or sectarian theology (Brown et al., 1997; Rao, 2023). Archaeological and sculptural evidence, nonetheless, indicates a more intricate development in which symbolic animals, liminal figures, and narrative motifs were progressively integrated into a cohesive visual programme (Seckel and Leisinger, 2004). This research examines the evolution of Gaṇeśa through a contextual analysis of elephant and nāga imagery, early Vināyaka representations, and

sculptural narratives illustrating the negotiation between obstruction and discipline. Instead of treating attributes as fixed symbols, the study views iconography as a relational domain shaped by placement, narrative context, and artistic intent within the traditions of early South Asian sculpture.

In early Indic literature, metaphor served as a bridge between philosophical insight and visual representation (Chavan, 1993). Among these metaphors, the elephant holds a distinctive place (Thapan, 2022). While the earliest sources associate the elephant with fertility, sovereignty, and strength (Getty, 1971), Buddhist texts reinterpret the elephant as a model for disciplined awareness, comparing the training of an elephant with the cultivation of mindfulness (Law, 1939; Subedi, 2025; Tuffley, 2012). Such metaphors were not merely literary devices but were part of a wider pedagogical framework that may have translated ethical and contemplative ideas into visualisable forms. Archaeological sites such as Bharhut and Sanchi provide material evidence of this process, with elephant imagery appearing prominently in narrative panels and architectural thresholds (Huntington and Huntington, 1985), guiding ritual movement and visual engagement.

A parallel symbolic trajectory is discernible through nāga imagery. Serpentine figures frequently occupy liminal spaces in early Indian sculpture, mediating transitions between realms and suggesting themes of transformation and renewal (Dehejia, 1997; Ganvir, 2010). When considered alongside elephant symbolism, the nāga introduces a complementary dimension of fluidity and motion, thereby reinforcing transformation and contributing to a visual ecology in which stability and change coexist. The subsequent incorporation of serpent motifs into Gaṇeśa iconography (Krishnan, 1999) indicates that artists were synthesising multiple symbolic traditions rather than adhering to a singular doctrinal source.

The depiction of Vināyaka further complicates this iconographic landscape. Early textual references characterise Vināyaka as an ambivalent or obstructive entity (G. Sastri, 1930; R. Sastri, 1926). Consequently, the emergence of Gaṇeśa as an auspicious and stabilised form (A. Coomaraswamy, 1928) may reflect a gradual reinterpretation of earlier liminal imagery within evolving artistic traditions.

Rather than proposing a new symbolic reading of Gaṇeśa, this article offers a contextual methodology for decoding iconography, demonstrating how narrative setting, sculptural placement, and artistic strategies together shape interpretive possibilities. The significance of this study lies less in redefining Gaṇeśa symbolically than in showing how visual traditions synchronise with textual motifs, thereby revealing a continuum between untamed and disciplined states of awareness embedded in early South Asian sculpture.

The examples discussed here focus primarily on the earliest Indian sculptural traditions, while acknowledging broader regional variations across South Asia. By grounding the analysis in specific archaeological contexts, the study aims to contribute to ongoing conversations in art history and archaeology regarding the relationship between narrative imagery, artistic agency, and embodied perception.

To situate this contextual approach within existing scholarship, the following section reviews the textual, art-historical, and theoretical frameworks through which Gaṇeśa's iconography has previously been interpreted.

2. RESEARCH CONTEXT AND LITERATURE

Scholarly engagement with Gaṇeśa has developed across several disciplinary trajectories, including Indology, art history, archaeology, and religious studies. Early research established the iconographic and stylistic foundations of the elephant-headed deity (Bhandarkar R G, 1913; A. Coomaraswamy, 1928; Getty, 1971; Rao, 2023), while more recent studies have explored ritual, symbolic, and comparative dimensions (Bermijn, 1999; Brown et al., 1997; Courtright, 1985; Dhavlikar, 2016; Joge et al., 2021; Krishnan, 1999; Michael, 1983; Narain, 1997; Rangarajan, 2014; Stevenson, 1846; Thapan, 2022). While extensive scholarship has explored Gaṇeśa's iconography, a systematic, integrated framework for analysing the experiential and contextual dynamics through which sculptural form actively structures perception, as proposed by cognitive iconography, remains a nascent area. This study aims to bridge this gap by offering such a framework. Situating the present study within this broader scholarly landscape requires attention to three interconnected areas: textual traditions, art-historical iconography, and emerging approaches within cognitive archaeology.

2.1. TEXTUAL AND HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS

Early textual references to elephant symbolism appear across Indic literature, where the animal is frequently associated with fertility, sovereignty, prosperity, and ritual prestige (Cunningham, 1854; Huntington and Huntington, 1985). These references reflect the elephant's social and political significance in early Indian society, yet they do not initially emphasise psychological metaphor. A notable conceptual shift occurs in Buddhist literature (Tuffley, 2012), in which the elephant becomes a recurring symbol of disciplined awareness and ethical training. Verses from the Dhammapada compare the mindful practitioner to a trained elephant enduring hardship with composure, suggesting that animal imagery functioned as an experiential teaching device rather than a purely literary ornament (Law, 1939; Subedi, 2025; Tuffley, 2012).

The emergence of Vināyaka in Brāhmaṇical textual sources such as the Mānava Gṛhya Sūtra (R. Sastri, 1926) and the Yājñavalkya Smṛti (G. Sastri, 1930) introduces a parallel symbolic trajectory. Early references often portray Vināyaka as an ambivalent or obstructive presence inhabiting thresholds or transitional spaces (Thapan, 2022). Rather than representing a unified deity, these figures appear as liminal agents requiring propitiation before ritual activity (G. Sastri, 1930; R. Sastri, 1926). Such descriptions reflect a worldview in which disorder and uncertainty were recognised as integral aspects of religious practice. The later transformation of Vināyaka into the auspicious Gaṇeśa (Rangarajan, 2014), therefore, reflects not only theological development but also a broader reinterpretation of liminality within visual and narrative traditions.

2.2. ART-HISTORICAL APPROACHES TO GAṆEŚA ICONOGRAPHY

Art-historical scholarship has played a foundational role in shaping contemporary understanding of Gaṇeśa imagery. The catalogues by Getty (1971), Coomarswāmy (1928), Rao (2023) and Banerjea (2016) established typological frameworks that traced the deity's evolution from yakṣa imagery to the canonical forms associated with the Gupta period. These studies highlighted the gradual standardisation of attributes such as the elephant head, pot belly, and accompanying implements, emphasising stylistic continuity across regions.

Subsequently, scholarship expanded this framework by examining symbolic and philosophical dimensions within Indian art (Dehejia, 1997; Kramrisch, 1954). Zimmer (1946) interpreted composite imagery as an expression of metaphysical synthesis, while later analysis of scholars considered Gaṇeśa's role within ritual and social contexts (Courtright, 1985). Archaeological research has further demonstrated that elephant imagery appears widely across early Buddhist sites, often positioned at thresholds or narrative junctures within sculptural programs (Huntington and Huntington, 1985). These placements suggest that animal imagery functioned not merely as decoration but as a structuring device that guided viewers' perception and ritual movement. Additional studies of early Indian sculpture emphasise regional experimentation during the transition from the continuation of folk art to new forms and motifs, as it moves toward anthropomorphic forms (Sinha et al., 2008). Such observations underscore the importance of examining Gaṇeśa's emergence within broader sculptural contexts rather than isolating the figure as a singular theological innovation.

2.3. SYMBOLIC AND COMPARATIVE INTERPRETATIONS

Comparative and symbolic methodologies have made considerable contributions to the scholarly understanding of Gaṇeśa (Aburrow and Hine, 2022; Krishan, 1990a; Narain, 1997; Pogacnik, 2011; Saranathan, n.d.), frequently highlighting archetypal or cosmological interpretations. Eliade (1957) investigated sacred imagery as a representation of mythic frameworks, whereas subsequent scholars analysed composite deities as manifestations of philosophical synthesis within Indian art (Sinha et al., 2008). While these approaches provide meaningful insights, they occasionally risk disconnecting iconography from its material and archaeological contexts.

Recent scholarship thus advocates for more grounded approaches that consider the function of images within particular visual frameworks. Instead of perceiving symbols as universal archetypes, contextual analysis examines how meaning arises from placement, narrative connections, and artistic strategy. This evolution signifies a broader movement within art history toward contextualising interpretation within material culture rather than relying solely on abstract symbolism.

2.4. COGNITIVE ARCHAEOLOGY AND MATERIAL ENGAGEMENT

Emerging approaches in cognitive archaeology provide supplementary tools for investigating the relationship between iconography and experiential understanding. Renfrew (1998) posited that material artefacts actively engage in cognitive processes, serving as extensions of memory and perception (Iliopoulos, 2019). Building upon this insight, Malafouris (2019) formulated the material engagement theory, asserting that objects influence thought through embodied interaction (Malafouris, 2020).

Within this framework, sacred images may be understood as visual structures that guide attention and emotional engagement (A. K. Coomaraswamy, 1934). Rather than presenting cognitive theory as a replacement for historical analysis, the present study employs it as an interpretive lens to examine how sculptural form interacts with viewer perception. By integrating cognitive archaeology with traditional iconographic analysis, the article seeks to bridge the gap between material evidence and experiential interpretation.

2.5. IDENTIFYING THE RESEARCH GAP

Existing scholarship on Gaṇeśa iconography has made significant contributions across disciplines such as textual, art-historical, anthropological, and symbolic studies. However, these fields often produce compartmentalised interpretations that overlook the interconnectedness of sacred imagery. A key research gap is the limited engagement between traditional iconography and emerging interdisciplinary theories of visual cognition and material symbolism (Dika, 2017; Hammersley, 2015; Kramrisch, 1954; McGraw and Krátk, 2017; Renfrew et al., 1998; Roy Sonu Kumar et al., 2018; Wynn et al., 2024). Integrating these perspectives could deepen understanding of the experiential and educational roles of sacred imagery. Further study is needed on artistic agency in iconographic development. While textual canons offer formal guidelines (Shah, 1958), the roles of sculptors, artisans, and ritual practitioners in shaping iconographic meanings are underexplored. Viewing artistic interpretation as cultural knowledge production could broaden insights into visual traditions. Cross-cultural comparative studies may also reveal universal and culture-specific aspects of religious symbolism. Interdisciplinary collaboration among historians, art historians, anthropologists, and cognitive scientists holds promise for future research. (Whitehouse and Lanman, 2014).

2.5.1. UNRESOLVED PROBLEMS AND CONCEPTUAL RESEARCH GAPS

Notwithstanding extensive scholarly research on Gaṇeśa iconography, numerous interpretive and theoretical issues remain unresolved. These gaps highlight the necessity of integrative, interdisciplinary approaches to comprehensively examine the complex historical, symbolic, and artistic development of Gaṇeśa imagery.

A persistent question concerns the transformation of elephant symbolism into anthropomorphic, elephant-headed iconography. Although elephants held significant symbolic importance in early Indic religious traditions (Thapan, 2022), the emergence of a hybrid elephant-human deity marks a conceptual transition that remains insufficiently examined in current scholarship. Conventional interpretations have linked Gaṇeśa's form to yakṣa traditions, elephant cults, or local fertility symbolism (Bhandarkar R G, 1913; Brown et al., 1997; Coomaraswamy, 1928; Dhavalikar, 1990; Getty, 1971; Krishnan Y., 1981; Michael, 1983; Narain, 1997; Rao, 2023). While this interpretation elucidates certain elements of Gaṇeśa's early iconography, it does not fully explain the rapid elevation of Gaṇeśa to a central theological and ritual role in Hindu devotional practices. The question of why only Gaṇeśa achieved widespread cultural prominence among the numerous yakṣa-like figures remains insufficiently examined.

Another unresolved issue is the semantic and symbolic evolution of the term Vināyaka. Early textual and epigraphic evidence suggests that Vināyaka functioned as both an honorific title (Thapan, 2022) and a designation for potentially obstructive, spiritual entities (G. Sastri, 1930; R. Sastri, 1926). Buddhist inscriptions and literary references occasionally employ Vināyaka in honorific contexts (Thapan, 2022), whereas later Brāhmaṇical texts (G. Sastri, 1930; R. Sastri, 1926) portray Vināyakas as disruptive or demonic forces that require ritual propitiation to be appeased (Brown et al., 1997; Courtright, 1985; Dhavalikar, 1990; Krishnan Y., 1981; Mubeen, 2014). The coexistence of these divergent semantic meanings suggests a complex process of symbolic reinterpretation rather than a rivalry between Buddhism and Brāhmaṇism (Thapan, 2022), a dynamic that has not yet been systematically analysed across textual traditions.

Similarly, iconographic elements, such as the serpent draped across Gaṇeśa's torso, have been interpreted as a ritual sacred thread (Yajñopavita) (Brown et al., 1997; Courtright, 1985; Dhavlikar, 2016; Krishan, 1985, 1990b). How can a non-Vedic deity (Dhavalikar, 1990; Dhavlikar, 2016; Getty, 1971; Krishan, 1985, 1990b) wear a sacred thread, and that too not as per the specifications prescribed in Brāhmaṇical scripture (Manu, 1891)? This is a key question that scholars have not answered. Does the Nāga hold profound symbolism associated with yogic or meditative practices (Chapple and Funes Maderey, 2019)? Such divergent interpretations exemplify the complexity of attributing a singular symbolic meaning to iconographic motifs.

Furthermore, existing scholarship seldom addresses the role of artistic agency in the development of iconography. Traditional iconographic studies have emphasised textual prescriptions and canonical sculptural rules (Shah, 1958); however, historical evidence indicates that artisans and regional devotional communities have actively contributed to iconographic innovation (Tāranāth, 2024). The interaction between textual authority and artistic interpretation remains a significant yet underexplored aspect of iconographic evolution.

These unresolved conceptual and interpretive issues demonstrate that Gaṇeśa iconography cannot be fully explained by a single disciplinary framework. Instead, they underscore the need for interdisciplinary research that integrates historical, textual, artistic, and symbolic perspectives.

As the literature review indicates, despite comprehensive scholarship on Gaṇeśa, several lacunae persist. Firstly, textual metaphors and archaeological evidence are frequently addressed independently rather than being analysed as interconnected facets of visual culture. Secondly, the influence of narrative context on shaping iconographic significance has garnered limited focused inquiry. Lastly, although symbolic interpretations are prevalent, fewer investigations have explored how artists may have deliberately aligned scriptural motifs with sculptural techniques.

The present study addresses these gaps by proposing a contextual methodology for interpreting iconography. Rather than redefining Gaṇeśa symbolically, it examines how visual narratives of untamed and disciplined states of awareness align with sculptural placement and artistic composition. By situating Gaṇeśa within a continuum that spans early elephant imagery, nāga symbolism, and liminal Vināyaka figures, the article contributes to a more integrated understanding of early South Asian sculpture as a dynamic field of visual negotiation.

Addressing these gaps requires a methodological framework that integrates archaeological context with experiential interpretation, and this is the focus of the following section.

3. METHODOLOGY: COGNITIVE ICONOGRAPHY AS HYBRID FRAMEWORK

This study's framework blends art-historical analysis, cognitive archaeology, and hermeneutics to explore how iconographic meaning develops within sculptures. Instead of viewing sacred imagery as fixed symbols, it sees iconography as a relational process influenced by narrative, artistic practice, and viewer interaction. 'Cognitive iconography' here is an interpretive approach analysing how visual form guides perception through material and composition. This framework aims to supplement traditional iconography by emphasising the link between visual structure and perception.

3.1. CONSTRUCTIVIST ORIENTATION AND CONTEXTUAL INTERPRETATION

The study adopts a constructivist stance, recognising that meaning arises from interactions among artefacts, context, and interpretation (Crotty, 1998). It stresses that iconographic interpretation must consider production and encounter conditions. Hermeneutic theory (Sus, 2024) supports understanding through dialogue between the past and the present (Gadamer and Hans Georg, 2006). In sculpture, this dialogue is seen in how artists adapt motifs for new narratives (Dika, 2017). Using a constructivist view moves beyond simple classification to explore how images function in visual programs, emphasising placement, relationships, and narrative over isolated symbols.

3.2. COGNITIVE ARCHAEOLOGY AND MATERIAL ENGAGEMENT

Cognitive archaeology investigates the relationship between visual form and perception. Renfrew (1998) proposed that artefacts externalise thought and memory, whereas Malafouris (2019) contended that material culture influences cognition through interaction. Sculptural images function as active rather than passive components of ritual

environments (Mcgraw and Krátk, 2017). Gaṇeśa iconography, characterised by attributes such as pāśa and aṅkuśa, extends interpretation beyond mere symbolism by guiding attention and shaping narratives. This perspective regards iconography as a dynamic interface between material form and cognition. In this context, cognitive archaeology serves as an interpretive tool rather than a definitive statement on ancient mental states, emphasising how visual structures influence perception within ritual contexts.

3.3. ARTIST COGNITION AND EMBODIED PRACTICE

Art-historical scholarship is increasingly acknowledging the significance of artistic agency in the development of iconography. Rather than viewing sculptors as passive conduits of textual directives, recent research highlights the creative negotiation between inherited conventions and local experimentation (Cali, 2024). In early South Asian sculpture, compositional equilibrium, gesture, and spatial configuration indicate a refined understanding of how viewers engage with the form.

The concept of artist cognition discussed herein pertains to how visual choices—such as combining elephant and human features or arranging attributes—shape interpretive possibilities. For instance, subtle variations in the depiction of the pāśa or aṅkuśa across different sites, or the inventive adaptation of established motifs within new compositional frameworks, can demonstrate sculptors' active interpretive roles. By analysing these strategies, the study aims to elucidate how artists contributed to the evolution of Vināyaka imagery into the stabilised form of Gaṇeśa. This approach avoids ascribing deliberate philosophical intentions to individual artists while recognising that sculptural decisions embody knowledge derived from workshop traditions (Tāranāth, 2024).

3.4. INDIC EPISTEMOLOGY AND VISUALISATION PRACTICES

Indic contemplative traditions provide an additional interpretive framework for understanding the relationship between visualisation and material imagery (Farias et al., 2021). Textual sources concerning meditation practices underscore the significance of structured visualisation in stabilising attention and directing ethical cultivation (Yamabe, 2021). Although establishing direct correlations between meditation manuals (Buddhaghosha and Bhikku, 2010; Maxwell and Katyā, 2022; Meena, 2025; Ruhe, 2025; Yamabe, 2021) and sculptural production remains challenging, parallels between visual discipline and iconographic order indicate a shared cultural emphasis on regulated perception. In this study, Indic epistemology is presented not as a doctrinal system but as a cultural background that informs artistic practice. The focus on visualisation elucidates how metaphors such as the trained elephant (Law, 1939) could transition from literary discourse into sculptural representation. By contextualising Gaṇeśa imagery within this broader framework, the analysis avoids reductive symbolic interpretations and instead highlights the dynamic interplay between contemplative traditions and material culture.

3.5. ANALYTICAL PROCEDURE

The analytical process employed in this article involves close visual reading of selected sculptural examples alongside contextual examination of textual references. Rather than attempting a comprehensive survey of all Gaṇeśa images, the study focuses on key transitional moments in iconographic evolution. This selective approach allows for detailed analysis while maintaining methodological clarity. The framework of cognitive iconography thus operates as a bridge between traditional art-historical description and emerging interdisciplinary approaches, offering a contextual method for examining how sacred imagery encodes processes of transformation within early South Asian sculpture.

3.6. SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

While this research endeavours to provide a comprehensive interdisciplinary synthesis of Gaṇeśa iconographic scholarship, certain limitations should be acknowledged. The present study primarily concentrates on the origin and early development of Gaṇeśa's iconography, with particular emphasis on historiographic debates, symbolic formation, and early sculptural and textual traditions (Bhandarkar R G, 1913; Bopearachchi, 1993; Brown et al., 1997; Courtright, 1985; Dhavalikar, 1990; Getty, 1971; Joge et al., 2021; k. v. j. Koshalee and Bogahawatta, 2018; Krishan, 1990a; Michael, 1983; Rosseels, 2015; Stevenson, 1846). Later devotional developments—especially those associated with medieval

Bhakti movements and regionally specific ritual elaborations—are referenced only to the extent that they contextualise early iconographic consolidation and are not examined in depth.

The study also emphasises Anglophone academic scholarship, comprising peer-reviewed monographs and journal articles in the fields of Indology, art history, religious studies, and interdisciplinary humanities (Appelbaum, 1982; Aravinda Prabhu and Bhat, 2013; Chowdhary and Gopinath, 2013; A. K. Coomaraswamy, 1934; Cossellu and Buddhism, n.d.; Cunningham, 1854; Dehejia, 1997; Eliade, 1957; Fergusson, 1910; Huntington and Huntington, 1985; Kramrisch, 1954; Whicher, 1998). Although vernacular textual traditions, regional ritual literature, and local devotional narratives serve as significant sources for Gaṇeśa studies, a systematic examination of these materials is beyond the current scope.

Furthermore, given the extensive chronological and geographical scope of Gaṇeśa imagery, the review focuses on conceptual integration and theoretical synthesis rather than on an exhaustive cataloguing of regional iconographic variants. The interdisciplinary frameworks examined—particularly those derived from cognitive archaeology, material culture studies, and visual culture theory—are employed analytically rather than empirically, with the objective of exploring interpretive possibilities rather than validating specific models.

These limitations are acknowledged to clarify the scope of the present review and to situate its contribution within the ongoing scholarly discourse on Indic religious iconography.

The subsequent sections employ this framework to analyse key symbolic motifs, starting with the elephant, whose visual evolution offers a foundational context for understanding the emergence of Gaṇeśa's form.

4. THE ELEPHANT METAPHOR IN EARLY VISUAL CULTURE

Elephant imagery occupies a prominent position within early South Asian sculpture, appearing across Buddhist, Brahmanical, and regional artistic traditions (Thapan, 2022). Rather than functioning as a single symbolic motif, the elephant emerges in diverse narrative and architectural contexts, suggesting that artists employed the animal as part of a broader visual vocabulary linking strength, movement, and disciplined presence (Fergusson, 1910). Examining the elephant motif within early sculptural programs provides an essential foundation for understanding the later emergence of Gaṇeśa's anthropomorphic form.

4.1. ELEPHANT SYMBOLISM IN TEXTUAL TRADITIONS

References to elephants in early Indic literature reflect multiple layers of meaning. Late Vedic sources associate elephants with royal power and prosperity (Dhavlikar, 2016), while Buddhist texts introduce a distinct metaphorical dimension in which the elephant becomes an emblem of mental training (Law, 1939; Subedi, 2025). Verses from the Dhammapada compare the disciplined practitioner to a trained elephant that remains steady amidst disturbance, suggesting that the animal served as a pedagogical image connecting ethical cultivation with embodied experience (Tuffley, 2012).

While this textual shift does not imply a direct causal relationship, "cognitive iconography" suggests a dynamic interplay: textual metaphors provide conceptual frameworks, whereas the physical experience of engaging with elephant sculptures within specific architectural contexts likely reinforces, and potentially generates anew, embodied understandings of disciplined awareness, establishing a reciprocal feedback loop between text and material. Artists operating within such contexts may have drawn upon familiar metaphors to craft images that resonate with viewers' lived experiences.

4.2. ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

Elephant Motifs have been found at Indus Valley sites, and it is evident that the elephant had a distinctive place in the Indus Valley civilisation (Thapan, 2022). In the later period, archaeological sites such as Bharhut and Sanchi demonstrate the integration of elephant imagery into early Buddhist narrative programs. At Bharhut, elephants appear within railing reliefs that guide circumambulatory movement, often positioned at transitional points between narrative scenes. Huntington and Huntington (1985) note that such placements of imagery contribute to the rhythm of visual storytelling, encouraging viewers to engage with the reliefs sequentially rather than as isolated images.

Similarly, elephant figures at Sanchi participate in architectural compositions that emphasise threshold experience. Rather than dominating the narrative, these animals function as mediating presences linking human figures, sacred symbols, and architectural space (Dehejia, 1997). The repetition of elephant motifs across multiple sites suggests that sculptors employed a shared visual language through which animal imagery structured ritual perception.

Importantly, these early examples do not depict anthropomorphic elephant-headed beings. Instead, they establish a visual environment in which the elephant operates as a familiar and meaningful motif (Thapan, 2022). Recognising this broader iconographic ecology helps situate the later emergence of Gaṇeśa within an already-established tradition of elephant symbolism.

4.3. FROM MOTIF TO ANTHROPOMORPHIC FORM

The transition from animal motifs to composite anthropomorphic figures constitutes one of the most significant advancements in early South Asian sculpture. Gupta-period sites, such as Udayagiri, offer some of the earliest definitively dated instances of Gaṇeśa imagery. These sculptures exemplify a deliberate integration of elephant characteristics with human posture, indicating a process of artistic synthesis rather than abrupt innovation (Brown et al., 1997; Courtright, 1985; Dhavalikar, 1990; Dhavlikar, 2016). Surprisingly, scholars often neglect the earlier Pre-Gupta-period elephant-headed human figure carved on the frieze of a Buddhist chaitya at Mihintale, Sri Lanka. They often link it to the religious exchange between Brāhmaṇical and Buddhist philosophy (Koshalee and Bogahawatta, 2018) without delving deeper into its cognitive aspects.

Scholars have frequently analysed this transformation within theological paradigms; however, the sculptural evidence suggests that artists engaged in innovative experimentation with hybrid forms across various artistic traditions (Sinha et al., 2008). Composite figures are evident in Yakṣa iconography and narrative reliefs, exemplifying a broader artistic inclination to combine human and animal features to convey complex symbolism (A. K. Coomaraswamy, 1934). In this context, the elephant-headed form may be regarded as part of an ongoing continuum of visual experimentation rather than an isolated iconographic creation.

The compositional balance of early Gaṇeśa images further corroborates this interpretation. The frontal orientation and judicious distribution of attributes in the Gupta period indicate a focus on stability, rather than the dynamic movement typically associated with narrative animal imagery. These distinctions imply that artists were not simply reproducing animal motifs but reinterpreting them to communicate novel visual concepts.

4.4. COGNITIVE INTERPRETATION AND ARTISTIC AGENCY

From the perspective of cognitive archaeology, the shift toward anthropomorphic elephant imagery can be interpreted as a transformation in how visual form guides perception. Expressing thoughts about Arnheim, Cali (2024) argued that compositional balance influences emotional response; similarly, early Gaṇeśa sculptures exhibit a controlled symmetry that encourages focused engagement. Rather than overwhelming the viewer with narrative complexity, the image presents a stabilised focal point within the sculptural environment.

It appears that artists have selected elephant imagery not solely for its symbolic significance but also for its capacity to direct visual focus. The transition from portraying a wild animal to a curated anthropomorphic figure may therefore indicate an evolving aesthetic strategy aimed at harmonising narrative vitality with meditative serenity. While assertions about artistic intention are difficult to confirm definitively, the consistency of compositional choices across early examples suggests a shared understanding of how form influences perception.

4.5. SYNTHESIS

Taken together, textual metaphors and archaeological evidence indicate that elephant imagery functioned as a versatile visual resource within early South Asian sculpture. From narrative reliefs at Bharhut and Sanchi to anthropomorphic figures at Mihintale and Udayagiri, the elephant progresses from a dynamic participant in storytelling to a stabilised focal point. This transformation establishes a foundational visual platform for later iconographic developments, thereby facilitating the emergence of Gaṇeśa as a composed and auspicious figure. Importantly, the evidence does not imply a linear progression from animal to deity; rather, it demonstrates a process of gradual synthesis wherein artists negotiated multiple symbolic traditions. By analysing the elephant motif within its sculptural context,

this chapter underscores how visual culture mediates between untamed movement and disciplined form—a tension that becomes central to the interpretive framework developed in subsequent sections.

If elephant imagery anchors compositional stability, nāga symbolism introduces an equally important dimension of transformation, which the next section explores.

5. NĀGA SYMBOLISM AND COGNITIVE ECOLOGY

Serpentine imagery constitutes a significant component of Gaṇeśa's iconography (Krishnan, 1999). Serpent representation across Buddhist, Brahmanical, and regional sculptural traditions is an important aspect of early South Asian visual culture (Borah, 2017; De Souza, 1964; Duran, 1990). Unlike the elephant motif, which frequently conveys grounded presence and stability, nāga imagery introduces movement, fluidity, and liminality in architectural and narrative contexts, yet both share common symbolic associations, such as fertility (De Souza, 1964). Examining nāga symbolism alongside elephant imagery reveals a broader visual ecology in which artists balanced contrasting yet complementary symbolic registers.

5.1. NĀGA AS MIND-METAPHOR IN TEXTUAL TRADITIONS

Textual sources within early Buddhist literature frequently employ serpent imagery to illustrate themes of transformation, vigilance, and the regulation of internal states. The *Sutta-Nipāta* (Jayawickrama N., 1977), for instance, likens disciplined conduct to shedding a serpent's skin, emphasising renewal through self-restraint (Thera, 1994). These metaphors imply that serpents were perceived not simply as mythological entities but as pedagogical symbols that communicate psychological processes.

Within Indic cosmology more broadly, nāgas occupy transitional spaces between terrestrial and aquatic realms (Staniland Wake, 1873). This liminal positioning may have contributed to their frequent association with thresholds and protective roles within sacred architecture. While textual metaphors cannot be assumed to directly determine sculptural form, they indicate a cultural environment in which serpentine imagery carried experiential resonance.

5.2. NĀGA IMAGERY IN EARLY SCULPTURE

Archaeological sites such as Sanchi and Amaravati provide substantial evidence of nāga imagery incorporated into architectural compositions (Ganvir, 2010). At Sanchi, serpentine figures are found near gateways and railings, indicating transitions between narrative segments. Dehejia (1997) observes that such placements influence the viewer's spatial perception, directing movement within the monument and emphasising themes of protection and transformation.

In contrast to narrative animal imagery that portrays dynamic action, nāga figures frequently display coiled or rhythmic forms that underscore continuity and cyclical motion. The recurring serpentine motifs across various reliefs imply that artists utilised a common visual lexicon wherein curvature and flow contrasted with the stable presence of elephants and other land animals. These compositional decisions reflect artists' awareness of how form can influence the viewer's perception of spatial arrangements.

5.3. COGNITIVE ECOLOGY: STABILITY AND TRANSFORMATION

From the perspective of cognitive archaeology, the juxtaposition of elephant and nāga imagery within early sculptural programs may be understood as a form of visual ecology—an arrangement of motifs that collectively shape perceptual experience (Malafouris, 2019). Elephants, with their weight and solidity, anchor the viewer within the narrative field, while serpents introduce directional movement and visual tension.

Rather than interpreting these motifs as opposing symbols, this chapter proposes that artists balanced stability and transformation through compositional strategies. In the case of the Muchalinda Nāga narrative (Johns and Rani Nag, 2021), often found at these places and depicted with a number of hoods in a protective posture, can actually be seen as a transformation from Siddhartha to Gautama Buddha. The presence of serpentine forms alongside grounded animal figures encourages a dynamic viewing process in which attention shifts between stillness and motion. Such visual interplay prepares the ground for later iconographic developments in which Gaṇeśa incorporates both stabilising and transformative attributes.

5.4. THE SERPENT GIRDLE IN GAṆEŚA ICONOGRAPHY

The incorporation of serpent imagery into Gaṇeśa's iconography signifies a noteworthy moment of symbolic synthesis. In numerous early representations, a serpent encircles Gaṇeśa's torso, frequently interpreted as a sacred thread – Yajñopavita by the scholars (Brown et al., 1997; Dhavlikar, 2016; Krishnan, 1999). Within the contextual framework presented herein, the serpent girdle may also be regarded as a visual indicator of regulated transformation. It can be interpreted as Vaikakśa, a cloth draped around the torso from the left shoulder, worn during meditation (Chandra, 1956). Rather than highlighting uncontrolled movement, the coiled serpent suggests transformation of mind (Bhikkhu, 2016), containment and balance, resonating with broader themes of disciplined awareness introduced through elephant imagery.

Scholars have observed that the amalgamation of elephant and serpent motifs manifests across various sculptural traditions (Banerjea, 2016; Rao, 2023). It is apparent that artists were utilising a common symbolic lexicon rather than devising isolated attributes. The combination of these motifs into a unified figure exemplifies an artistic dialogue in which contrasting visual elements are harmonised within a cohesive composition.

5.5. SYNTHESIS

Nāga symbolism introduces a vital dimension to the evolving visual language culminating in the iconography of Gaṇeśa. Its associations with liminality, transformation, and cyclical movement augment the stabilising influence of elephant imagery, thereby fostering a harmonious visual environment in early South Asian sculpture. Analysing nāga motifs within their architectural and narrative contexts, this section demonstrates how artists meticulously arranged symbolic contrasts to influence viewer perception. The interplay between stability and transformation established herein provides a conceptual bridge to the subsequent discussion of visualisation techniques. As elephant and serpent imagery converge within sculptural programmes, the foundation is laid for understanding how internal contemplative metaphors may have informed the development of anthropomorphic forms symbolising disciplined awareness.

6. VISUALISATION AND MATERIAL PRACTICE

Visualisation occupies an important (Leuba, 1919) yet often understated position within early South Asian artistic traditions. While sculptural imagery is typically examined through stylistic or iconographic frameworks, the experiential dimension by which images guide perception and attention has received comparatively little attention (Chari, 2002). Rather than isolating visualisation as a purely meditative phenomenon, this section considers how material environments translated internal metaphors into sculptural form.

6.1. VISUALISATION IN CONTEMPLATIVE TRADITIONS

Indic textual traditions frequently portray visualisation as a method for stabilising awareness through organised imagery (Chapple and Funes Maderey, 2019; Farias et al., 2021). In Buddhist meditation practices, exercises like kasiṇa contemplation employ visual objects or imagined forms to cultivate sustained attention (Buddhaghosha and Bhikku, 2010). Although these practices do not necessarily imply that specific sculptures were deliberately created as meditation aids, they do indicate a cultural familiarity with the notion that visual form can impact cognitive experience.

Rather than treating visualisation as a strictly religious or meditative phenomenon, this study approaches it as a broader epistemic framework influencing artistic production. The translation of metaphor into image—such as the disciplined elephant or the coiled serpent—suggests that sculptors operated within a visual culture attuned to imagery's transformative potential. Such practices likely informed how viewers engaged with sacred environments, where narrative reliefs and iconic figures functioned simultaneously as aesthetic and experiential structures.

6.2. SCULPTURAL SPACE AND GUIDED PERCEPTION

Archaeological evidence from sites dating from the 3rd BCE to the 6th CE, such as Sanchi, Bharhut, and Ajanta, demonstrates that early Indian art was deeply concerned with orchestrating viewers' movement and perception. Narrative murals and relief panels often unfold sequentially along circumambulatory paths, encouraging viewers to

encounter images through bodily motion rather than static observation (Dehejia, 1997). Within this context, visualisation becomes a spatial process shaped as much by architecture as by individual iconography.

Sculptural programs frequently integrate multiple symbolic motifs such as elephants, nāgas, and yakṣas (Cunningham, 1854), creating layered environments in which meaning emerges through relational placement. Rather than isolating Gaṇeśa as a singular image, it is more productive to consider how the eventual anthropomorphic form participates in these broader visual systems. The viewer's experience of movement, repetition, and focal stillness contributes to the perception of stability that later Gaṇeśa images embody.

6.3. ICONOGRAPHY AS A FEEDBACK LOOP

From a cognitive archaeology perspective, material images can be understood as part of a feedback loop between perception and cultural practice (Basu, 2004). Varela, Thompson and Rosch argue that cognition is shaped through embodied interaction with the environment (Basu, 2004), while Malafouris (2019) emphasises the role of artefacts in structuring thought processes. Within early South Asian sculpture, recurring visual metaphors such as the disciplined elephant or the regulated serpent may have reinforced shared patterns of attention.

The emergence of anthropomorphic Gaṇeśa imagery can thus be interpreted as a crystallisation of visual strategies already present within earlier sculptural traditions. Rather than representing a sudden theological innovation, the form appears to integrate stabilising and transformative motifs into a single focal figure. This integration suggests that iconography evolves not only through textual transmission but also through iterative artistic experimentation responding to viewer engagement.

6.4. ARTISTIC PRACTICE AND EMBODIED KNOWLEDGE

Art-historical research increasingly recognises that sculptural creation involved embodied knowledge conveyed through workshop traditions (Tāranāth, 2024). Elements such as compositional balance, proportional systems, and gesture embody practical understanding developed through hands-on craftsmanship rather than solely through textual instructions (Arnheim, 1969). Consequently, the emergence of Gaṇeśa's tranquil frontal posture and symmetrical configuration can be interpreted as a conscious visual strategy intended to evoke a sense of composure amidst dynamic narrative contexts.

Instead of attributing particular philosophical intentions to individual artists, this section proposes that sculptors engaged in a collective visual culture influenced by contemplative metaphors and ritual practices. The incorporation of elephant and serpent motifs into anthropomorphic imagery demonstrates how artists navigated inherited symbolic vocabularies to craft novel forms that resonated with viewers' embodied experiences.

6.5. SYNTHESIS

When understood as a material and spatial practice, visualisation provides a crucial bridge between earlier symbolic motifs and the stabilised iconography of Gaṇeśa. By translating contemplative metaphors into sculptural form, artists created images that guide perception and reinforce narrative themes. The convergence of elephant stability and nāga transformation within a composed anthropomorphic figure suggests that Gaṇeśa's emergence reflects an evolving dialogue between internal visualisation practices and external artistic experimentation.

These experiential dynamics establish the foundation for analysing how liminal Vināyaka imagery develops into the stabilised figure of Gaṇeśa in the subsequent section. As visualisation practices converge with sculptural innovation, the elephant-headed form begins to represent not only narrative symbolism but also a structured experience of regulated awareness within early South Asian visual culture.

7. FROM VINĀYAKA TO GAṆEŚA: ICONOGRAPHIC EVOLUTION

The transition from Vināyaka to Gaṇeśa (Rangarajan, 2014) signifies a pivotal advancement within the early sculptural traditions of South Asia. Rather than reflecting an abrupt theological shift, this change appears to embody a gradual process of visual negotiation influenced by narrative frameworks, artistic experimentation, and evolving ritual priorities (Mubeen, 2014). An analysis of Vināyaka portrayals in archaeological contexts reveals a liminal figure whose

eventual identification as Gaṇeśa can be understood through concepts of continuity and reinterpretation, rather than through symbolic substitution.

7.1. EARLY VINĀYAKA REFERENCES AND LIMINALITY

The term 'Vināyaka' denotes a multifaceted and paradoxical entity that serves simultaneously as the creator and eradicator of obstacles. As noted in the *Amarakośa* (Amarsingh, 1925), the term refers to an individual who either lacks a leader or embodies leadership oneself. This suggests a self-initiated figure whose nature may be either constructive or destructive. Early textual references, such as those found in the *Mānava Gṛhya Sūtra* (R. Sastri, 1926) and *Yājñavalkya Smṛti* (G. Sastri, 1930), describe 'Vināyakas' (often in the plural) as spirits that must be propitiated to prevent ritual failure and psychological disorder. Such descriptions characterise Vināyaka as an ambivalent figure associated with thresholds, obstacles, and uncertainties in ritual practice (Courtright, 1985). Rather than functioning as a fully established deity, Vināyaka exists within a broader category of liminal beings whose roles are connected to transitional phases. This association with obstructions does not necessarily entail moral opposition; rather, it reflects a worldview recognising disruption as an inherent facet of movement across different states—whether spatial, ritual, or psychological.

Such liminality provides an essential conceptual foundation for comprehending subsequent iconographic advancements. The enduring references to Vināyaka across various textual traditions imply that obstruction was not outright rejected but was progressively reinterpreted within changing visual and ritual contexts. This continuity suggests that artists and patrons may have viewed obstruction and auspiciousness not as mutually exclusive but as interconnected aspects within a cohesive symbolic system.

7.2. ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE AND SCULPTURAL CONTEXT

The inscriptions carved at the base of an image found at Sakar Dhar – Kabul (6th CE) identify the elephant-headed human figure as Maha Vināyaka (Dhavlikar, 2016). The name, Vināyaka, is further supported by later inscriptions (8th CE) found on the pillar at Ghantiyala, Jodhpur (Thapan, 2022). Archaeological evidence reinforces the interpretation of Vināyaka as a figure embedded within transitional spaces. Early sculptural representations associated with obstructive or liminal imagery often appear near gateways, thresholds, or architectural junctures, positioning the figure within zones of passage rather than centralised worship. Such placement suggests a functional relationship between iconography and spatial experience, where viewers encounter the image as part of a movement through sacred space.

Among the most compelling visual motifs connected with Vināyaka is the depiction of trampling or subjugation by protective figures such as Aparājītā. These images have sometimes been interpreted as narratives of triumph (Krishnan, 1999); however, their compositional structure indicates a more nuanced visual strategy. The act of trampling emphasises containment and regulation rather than annihilation, reflecting a broader artistic tendency to transform disruptive forces into stabilising elements within the sculptural program. Buddhist narratives state that Mara rode upon an elephant, Girimekhala. But the 8th-century panel depicts an elephant-headed human figure holding a raised axe as the head of Mara's army. This concept parallels Vināyaka's obstructive nature.

The continued presence of Vināyaka imagery within such contexts suggests that the figure retained symbolic relevance even as its visual role evolved. Rather than disappearing from the iconographic landscape, Vināyaka becomes integrated into compositions that highlight the negotiation between instability and order.

7.3. OBSTRUCTION, REGULATION, AND VISUAL STRATEGY

Artists seem to have engaged with this principle through meticulously organised compositions that direct the viewer's focus. The placement of trampling figures, the alignment of bodies, and the allocation of attributes all contribute to a sense of orchestrated resolution. Instead of depicting obstruction as an external adversary, these visual strategies suggest that disruption is embedded in the image's overall harmony.

This approach aligns with broader patterns observed in early Indian art, wherein liminal figures frequently serve as mediators of transitions rather than as adversaries to central themes. The evolution from Vināyaka imagery towards Gaṇeśa's stabilised form can thus be understood as a transition in visual emphasis—from explicit depiction of obstruction to its incorporation within a harmonious anthropomorphic figure.

Rather than indicating Vināyaka's disappearance, subsequent images of Gaṇeśa holding standard attributes imply a process of synthesis. The capacity to obstruct is reconceived as the ability to regulate, embodied within a figure that combines strength and composure. The elephant head—previously recognised in earlier traditions as a symbol of disciplined presence—serves as a visual focal point for this transformation. The tranquil posture and symmetrical arrangement of attributes further bolster the perception of internal balance. Artists appear to have utilised established motifs while reorienting their interpretive focus, thereby ensuring continuity within the developing iconographic framework. Through this process, Gaṇeśa manifests not as a replacement for Vināyaka but as a stabilised expression of themes already present within earlier visual traditions.

7.4. SYNTHESIS

The transition from Vināyaka to Gaṇeśa is most comprehensively understood as an evolution in iconography, grounded in continuity of context. Archaeological placement, imagery of trampling, and compositional strategies suggest that obstruction was not removed but rather reinterpreted through visual transformation. Instead of depicting opposing entities, Vināyaka and Gaṇeśa occupy successive positions within a common symbolic continuum, shaped by artistic negotiation and narrative context.

This transition does not eliminate the liminal aspect associated with Vināyaka; rather, it incorporates it within a stabilised visual framework. By analysing the process through which disruptive imagery is harmonised within a composed anthropomorphic form, the chapter emphasises how early South Asian sculptors translated concepts of transition and regulation into enduring iconographic structures. These developments anticipate subsequent interpretive frameworks in which regulation and disruption coexist as complementary elements within a unified visual continuum.

8. DISCUSSION: UNTAMED AND DISCIPLINED MIND — CONTEXTUAL ICONOGRAPHY AND THE TWOFOLD NATURE OF VINĀYAKA-GAṆEŚA

The preceding sections have traced the gradual convergence of elephant imagery, nāga symbolism, visualisation practices, and liminal Vināyaka figures in early South Asian sculptural traditions. This discussion synthesises those strands by examining how Gaṇeśa's iconography articulates a relationship between untamed and disciplined states of awareness. Rather than proposing a single symbolic meaning, the analysis emphasises contextual interpretation, suggesting that visual narratives and sculptural strategies collectively encode processes of regulation and transformation.

Elephant imagery in early Indic traditions frequently oscillates between representations of unrestrained force and disciplined composure. Narrative scenes linked to Māra's army, for instance, feature animal and hybrid figures that embody chaos and psychological unrest, illustrating the instability that precedes enlightenment. Although these visual traditions do not explicitly depict Gaṇeśa, they create a broader iconographic context in which the elephant may symbolise both unregulated power and the potential for transformative change.

In Buddhist literature, the metaphor of the trained elephant is a recurring image representing cultivated awareness (Law, 1939; Subedi, 2025; Tuffley, 2012). When examined alongside sculptural evidence, this metaphor indicates that artists operated within a visual culture attuned to the tension between untamed movement and disciplined presence. The eventual development of the composed elephant-headed figure can thus be interpreted as an extension of earlier visual strategies designed to stabilise narrative energy.

The liminal character of Vināyaka imagery provides a crucial link between untamed and disciplined states. Sculptural depictions of Aparājitā trampling a Vināyaka-like figure (Krishnan, 1999) or related motifs often convey containment rather than annihilation. The visual emphasis lies not in victory over an adversary but in the regulation of disruptive forces within a balanced composition. Such imagery resonates with broader themes of obstruction found across South Asian visual culture. Figures associated with Vighnantaka (Krishnan, 1999) or similar narrative roles illustrate how hindrances are incorporated into ritual frameworks rather than excluded. By situating obstruction within a controlled visual program, artists transform instability into an element of compositional harmony.

This perspective challenges interpretations that view Vināyaka exclusively as negative (G. Sastri, 1930; R. Sastri, 1926) or as pre-iconic (Brown et al., 1997; Courtright, 1985; Thapan, 2022). Instead, the obstructive dimension is

integrated into a broader continuum where disruption and regulation coexist within the framework of evolving sculptural narratives.

Early anthropomorphic Gaṇeśa images present a notable shift toward compositional equilibrium. The frontal posture, measured symmetry, and calm expression contrast with the dynamic tension characteristic of earlier obstructive imagery. Attributes such as the pāśa (noose) and aṅkuśa (elephant goad) reinforce this visual logic, functioning as instruments that guide and restrain rather than dominate.

Within the contextual framework developed here, these implements may be interpreted as visual indicators of regulated awareness. The pāśa suggests containment or gathering, while the aṅkuśa evokes direction and guidance. Their presence in Gaṇeśa's iconography aligns with broader themes of disciplined transformation, as introduced through elephant and nāga imagery in earlier chapters.

Importantly, the stabilised form of Gaṇeśa does not negate the liminal dimension associated with Vināyaka. Instead, it integrates that dimension into a composed visual structure, reflecting a process of synthesis rather than replacement.

The placement of Gaṇeśa within Saptamātrkā panels (Dhavlikar, 2016) further illustrates the integration of regulation and transformation within sculptural programs. These group compositions often position Gaṇeśa alongside powerful feminine figures, suggesting a visual dialogue between dynamic energy and stabilising presence. These Mātrkāś are often associated with mental hindrances (Goswami et al., 2005). The inclusion of Gaṇeśa in such contexts indicates that artists understood the elephant-headed figure as part of a broader network of protective and transformative imagery.

Narratives in Gaṇeśa Purāṇa describing Gaṇeśa's encounters with figures such as Kāmāsura or Matsarāsura (Stevenson, 1846; Translated by Dr Joshi, 2019) likewise emphasise the regulation of internal states rather than external conquest. While these mythological motifs belong to later textual traditions, their thematic resonance with earlier sculptural narratives suggests continuity in the visual articulation of transformation.

In summary, the evidence presented throughout this scholarly article supports an interpretation whereby Vināyaka and Gaṇeśa symbolise complementary aspects within a shared iconographic continuum. Rather than functioning as discrete symbolic entities, Vināyaka and Gaṇeśa are best comprehended as two dynamic poles within a collective conceptual continuum—one emphasising untamed liminality and the potential for obstruction, the other embodying its transformation into stabilised regulation and auspicious guidance. This duality, however, is not absolute, as even the mature Gaṇeśa may retain elements of his liminal heritage, reflecting an ongoing negotiation of these states. Such duality arises not from abstract symbolism but from contextual relationships among narrative imagery, sculptural placement, and compositional strategy.

Iconographic meaning, therefore, emerges through contextual interpretation rather than from isolated attributes. The same elephant imagery that signifies disruption in one narrative may convey serenity in another, contingent upon its placement and visual framing. By examining Gaṇeśa through this contextual perspective, the study emphasises how early South Asian artists integrated scriptural metaphors with material practice, producing imagery that encodes transformation within their formal structure. The question is whether a similar methodology could be applied to the Indic Philosophical sects, allowing us to decipher the deeper meanings of Śaiva, Vaiṣṇav, Śakta, Buddhist, and Jain Iconography.

9. CONCLUSION

This article has examined the emergence of Gaṇeśa's iconography through a contextual analysis of early South Asian sculptural traditions, integrating textual metaphors, archaeological contexts, and theories of material engagement. By tracing the convergence of elephant imagery, nāga symbolism, visualisation practices, and liminal Vināyaka figures, the study has proposed that Gaṇeśa's form developed not through abrupt doctrinal change but through gradual artistic negotiation within evolving visual programmes.

The analysis of elephant imagery revealed that early sculptors employed a motif capable of conveying both dynamic movement and disciplined presence. Nāga symbolism introduced a complementary dimension of transformation and liminality, thereby contributing to a visual ecology where stability and motion coexist harmoniously. Visualisation practices further demonstrated how structured imagery might have directed viewer perception within ritual contexts, linking contemplative metaphors to material forms. The examination of Vināyaka imagery indicated that obstruction

functioned as a transitional principle embedded within sculptural narratives, thereby preparing the foundation for the stabilised anthropomorphic depiction of Gaṇeśa.

The discussion section synthesised these strands by proposing a contextual framework in which Vināyaka and Gaṇeśa may be understood as complementary aspects within a shared iconographic continuum. Rather than interpreting the elephant-headed figure through fixed symbolic meanings, this study emphasised how narrative setting, sculptural placement, and artistic strategy shape interpretation. Attributes such as the pāśa and aṅkuśa function not merely as emblematic objects but as visual indicators of regulation, reinforcing themes of balance and transformation embedded in early South Asian visual culture.

By emphasising contextual iconography as a methodological approach, the article contributes to broader dialogues within archaeology and art history concerning the relationship between material culture and embodied perception. The findings indicate that sacred imagery play an active role in shaping visual and cognitive experiences, mediating between narrative tradition and artistic innovation. Future research may expand this framework to analyse other composite figures in South Asian art, investigating how contextual interpretation uncovers the dynamic processes through which visual traditions encode transformation over time.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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