FLORA AND FAUNA

The plant and animal life that is depicted at Ajanta has earned well-deserving praise of art-lovers on account of the loving care with which it is drawn. The plants and animal varieties are, however, confined to those which are commonly seen.

Areca-nut (Areca catechu)

The areca-nut plant occurs frequently both in the earlier and later group of paintings, generally in the palace gardens (Chāmpeya Jātaka, I).

This cultivated palm is met with throughout the hot, damp regions of Asia and Malay Islands. The name betel is Malayan in origin and simply means a leaf and came to be known English, through the Portuguese betra. In India the plant is confined to coastal regions.

1. Watt, (Sir) George, Commercial Products of India, p. 83.
The betel-chewing was common in India in ancient times and is widespread today as well. But its powder was used as one of the spices or flavouring agents to be added to certain types of liquors.

Asoka (Saraca indica)

This is one of the common plants depicted in the paintings. The tree figures frequently in ancient literature. It has red flowers and is said to be fit for worship and suitable for planting in the vicinity of houses.

Asvattha (Ficus religiosa)

Asvattha or pipal being a sacred plant for the Buddhist occurs frequently. Usually a manusi Buddha is shown seated under it.

It is one of the oldest flora in India as it is depicted even on Harappan seals. It is sacred even to the Hindus who regard it supreme among the trees. It is a large tree without aerial roots and is extensively cultivated all over India.

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Bamboo (Bambuseae)

Bamboo is usually shown in jungles. It is grown today in many parts of the country. Few plants are more valuable to man, especially to the inhabitants of the tropical regions. There are more than a hundred species of this plant in the country and all of them are of industrial and economic value. It has, however, a high antiquity in India as it is referred to even in the Vedic literature.

Banana (M. Sapientum)

The plant occurs only in the later group of paintings. After mango, this is the commonest fruit in India and is cultivated throughout the country except in the north-west.

The word 'banana' is said to have come from New Guinea. But the Arabic name musa or amusa is obviously derived from the Sanskrit mocha and it may, therefore, be surmised that the plant is indigenous.

1. Aiyer, op.cit., p. 11.
2. Watt, op.cit., p. 76d.
Banyan (Ficus bengalensis)

It is usually depicted in jungles (Saddanta Jātaka, I; Mahākapi Jātaka, XVII). It is a large tree which is found all over the country. It is held sacred by Hindus and women worship it.

Palasā (Butea frondosa)

It is represented only thrice, and that too in jungles (Mahākapi Jātaka, XVII). It is a moderate-sized, deciduous tree common throughout the plains of India and Burma. In summer it has brilliant flowers. It is a useful plant as its leaves are given as fodder to buffaloes and the timber, though not durable above ground, is much better under water.

Sāla (Shorea robusta)

Queen Māyā (Birth of Buddha, II) is shown holding a branch of Sāla tree. Though the plant is rare in the paintings it grows presently in many parts of the country and its timber is used in the construction of houses, particularly in north India.
Teak (Tectona grandis)

The plant occurs only in jungle scenes. (Sarabha Jātaka, XVII; Sutasoma Jātaka, XVII). The tree is known for its durable qualities and is, therefore, used in the construction of houses, and boats as well. In the ancient past it was exported to the Imperial Roman provinces for building ships.

Cotton-wool tree (Bombas heptaphyllum)

A plant depicted in the Sarabha Jātaka (XVII) appears to be a cotton-wool tree. It undoubtedly existed in the country even in the third millennium B.C. Today it is widely cultivated in the country, particularly in Maharashtra, Gujrat and Madhya Pradesh.

Among other plants are seen a Śāmalu tree (Vitex trifolica), a wild fig (Gular) and ferns (Śibi Jātaka, XVII). Many of the aquatic plants (Sarabha Jātaka, XVII; Śibi Jātaka, XVII) cannot be identified. Some creepers are also seen (Śadānta Jātaka, XVII, Śibi Jātaka, XVII).

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2. See Supra, p. 214.
Fruits

Among the fruit-trees the commonest is the mango tree (*Mangifera Indica*). Among others is the jack-fruit (*Artocarpus integrifolia*) and lemon, (Votaries, II) pine-apple and pomegranates (Verandah, Ceiling, II).

Vegetables

Some vegetables are shown in Migrochamge Jētaka (XVII). Among them are raw bananas, beans, kerēla (*Momordica Charantia*) and mulis (*Raphanus sativus*). Pumpkins or gourds (*Cucurbita maxima*) are hanging from the lintel in a shop (Simhala Avasāna, XVII).

Flowers

The only flower that is represented very often is lotus literary references to which are abounding.

Birds

Birds have been drawn with loving care in graceful postures. The following are illustrated.
Crane (*Antigone* spp.)

Cranes are shown in a few panels (in the Muchakunda Jātaka in the *Visvantara Jātaka*, XVII). They are also seen in decorative motifs (Ceiling of the Verandah, II).

The bird is seen today in many parts of the country and the typical Indian species is known as the *saras* crane. The birds pair for life and are so much devoted to each other that the legend has arisen that if one of the pair is killed the other dies of broken heart. Hence they figure very often in the ancient literature.

Cock

The children are depicted playing with cocks (Votaries II). The bird is very common in India and elsewhere.

Crow (*Curvus splendens*)

Crow occurs only in the *Sīmhala Avadāna* (XVII). It is one of the most conspicuous birds in India.
Dove (*Streptopelia risoria*)

A pair of doves is seen in "Padmapati" (I). They can be identified as the "Indian Ring Dove" variety.

Duck (*Nettapus coromandelianus*)

Figures of ducks are shown set in decorative patterns (Ceiling of the Verandah, XVII). They are also shown in ponds (Syūma Jātaka, X).

The bird is found all over the country in its usual habitats such as evergreen ponds, and broad dykes and channels where much of the water is choked with a growth of grass and reeds.

Goose (*Anser indicus*)

Finest illustrations of this bird can be seen in the हांसा Jātaka (XVII) and the Mahā-हांसा Jātaka (II) as also in the decorative patterns (Ceilings of I & II).

The goose (हांसा) usually breeds in Ladakh and Tibet. In the sub-continent it is abundant in winter from the Indus valley eastwards across to Assam. About Central India it grows less common and further southwards it is scarce.

It is the commonest bird occurring in ancient art and literature as well.

**Parrot (Psittacula krameri)**

Parrot occurs as a decorative motif (Ceiling of the Verandah, II) and also as a pet-bird (School Scene, XVI). It is the most popular cage bird which is excessively abundant in the country.

**Peacock (Pavo cristatus)**

It occurs in many scenes, usually perching on trees. Now a national bird, it is one of the most charming and beautiful of the lot. The introduction of this bird to Europe is attributed to Alexander the Great and was exported in large numbers to the Roman empire.¹

**Pigeon (Columba elphintonii)**

The pigeons depicted in the murals (Syāma Jātaka, XVII and the Śibi Jātaka, I) appear to be the Nilgiri-wood species which is found in the Western Ghats from Maharashtra to Cape Comorin. Today, flocks of them are tamed by people for popular sports.

¹ Warmington, op. cit., p.152
Owl (Strix ocellatum)

The owl illustrated in the "Māra's Attack" (I) appears to be of the 'mottled-wood' variety which is peculiar to India. Its call is a loud, hard hoot and is bad omen for the Hindus.

Vulture (Sarcogyps calvus)

The vultures in the 'Simhala Avadāna' (XVII) appear to be of the 'King Vulture' variety. The panel shows fight between Simhala's men and the ogresses. The vultures have naturally gathered there for the flesh of dead bodies.

Stork (Anastomus oscitans)

The stork in the Migroch-mrga Jātaka (XVII) may be of the 'Open Bill' variety which is very common in India.

Animals

Of the wild animals the following are represented.
Elephant (Elephas indicus)

Elephants occur very often. They are shown in forests (Saddanta Jātaka, I) in palaces (Maṭripoṣaka Jātaka, XVII) and in war (Sīhāla Avadāna, XVII).

It is the largest and strongest of all the animals in India and looms large in the traditions of the country. It roamed in Indian forests since prehistoric times. It is represented on Harappan seals and is of common occurrence in Indian art and literature. In the ancient past it was a symbol of sovereignty and its importance did not decrease even after the advent of the horse.

It was used for a variety of purposes and its tusks were a major item of export to the western world.

Today the animal is confined to the forests of Mysore and Assam.

Lion (Felis leo guzeratenis)

Lion is depicted twice (Padmapāni, I; and Arga Jātaka, XVII), in caves in dense forests. A lioness is also illustrated (Sutasoma Jātaka, XVII).

Indian lion, known for its majesty, was sometimes exported to Rome, possibly for the gladiatorial games.

2. Warmington, op.cit., p. 147.
**Tiger (Felis tigris)**

Tiger is also represented (Mahākapi Jātaka, XVII). The animal was sometimes presented to Roman emperors by Indian ambassadors.

Other wild animals include leopards (Felis pardus) in the Sutasoma Jātaka (XVII), hyaena (Hyaena striata), wolves (Canis palipes) in the Saddanta Jātaka (XVII), foxes (Sutasoma Jātaka, XVII), bear (Melursus ursinus) in the story of the 'Benevolent Bear' (XVII), wild boar (Sus cristatus), jackals (Sutasoma Jātaka, XVII) and wild cat (Felis chaus) in the Sutasoma Jātaka (XVII).

Other animals include the typical Indian antelope (Antilope cervicapra) or the 'Black-Buck (Mahājanaka Jātaka, I), and a spotted deer or chital (Cervus axis) in the Nigrodhamrnga Jātaka (XVII). Stags (Cervus unicolor typicus) are represented in many panels. Monkeys too occur very frequently.

1. Ibid., p. 149.
Domesticated animals

Among the domesticated animals are horses, bulls, cows, rams, buffaloes, swine, donkeys and dogs are represented. Of these horses are shown in war scenes (Simhala Avadana, XVII), hunts (Marga Jataka, XVII) and in the royal paraphernalia. The dogs are shown in the hunting scenes (Marga Jataka, XVII) and may, therefore, be hounds which were known for their qualities in the ancient past. They were also exported to Rome.

Reptiles

The commonest among the reptiles are the serpents and the cobras which occur in a number of scenes. It is interesting that python (Saddanta Jataka, X) and viper (Simhala Avadana, XVII) are also represented.

Aquatic creatures

Of the aquatic creatures fish of different varieties occur frequently (Matsya Jataka, XVII).

1. Warminster, op.cit., p.149.
Large sharks (?) are also shown in some panels (Mahājanaka Jātaka, I; Siṃhala Avadāna, XVII). Crocodile, the vāhana of the river goddess Gāṅgā, is sculptured in Cave XVII. Some sea-monsters with terrifying features are seen in the 'Ship-wreck' scene (Mahājanaka Jātaka, I). One of them has the head of a dog (Sutasoma Jātaka, XVII) and the other, that of a cat.

Mythical beings

Mention may also be made of some mythical beings which include a mermaid (Ceiling, II; Purāṇa Avadāna, II); a boar-headed man (Ceiling, I); and a tiger with head and horns of an antelope (Cave IX). Dragons appear in the ceiling of the chapel to the left of the ante-chamber of Cave II. Many of these are used as decorative motifs.