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Iconography in Transition: An Interdisciplinary Re-examination of Gaṇeśa Across Art History, Archaeology, Buddhist Studies, and Cognitive Symbolism

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Abstract:

Indian iconography has traditionally been studied within specific disciplinary frameworks, such as art history, textual hermeneutics, archaeology, and anthropology. However, scholars advocating interdisciplinarity argue that complex cultural phenomena cannot be fully understood through isolated approaches. The elephant-headed form of Gaṇeśa illustrates this challenge in the following way. Early Buddhist inscriptions that identify *Vināyaka* as a title of honour, numismatic evidence from Indo-Greek regions, transitional Gupta-period terracotta seals, and elephant-headed figures in Sri Lankan and Andhra Buddhist sites collectively show that Gaṇeśa's emergence is neither linear nor sectarian. Cognitive approaches further reveal the symbolic significance of elements such as the elephant-head, *nāga*, *pāśa*, and *aṅkuśa* in relation to mental discipline. This study

adopts an interdisciplinary methodology informed by art history, archaeology, Buddhist studies, philology, anthropology, and cognitive symbolism, following the practices recommended by leading theorists of integrative research. A brief conceptual note explains how emerging digital humanities tools may support future research in this area. This study suggests that Gaṇeśa's iconography reflects broader cultural transitions in India—dynamic, plural, and deeply interconnected.

Keywords: Gaṇeśa; interdisciplinarity; Buddhist epigraphy; cognitive symbolism; Vināyaka; archaeology; cultural analytics; Nāgavagga; iconographic evolution.

1. Introduction

Indian iconography is one of the richest cultural repositories of the subcontinent; however, its scholarly treatment has often remained confined within strict disciplinary boundaries. Gaṇeśa, whose iconography spans Buddhist, Brāhmaṇical, folk, numismatic, philosophical, and cognitive domains, exemplifies precisely the kind of subject that requires integrative methodologies. Traditional art-historical studies have offered detailed stylistic and typological analyses of Gaṇeśa (Getty; Banerjea), while archaeological work has catalogued terracottas, inscriptions, and early sculptural forms (Dhavalikar). Sanskritists and Indologists have foregrounded Purāṇic narratives, often privileging later textual constructions of Gaṇeśa (Courtright; Krishnan). Anthropologists have emphasised popular religious practices, agrarian rituals, and local village traditions (Michael,).

In the case of Gaṇeśa, such fragmentation leads to conflicting theories about his origins and development. Early textual references to *Vināyaka* in the *Mānava Gṛhya Sūtra* describe disruptive spirits rather than elephant-headed deities (R. Sastri; Krishnan). The *Yājñavalkya Smṛti* ritualises

these Vināyakas, linking them with Ambikā (G. Sastri). Conversely, Buddhist inscriptions from Sanchi, Sonari, Andher, and other Haimavata contexts use *Vināyaka* as an honorific linked to teachers and possibly even the Buddha (Thapan). The *Amarakośa* includes *Vināyaka* among the names of the Buddha (Amarsingh), revealing the semantic and doctrinal tensions between Buddhist and Brāhmaṇical traditions.

Visual and material evidence further challenge linear narratives. Elephant-headed figures at Amarāvatī and the Kaṇṭaka Cetiya at Mihintale, found in purely Buddhist contexts, precede the stabilised Purāṇic Gaṇeśa of the Gupta period (Koshalee and Bogahawatta). Similarly, Indo-Greek coins from the Hermaeus period depict elephant-headed figures whose iconographic identities remain debated (Bopearachchi; Brown et al.). Gupta-era terracottas display syncretic iconographic elements not yet aligned with later Purāṇic codification (Dhavlikar; Brown et al.; Narain; Thapan).

Cognitive and philosophical frameworks offer further insights. The *Nāgavagga* of the *Dhammapada* uses the elephant as a metaphor for mental discipline (Tuffley), while cognitive theorists such as Zimmer and Paranjpe highlight the psychological symbolism within Indic visual systems (Zimmer; Paranjpe). Some scholars (Dreyfus and Thompson) similarly argue that Buddhist imagery encodes models of the mind and introspection. This interdisciplinary approach presents Gaṇeśa not merely as a mythological figure but as a cognitive archetype symbolising the disciplined mind, an interpretation rarely explored in traditional art-historical discourse.

Interdisciplinary methodologies require synthesising evidence from textual, material, ritual, and perceptual domains. In this context, Gaṇeśa's evolution provides an ideal case study for applying integrative frameworks. His iconography reflects transitions between Buddhism and Brāhmaṇism, between folk and elite traditions, between regional and pan-Indian cults, and between pre-classical and classical visual systems. Such complexity cannot be addressed without a research strategy that

intentionally combines art history, archaeology, Buddhist studies, cognitive science, anthropology, and, potentially, digital humanities tools.

Thus, Gaṇeśa's iconography serves as a microcosm of *India in transition*, reflecting multireligious entanglements, philosophical negotiations, and artistic innovations across centuries. The present study employs an interdisciplinary methodology to explore this plurality, asserting that only such a comprehensive approach can capture the nuanced evolution of Gaṇeśa's visual and conceptual forms.

2. Limits of Single-Disciplinary Approaches and the Need for Interdisciplinarity in Gaṇeśa Studies

Disciplinary boundaries have long shaped scholarly efforts to explore the origins and development of Gaṇeśa (Dhavlikar). While each discipline, such as art history, archaeology, religious studies, anthropology, Indology, or cognitive science, offers valuable insights, none can fully explain Gaṇeśa's complex iconography. Research limited to a single discipline is inherently restrictive because it "illuminates only one dimension of a multifaceted problem." Gaṇeśa's emergence, which spans Buddhist, Brāhmaṇical, regional, numismatic, and cognitive traditions, exemplifies this methodological challenge (Brown et al.).

2.1 Limitations of Art-Historical Approaches

Art-historical scholarship has traditionally prioritised formal analysis, typology, and stylistic chronology. Foundational studies by Getty, Banerjea, and Rao classify Gaṇeśa mainly through morphological features such as posture, attributes, arm count, decorative motifs, and sculptural variations (Getty, ch. 3; Banerjea 356–61; Rao 35–67). While important, these frameworks often

view images as static aesthetic forms rather than dynamic cultural artefacts shaped by rituals, cognitive symbolism, or inter-sectarian dialogue.

Moreover, art-historical narratives often start with Gupta sculptures, thereby overlooking earlier Buddhist elephant-headed figures at Amarāvatī, Nagarjunakonda, and Mihintale (Koshalee and Bogahawatta). Because these early depictions do not fit neatly with later Purāṇic iconography, they are sometimes marginalised as "proto-Gaṇeśa" or "unrelated elephant demons" (Getty 29–30), a classification that shows the limits of strict typology. Visual meaning is always influenced by "patterns of intention" that go beyond stylistic boundaries. Without considering contextual, textual, and cognitive evidence, art history risks detaching visual forms from their conceptual foundations.

2.2 Constraints of Textual and Philological Methods

Textual and philological approaches, especially within Indology, have historically privileged Sanskrit sources such as Ṛgvedic hymns, Gṛhyasūtras, Smṛtis, and Purāṇas. Scholars such as Courtright, grounded Gaṇeśa studies in Purāṇic mythology, interpreting him as a Brāhmaṇical deity whose canonical identity crystallised within Sanskritic frameworks (Courtright 8–13).

However, this approach encounters three critical problems.

 Purāṇic narratives are late and often retroactive, offering theological rather than historical origins (Dhavalikar).

 Early references to Vināyaka in Gṛhyasūtras and Smṛtis describe disruptive beings rather than elephant-headed deities (R. Sastri; G. Sastri).

 Primary Buddhist uses of the term Vināyaka are disregarded despite their chronological precedence (Thapan 84–106).

Textual approaches, therefore, risk creating a sectarian history of Gaṇeśa, privileging Brāhmaṇical perspectives and neglecting Buddhist, Jain, and folk contributions to Gaṇeśa's history. South Asian traditions evolved through "mutual translation rather than unilateral inheritance." A textual method that favours one tradition flattens this complexity.

2.3 Archaeological and Numismatic Approaches in Isolation

Archaeology provides essential material evidence—terracotta plaques, Gupta seals, and architectural remains —but, when studied alone, it cannot resolve iconographic ambiguity. For instance, the late Gupta terracotta seal (Joge et al.) depicts a seated figure possibly associated with Mātṛkā cults. Yet, its exact identification remains uncertain without supporting textual, iconographic, and ritual evidence.

Numismatic evidence presents challenges similar to those faced by historians. Indo-Greek coins depicting elephant-headed figures (Bopearachchi 425–53) provide some of the earliest known hybrid representations in South Asia. However, their identity remains disputed: are they Gaṇas, Yakṣa variants, Mithraic syncretisms, or local protective spirits? (Sinha et al. 111–12). Without interdisciplinary comparisons across regions, scripts, artistic styles, and symbolic frameworks, archaeological and numismatic sources remain open to multiple interpretations. Archaeological evidence requires collaboration with textual, anthropological, and cognitive approaches.

2.4 The Problem of Overlooking Buddhist Evidence

A key oversight in Gaṇeśa studies is the neglect of Buddhist material. Buddhist art and epigraphy from Sri Lanka, Andhra, and Gandhāra reveal the following:

☐ Elephant-headed guardian figures (Koshalee and Bogahawatta)

☐ The title *Vināyaka* used for Buddhist teachers (Thapan 84–85)

☐ Visual metaphors of mind-training linked to elephants and nāgas (Subedi; Law; Tuffley; Bhikkhu)

However, early scholarship, dominated by Brāhmaṇical frameworks, often dismissed these as aberrations or "demonic representations," reflecting the discipline's sectarian bias (Brown et al. 59–60). We can say that the idea that disciplinary boundaries often "reproduce epistemic blind spots" is especially relevant here. Without incorporating Buddhist studies, Gaṇeśa research remains incomplete.

2.5 Anthropological Perspectives: Insightful but Incomplete

Anthropologists such as Michael and Mubeen have highlighted Gaṇeśa's village cults, agrarian associations, ritual plants, and seasonal festivals (Mubeen; Michael, 91–116). These studies illuminate Gaṇeśa's lived religious presence but lack engagement with early material culture, Buddhist contexts and textual genealogies. Anthropology reveals *how* Gaṇeśa functions in society, but not *how* the iconographic form emerged historically.

2.6 Absence of Cognitive and Philosophical Integration

Cognitive interpretations, such as the elephant symbolising the mind, nāga representing transformative energy, and *pāśa and aṅkuśa* serving as tools for attention control, are derived from the works of Zimmer, Paranjpe, and Dreyfus and Thompson (Zimmer 102–05; Paranjpe 231–47; Dreyfus and Thompson 89–112). However, these insights remain peripheral to mainstream iconographic studies. By failing to incorporate cognitive symbolism, scholars miss Gaṇeśa's

philosophical aspects, especially his connection to mind-training ideas found in Buddhist texts such as the Nāgavagga *(Tuffley, ch. 23) and* the *Uraga Sutta* (Bhikkhu).

2.7 Why Interdisciplinarity Is Necessary

Because Gaṇeśa arises from **multiple cultural axes**, no single discipline can explain him.

Discipline	What it explains	What it misses
Art History	Stylistic evolution	Textual meaning, cognitive symbolism
Archaeology	Material context	Sectarian debates, iconographic philosophy
Indology	Textual codification	Material precursors, Buddhist usage
Anthropology	Ritual practice	Historical emergence
Buddhist Studies	Early metaphors, inscriptions	Later Purāṇic systematisation
Cognitive Science	Symbolic meaning	Historical development

Thus, interdisciplinarity is not a choice but a *necessity*. Interdisciplinary analysis is essential whenever phenomena are too complex, layered, or interconnected to be addressed by a single

disciplinary matrix. Gaṇeśa, rooted in Buddhist metaphor, folk ritual, Greco-Indian imagery, Gupta reformulations, and cognitive symbolism, exemplifies this integrative need.

3. Gaṇeśa as a Cognitive–Symbolic Figure: Elephant Imagery, Mind-Training, and Buddhist Linkages

The interdisciplinary analysis of Gaṇeśa becomes clearer when viewed through the lens of cognitive symbolism, a field that interprets visual traits as externalised representations of internal psychological processes. The presence of elephant imagery in Buddhist texts, early Buddhist art, and later Purāṇic iconography indicates that Gaṇeśa's form embodies a lasting cultural metaphor: the mind as a powerful but unruly force that needs discipline, guidance, and transformation (Subedi; Pirta). Cognitive theorists maintain that religious symbols often serve as models of mental experience. Gaṇeśa's iconography clearly expresses such a model.

3.1 The Elephant as a Cognitive Metaphor in Buddhist Literature

The *Nāgavagga* ("The Elephant Chapter") of the *Dhammapada* provides one of the earliest and most straightforward explanations of the elephant as a metaphor for mental training: The Buddha compares the undisciplined mind to a wild elephant, while the trained mind is like an elephant guided by its mahout (Tuffley, ch. 23). The term *nāga*, used throughout the Pāli canon, refers not only to serpents but also to noble elephants, symbolising dignity, strength, and self-control (Zimmer; Thapan 54–58).

The semantic layering of *nāga* allows for multiple symbols: the elephant as mental strength (Tuffley), the serpent as transformative energy (Bhikkhu), and both as protectors of spiritual wealth. In this context, the elephant-headed form is not literal but educational, a visual shortcut for

the mental discipline developed through meditation (Buddhaghosha and Bhikku). This metaphor precedes Purāṇic accounts of Gaṇeśa and appears to be part of a common Indic symbolic language used in various texts.

3.2 Early Buddhist Elephant-Headed Figures as Visual Metaphors

Elephant-headed figures at Buddhist sites such as Amarāvatī, Nagarjunakonda, and Mihintale provide strong evidence of a cognitive-symbolic lineage. These figures, usually two-armed and unclothed, often accompanied by dwarf attendants, appear in both narrative and protective contexts (Koshalee and Bogahawatta). Scholars differ on whether these figures represent deities, guardians, or personifications of mental obstacles (Brown et al.; Dhavalikar).

Significantly, none of these early figures conformed to the later Purāṇic iconography of Gaṇeśa. Their presence in Buddhist settings suggests a conceptual, rather than sectarian, function. As Dreyfus and Thompson argue, Buddhist art frequently externalises mental states through animal figures, enabling practitioners to "see the mind as if it stood outside" (Dreyfus and Thompson 104–07). The elephant-headed form in Buddhist contexts may thus visualise internal hindrances (distraction, delusion) or their transformation. This interpretation aligns with the Buddhist use of the term *Vināyaka*. Early sources associate Vināyaka with teachers, qualities of leadership, or spiritual mastery (Thapan 84–85). The later Brāhmaṇical portrayal of the Vināyakas as malevolent beings may reflect a polemical reinterpretation rather than a historical origin (Thapan 251–52).

3.3 Transition to Purāṇic Gaṇeśa: Symbolic Continuities and Re-Significations

By the Gupta period, Gaṇeśa adopts a stable iconographic form: an elephant head, a pot-bellied human body, multiple arms holding *pāśa* (noose), *aṅkuśa* (goad), *sweets*, and often a serpent

(*nāga*) draped across the torso(Getty; Krishnan; Dhavlikar). While the Purāṇas offer mythic rationalisations of decapitation, remaking of the head, and battles against demons, the symbolic foundation predates these theological narratives.

Symbolic Continuity

• **Elephant-head: cognitive power, potential, memory, and attentional capacity** (Zimmer; Tuffley).

• **Pāśa (noose): capacity to capture, restrain, or stabilise mental fluctuations** (Paranjpe; Tuffley).

• **Aṅkuśa (goad): executive control, redirection of attention, and cultivation of insight** (Krishnan 126; Law 91–92).

• **Nāga across the torso: transformative energy, vigilance, and meditative containment** (Dreyfus and Thompson; Buddhaghosha and Bhikku).

These attributes closely match the cognitive metaphors found in early Buddhist literature: the mind as an elephant, distractions as obstacles, and meditative insight as a guiding force(Tuffley 160–66; Yamabe 370–80). This connection is intentional and reflects cultural translation. Indic traditions often translated symbols across religious boundaries rather than replacing them with new ones.

3.4 The Role of Mātṛkā Traditions in Psychological Symbolism

The association of Gaṇeśa with the *Saptamātṛkās* suggests an additional layer of psychological symbolism in the text. Mātṛkās have long been interpreted as personifications of **vikāras**, passions, or emotional disturbances such as kāma (desire), krodha (anger), mātsarya (jealousy), and bhaya

(fear) (Mahapatra 93). Gaṇeśa's placement alongside Mātṛkās in sculpture, seals, and cave shrines suggests a mediating role. Rather than being an independent deity, he functions as a symbolic agent of *taming*, *balancing*, and *transforming* emotional disturbances. This placement closely aligns with the Buddhist framework of **kilesas** (mental defilements) subdued through meditative discipline. Therefore, cognitive reading views Gaṇeśa not as a mythic son of Śiva but as an artistic personification of **the practitioner's ability to manage, restrain, and direct the mind.**

3.5 Cognitive Archaeology and External Symbolic Storage

The persistence of Gaṇeśa across regions, religions, and centuries shows how effectively the symbol encodes psychological insight into a recognisable form.

Under this framework, Gaṇeśa becomes

☐ A mnemonic **device** for mental discipline,

☐ a ritual **companion** for regulating attention and intention,

☐ a **visual guide** mapping the practitioner's inner landscape.

This approach aligns with cognitive interpretations of Buddhist visualisation practices (*kasiṇa*, *ānāpānasati*, *citta-bhāvanā*) discussed in the *Visuddhimagga* (Buddhaghosha and Bhikku) and reflects the psychological symbolism in Gaṇeśa's Purāṇic battles against Kāmāsura, Matsarāsura, and others (Translated by Dr Joshi). It also clarifies Buddhist depictions where an elephant-headed figure is trampled by Aparājitā (Bhattacharyya 153), symbolising the conquest of mental hindrances on the path of mind purification.

3.6 Summary

Through interdisciplinary analysis, Gaṇeśa emerges as a **cultural translation of Buddhist cognitive symbolism**, subsequently reinterpreted through Purāṇic theology, regional practices, Gupta artistic conventions, and folk traditions. His form becomes:

 A visual metaphor for the mind

 a map of cognitive training

 a symbol of emotional mastery

 an evolved product of intercultural transitions

4. India in Transition

4.1 India in Transition and the Imperative of Interdisciplinary Approaches

The theme of "India in Transition" prompts reflection not only on historical changes but also on the epistemological shifts needed to study them. South Asian religious and artistic traditions have developed through continuous interaction, negotiation, and translation among Buddhist, Jain, Brāhmaṇical, regional, and folk communities. In such a cultural setting, symbols like Gaṇeśa cannot be understood through a single disciplinary or sectarian perspective. Premodern India was characterized by the circulation of motifs and practices across religious boundaries. This circulation persists today, shaping the relationship between religions, communities, and academic disciplines. Interdisciplinary theorists observe that the most significant insights arise from overlaps in disciplinary vocabularies. Iconography, being simultaneously visual, textual, ritual, and cognitive, lends itself to an integrative methodological approach. The case of Gaṇeśa clearly exemplifies this:

☐ **Archaeology** uncovers transitional material form.

☐ **Art history** offers stylistic and iconographic continuity.

☐ **Buddhist studies** reveal the semantic and conceptual foundations of Buddhist thought.

☐ **Indology and philology** analyse Purāṇic recensions and theological reframing.

☐ **Anthropology** sheds light on ritual appropriation and its local meanings.

☐ **Cognitive science** studies symbolic embodiment and mental models.

Collectively, these disciplines portray Gaṇeśa as a product of *India in transition*: a space where symbols circulate, meanings evolve, and religious boundaries remain flexible. This requires reading images not as end products but as nodes in networks of thought, ritual, and social practice. Therefore, an interdisciplinary approach is crucial not only for scholars but also for India's broader cultural understanding. The study of Gaṇeśa, based on Buddhist metaphors, reinterpreted in Purāṇic stories, and experienced through folk rituals, embodies the process of cultural change that continues to shape India today.

4.2 Incorporating modern technologies: AI and Big Data in Iconographic Research

Although this study remains rooted in the humanities, emerging digital methodologies offer promising pathways for interdisciplinary collaboration. Scholars of digital humanities contend that computational tools enable researchers to expand analyses, detect patterns unseen by the naked eye, and democratise access to cultural archives (Roy Sonu Kumar et al.).

Potential Applications to Gaṇeśa Studies

☐ **Pattern Recognition and Image Clustering:** Machine learning models can analyse thousands of Gaṇeśa sculptures and paintings and cluster them based on stylistic, regional, or chronological patterns. Similar techniques have already been used on Buddhist art in Gandhāra and Japanese mandalas (Federico).

☐ **Digital Epigraphy:** NLP-based text-mining tools can identify shifts in the use of terms such as Vināyaka, Gaṇapati, Gaṇeśa*, and other names* across extensive textual collections. This can show how meanings change across Buddhist, Jain, and Brāhmaṇical literature (Piotrowski).

☐ **GIS Diffusion Mapping:** Spatial mapping software can visualise the spread of elephant-headed imagery from Sri Lanka and Andhra to Gupta northern India, highlighting routes of interaction and cultural transition.

☐ **Cognitive Modelling:** AI-assisted cognitive archaeology may help model how symbols such as *pāśa* or *aṅkuśa function* as external representations of mental processes. These tools do not replace traditional methods; instead, they enhance them. Interdisciplinarity flourishes when methodologies complement each other rather than compete. Thus, AI is a future-oriented extension of the interdisciplinary spirit that underpins this study.

4.3 Conclusion

Gaṇeśa's iconography, far from being the product of a single religious tradition or linear textual history, results from a dynamic interaction of cultural systems. Buddhist cognitive metaphors, early elephant-headed guardians, Mātṛkā iconography, Purāṇic narrative frameworks, regional ritual practices, and cognitive-symbolic meanings shaped the deity's form and function. No single

discipline, whether philology, archaeology, art history, or cognitive theory, can fully explain this complexity.

An interdisciplinary approach reveals Gaṇeśa as:

☐ A cognitive **archetype** of mental discipline,

☐ a visual **repository** of Buddhist metaphorical structures,

☐ a Purāṇic **theological synthesis**,

☐ a regional **ritual figure**,

☐ and a **symbol of India's ongoing cultural transition.**

In this sense, Gaṇeśa is an emblem of auspicious beginnings and intellectual diversity. He embodies the productive instability of interdisciplinary research. His iconography encourages scholars to go beyond disciplinary barriers and adopt integrative frameworks that respect the complexities of South Asian cultural history. As India continues to navigate new social, technological, and cultural shifts, interdisciplinary scholarship is not just a methodological choice but a philosophical necessity. Gaṇeśa, shaped by centuries of cross-cultural dialogue, remains a reminder that the most enduring symbols are those that can evolve through multiplicity, translation, and transformation.

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