

Research Article

Contribution Of Buddhist Art To Indian Culture

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Abstract

Buddhist art owes its origin due to the religious devotion and fervour of Buddha's followers. But it received the greatest incentive from the great Mauryan emperor Asoka through whose efforts Buddhism became a popular religion in India. He did all that was possible for the propagation of Buddhism and art which reflects 'the ideas and ideals, ambitions, joys and fears of Buddhist deity'. There were other lay devotees who generously contributed to the erection of caityas, stupas and the like to express their deep veneration to Buddha. Thus the inspiration of the Buddhist art came from religion. Indeed, it also served as a valuable means for the propagation of Buddhism. Starting from the time of emperor Asoka upto the middle of the 1 st century B. C.

Key Words: Art, Symbols, Mathura, Amaravathi, Stupas, Deity

Introduction

Buddha was represented by a few symbols,. The followers of Buddha did not believe in the worship of the image then. They paid their veneration to the symbols. We thus see that a garden with trees in the midst and his mother represents his birth, a house his renunciation, the Bodhi tree his enlightenment. his first discourse to his Pancavaggiya bhikkhus by a wheel flanked by a deer and the like. These kinds of symbols are found at Sarnath, Nalanda and Amaravati. Stupas were also erected over the relics of Buddha. Specimens of which are to be found at Sarnath and Amaravati.

Next comes pictorial representation of the Jataka episodes depicting the previous lives of Buddha. In the bas reliefs of Bharhut and Sanchi we find this kind of representation. During this period Asoka built large pillars at important places throughout India. His famous Lion Capital Pillar is indeed one of the noblest products of Buddhist art. It has been accepted as the national emblem of free India. This period also witnessed the appearance of rock-cut temples at Bhaja, Karle and Ajanta. Buddhist art received a great impetus during the reign of the Indo-Greek and Indo Scythion rulers. King Kaniska who played the part of second Asoka was a great lover of art. He patronised the artists to carve statues of Bodhisatvas and Buddhas to popularise Buddhism. As a consequence, statues of Bodhisatvas and Buddhas in various postures (mudras) were produced and they were in great demand. Mathura became shortly a great centre of Buddhist art. Many Buddhist stupas, caityas, viharas were constructed during the reign of Kaniska. Some scholars hold that the image of Buddha was first made in the Gandhara school of art while some others hold that it was the Mathura school which was responsible for the first image of Buddha.

Mathura School of Art

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Mathura art reflects the urban and sophisticated tastes of the inhabitants, patrons and sculptors of the region who adapted the older forms of Bharhut-Sanchi and foreign artistic influences of Bactro-Gandharan art to create a widely spread and influential art style. Mathura and the surrounding region have a long history though continuous political history can be traced from the 6th century B.C. onwards when this became the capital of the Surasena janapada. Later, it came under the control of the Magadhan kingdom under the Nandas and Mauryas from whom it passed on to the Sungas under whom it was a prosperous city as recorded by Patanjali in the 2nd century B.C. It continued to be under the suzerainty of local chiefdoms such as the Mitras and Dattas whose coins have been discovered from the region. It is in the middle of the 1st century B.C. that Mathura came under the rule of Saka-Kshaptrapas whose rulers such as Rajula and his son Sodasha issued the inscriptions of importance. It is under the Kushanas, especially under Kanishka that Mathura became the eastern capital and emerged as a major centre of art activity. The Kushanas ruled this region till about A.D. 250 after which there is a hiatus or gap here till the rise of the Gupta in the 4th century B.C. though art activity continued in the transitional period. This period saw an expanding urbanization and the rise of long- distance trade. This led to an increased contact within larger areas of the Kushana Empire. The art of this period also has a pronounced urbanized sensibility as the tastes and desires of the lay city dwellers transform. By 2nd Century B.C. Mathura was both an important urban center as well as a center for various faiths such as Buddhism, Jainism, Shivaism, Vishnuism and Naga Cults. The Bhagvata cult of Vishnu spread here in 1st-2nd century A.D. (Kushana Period). Thus, during the period art derived from religion flourished here. In the early period large Yaksha and Yakshi images were carved. During the Shunga period worship of gods through symbols such as the Bodhi tree, Chakra etc continued. Later Jaina and Buddhist stupas were built at Mathura along with the rest of central India. The art of Mathura is characterized by the use of mottled red Sikri sandstone that is found in the area around it. Majority of sculptures have been recovered from sites in and around the city from various Buddhist, Jaina and other sectarian buildings. The important Buddhist sites include Katra Keshavadeva, Jamalpur, Chaubara, Bhutesvara, Palikhera, Maholi and Govindgarh, while the most famous Jaina site is at Kanakali Tila. Sonkh has revealed the existence of apsidal structural temples belonging to naga cult along with other antiquities. However, the influence of Mathura art was spread over most of north India with specimens being discovered from Sarnath, Kausambi, Bodhgaya and Rajgir in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, along with Sanchi in Madhya Pradesh and Chandraketurgarh in Bengal, Vadnagar in Gujarat and Taxila in Pakistan. From Ahicchatra and Sanghol in UP and Punjab respectively a considerable quantity and variety of sculptures in Mathura style have been discovered that provide proof of the export and popularity of the art beyond the city itself.

The Mathura art reached its apex in the Gupta period. The Gupta age was an era of art. It brought the Buddhist art of India to its highest perfection as an expression of the inner feelings of devotion and zeal of the artists' lastly, Buddhist art like Buddha's religion was not confined to its land of origin. Along with Buddhism it spread to the north south and southeast of India and made its influence felt in those regions. The full flowering of Buddhist art can be noticed in the temple of Borobodhur in Java, which can be regarded as 'the architectural wonders of the world: and 'no where in the world has the Buddha Pratim .. or the hand of the stone sculpture revealed the quality of spiritual beauty so characteristic of the Dharma'. The same may be said of the Buddhist monuments of Chandi Kalasan and Chandi Mendut in Java as also of the temple of Bayan in Ankor Thorn (Cambodia). Thus the achievement of Buddhism in the realm of art is most significant and also unique in all respects.

The sculptures from the Mathura School have remarkable stylistic unity. The figures have oval or round-ish faces with open eyes, thick lips and sharp nose with a fleshy full bodied figure are shown in a number of postures. The figures are generally shown wearing a diaphanous (almost transparent), clinging dhoti, while a scarf like *uttariya* emerges from behind one shoulder over one forearm. The divine figures are shown with one hand upraised in *abhaya mudra* and the other is placed on the waist near the knot of waist band, with a canopy like halo atop and behind the head. Plants, leaves, birds and animals were rendered in a realistic manner and much care has been to create details of these on background as well as the reverse of many sculptures at Mathura. The figure of the Buddha wears a *samghati* that covers only one shoulder, the hair are arranged in small snail like curls are gathered in a *kapardin* like top knot. A large halo with scalloped edges representing a flame or light can be seen behind the head. Often attendant deities such as *bodhisattvas* or *Indra* and *Brahma* are shown on both sides of the Buddha. The discovery of a number of dated donative's inscriptions from the pedestals of the Buddha and *bodhisattva* images from Mathura and surrounding areas have contributed greatly to our understanding of the evolution of the Buddha image as well as the Buddhist principles and tenets popular during the time. One of the best preserved specimens is from *Ahiccahra* whose inscription reveals that it was a gift of the *Bhikshu Virana* for the benefit and happiness of all teachers, together with elderly *shramanas* and disciples. The inscription is dated in the year thirty two, probably of the *Kanishka* era, i.e A.D. 152. In another example the sculpture of seated meditating Buddha founded from *Katra* informs us that it was dedicated by a Buddhist nun named *Amohaasi* for the welfare and happiness of all sentient beings'. Such inclusive generosity is indicative of *Mahayana Buddhism* which emphasizes the belief that merit or *punya* can be transferred from one to another. The large number of sculptures of *bodhisattvas* is another indication of the popularity of *Mahayana Buddhism* in the region. These were generally shown as standing royal personages, lavishly be jeweled with a *dhyani* Buddha figure in their crown or diadem. The attributes in their hands such as a purse or a lotus identifies them as a particular *bodhisattva* such as *Maiterya* or *Avalokiteshvara*.

This early development of the identification of particular deities based on their posture, attributes, vehicle and form are termed *iconographic traits*. These *iconographic traits* are characteristic of the *Mathura school of art* and reflect the religious environment of the post *Mauryan* era based as it was on *bhakti* and *sectarian principles*. *Shaiva* figures were found from the region though their numbers are limited. *Ekamukhalinga* and *Chaturmukhalinga*, *linga* icons with one of four faces of *Shiva* carved on four sides began to be made during this period though the classic examples come from the subsequent *Gupta* period. *Karttikeya- Skanda* is one of the more prolific deities with independent as well as composite images being made of them. Or the latter, he is shown with *Shashthi*, as well as with *Ekanamsa* and with *Vishakha*. The *pancharatra* cult of *Vishnu* seems to have taken root here with a number of images being created such as *Chaturvyuha Vishnu* that shows *Vasudeva* as the central figure and *Samkarsana*, *Samba* and *Aniruddha* as emanations emerging from this main figure. Icons of *Vishnu* holding a mace and disc were also found from the region along with *Krishna* and *Balarama-Haladhara* both of whom evolved from independent pastoral and agricultural deities into becoming the incarnations or *avataars* of *Vishnu*. *Lakshmi*, the goddess of wealth is associated with *Kubera-Panchika*, the lord of wealth and prosperity. They are seen not only in the *Brahmanical* context but also in the *Buddhist* and local cults because their association with material well being and growth was rooted in common cultural environment rather than in a particular *sectarian creed*.

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Kubera is also shown in conjunction with Hariti, a yakshi-goddess who is associated with children and their well being. In fact, small votive plaques of these two are found in plenty from Mathura. Other deities such as the Matrikas or the Mothers, Naigamesha and Skanda are associated with children and had protective-destructive functions were created and donated in large numbers during the Post- Mauryan period at Mathura. The Jainas of Mathura produced votive tablets called ayagapattas that contain auspicious marks of worship such as fish couple or matsya yugala, the swatika, shrivatsa, ratna-bhanda, bhadrachakra, purna kumbha, divyamana, indrayasti and matsya. The most distinctive feature of Mathura art is the plethora or abundance of female figures in various poses carved on railing pillars and torana uprights engaged in activities such as bathing under a waterfall, playing with swords or a ball and with a child, carrying an offering basket, holding a lamp, tying a waist band, drinking from a cup, etc. they are often shown standing on a dwarf yaksha or on a lotus or an incline. These figures wear very transparent dhota revealing the form beneath, a heavy waist band or mekhala and other jewelry such as bangles, anklets, bracelets and the like. They sport different coiffures and are generally voluptuous and sensuously delineated. These females derive from the shalabhanjika and yakshi figures found on the early stupas and probably conferred an element of fertility on the stupa and the devotee who visited these. Often scenes from Jataka stories or lotuses are carved on the other side of the pillars such as at Bhuteshvara. Two sided panels with an offering bowl on top are another distinguishing specimen of sculptural art from Mathura, whose precise function and meaning are still to be ascertained. Perhaps alms and offering or water for ritual ablution were placed in these bowls. These may have a tree carved on one side and a figural panel on the other or a narrative passage on both sides such as the 'Vasantsena panel' from Maholi that depicts moments from the play Mrichchhakatika or Kubera and attendants drinking wine from Palikhera. Many scenes from royal life such as drinking and adorning the self seem to have taken the fancy of sculptors and patrons in the area. These include the Sundari and Nanda episode and kamaloka scenes of mithunas or couples in amorous play that are depicted on the torana and railings of structures. This is not to imply that narrative passages from Jataka katha and avadana katha relating to the life of Buddha did not adorn the railings and other architectural elements of stupa and vihara buildings, but only that they became less popular as newer subjects came to the fore that catered to the sensibility of an increasingly urban society. There was a strong royal cult also flourishing under the Kushanas where the royal family was worshipped in a devakula or shrine. One such shrine has been discovered at Surkh Kotal in Afghanistan and the other at Mat just outside the town of Mathura. Here portrait sculptures of the first four kings have been discovered of whom Wima Kadphises seated on a lion throne is very majestic and impressive. There is also the standing headless figure of Kanishka wearing a stiff tunic and boots, holding a sword with a makara symbol on the scabbard. A head from the site wearing a conical helmet gives an idea of what a royal figure may have looked like at the time. The art of Mathura of the Kushana period had a lasting impact on the subsequent art of the Guptas

Gandhara School of Art

Gandhara art represents the art that developed and spread in the north western part of India from the 1st Century B.C. to the 4th Century A.D. The major centers of art activity of this school were in the kingdoms in this region such as Bactria, Kapisha, Swat and Gandhara. The main material used in the Gandhara School is metal such as the gold used in the Kanishka reliquary from Shah ji ki Dheri. Stone wherever used is usually blue or grey schist and slate. Style has naturalism in body form, drapery, and pictorial scale. The bodies are made in the classical tradition with its emphasis on perfection of the human

form. Therefore they are usually shown as youthful and strong. The male figures are shown with musculature and with a squarish torso. The rendering of drapery with sharp flowing folds is similar to those seen on a Roman toga and is a distinctive feature of Gandharan art as are wavy curled hair and sharp features. Gandharan style was an amalgam of Hellenistic- Roman, Iranian and indigenous art.

A number of compositional traits were adapted from Roman mortuary art, while the divine attributes and decorative elements were taken from Hellenistic (Greek) and Iranian roots. This interaction of artistic components was largely due to the geographical position of the region which was at the cross roads of cultural exchange. The area saw the advent of number of foreign powers and political configurations ranging from the Greek, Bactrian to Kushana. It was also at the hub of economic activity based on trade with the west through the great Silk route. Sculptures of the school are usually found as part of architectural contexts with a deliberate iconographic scheme or pattern. There is a standardization of composition, pose of figures and other incidents from the life of Buddha which suggests that the sculptors are following an established iconographic mode. Most of the sculptures from this period are Buddhist, though some Hellenistic sculptures also survive. Standing Buddha images are most characteristic feature of the style. These figures have a uniformity of pose, costume, lakshana and other characteristics. The Buddha is usually depicted standing frontally with one leg bent. He is shown wearing a heavy robe that covers both shoulders, his left hand hangs down but the right hand is raised in abhaya or varada mudra. There is an ushnisha or a top knot on the head. He is not adorned with any other jewelry, though his elongated ear lobes suggest that as a prince he did wear heavy ornaments. Behind the head a halo with lotus, etc can be seen. Seated Buddha figure is shown in dharmachakra mudra which is the gesture of teaching or in dhyana mudra which suggests meditation. Bodhisattva icons are another important category of sculpture found from Gandhara region. These represent mahasattva bodhisattvas who embody the fulfillment of bodhisattvahood that is that future Buddha hood and form one of the most important elements of Mahayana Buddhism prevalent in this area. These male figures are shown standing or seated and wear a dhoti like lower garment, the torso is bare except for the a shawl-like length of cloth over the shoulder, the hairstyle is more elaborate with wavy hair falling over the shoulder. They, like the Buddha images of the region have an urna on the forehead and an ushnisha on the head with a halo behind. They are shown wearing sandals, and sometimes like the Buddha, may sport a mustache. Distinct bodhisattvas are recognized by their attributes, symbols and headdress, an example being Maiterya, the personification of love who is depicted holding a vase. The figures are usually depicted as royal figures with a profusion of ornaments and a crown. Influenced as they are by the Graeco Roman tradition they are also shown as muscular with perfect and realistic proportions. Narrative panels relating to Jataka and Tushita phases of Sakyamuni's life are also found in Gandhara art. Of these the moment of Enlightenment and after are depicted in great profusion. These narratives are based on the canonical (orthodox) Buddhist literature and also on biographical texts such as the Buddhacarita of Asvagosha. The Birth of Buddha by Mayadevi (his mother) under a sala tree, the enlightenment of the Buddha, Mara Vijaya (victory over Mara) are some of the subjects that are popular in Gandharan art. Naturalistic proportions, scale and poses are sought be depicted and composition is used to emphasize the central and key figure through a hierarchy of scaling; that is the more important figure may have a larger size. One of the distinguishing features of Gandharan art is the depiction of paradise such as Sukhavati which was part of the Paradise cult within Buddhism prevalent in North West India during the Kushana period.

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The cult centers on the belief that every devotee, through accumulation of merit, seeks to be reborn into paradise where he can reside without further rebirth and transmigration till he reaches nirvana. Attendant deities other than Buddha and Bodhisatva were also created, such as Kubera- Panchika and Hariti. The former is shown as a slightly corpulent royal personage while the latter is shown with children all around her. Bacchanalian scenes showing grape vine and wine drinking individuals are distinctly classical in their rendering. Besides stone, some sculptures in stucco, especially busts of Greek and Roman deities and princes, are an essential part of Gandharan art. Interestingly these were painted, with red colour being used for the lips and black for the eyes and hair. Ivory is another medium used to carve figures as is attested by large assemblage was found from Begram in Kapisa region.

A number of furniture pieces found in a secular palace complex demonstrate that style was not limited to production of religious imagery but permeated the cultural matrix of the area. Begram ivories are also interesting for the amalgamation of classical and indigenous style. The preponderance of female figures in all kinds of voluptuous poses is very reminiscent of the yakshi-shalabanjikas found on railing pillars at Mathura. The interaction between the art styles prevailing in northwest Indian, north and central India was a dynamic process with many borrowings, assimilations and influences. Gandhara style continued to influence Indian art upto the early medieval period as is seen in Kashmir and parts of Himachal Pradesh.

Amaravati School of Art

Buddhist art was not confined to north India alone and a very large religious complex grew around Amaravati. It represents the evolution of uniquely beautiful regional art style based on a thriving commercial and imperial system. The rise and fall of the ruling dynasties of the region influenced the construction of the monument, as did the doctrinal changes in Buddhism itself. The Amaravati stupa is the largest and the grandest of all stupas found in the region though many other stupas have been found in Andhradesha region such as at Jagayyapeta, Goli, Ghantasala, Bhattiprolu and Nagarjunakonda.

The stupa of Amaravati was product of a complex package made up of civilization, polity and economy of the area. An architectural site of this scale suggests that there was a large Buddhist population in the area who not only undertook the project of building this but whose spiritual needs were met through this stupa. It also presupposes that there was an adequate supply of raw material as well as the presence of skilled artisans to work on these in the area. Thirdly and most importantly there existed adequate resources based on economic surplus that could patronize the building over the large period of its construction. These resources must have been provided by the ancient city of Dharanikota which is about half a kilometer downstream on the mouth of river Krishna. This was a port on the river that allowed an enormous waterway, that could be easily navigated by large ships into the hinterland of Andhradesha The port and the hinterland had prosperous commercial relations with distant countries included the west from the beginning of the Christian era. Donative inscriptions found carved on the stupa refer to merchants as well as royal patrons who must have derived their riches from this trade. Buddhism was significant in the religious milieu of Andhradesha from the Mauryan period onwards, and the society was literate, complex and highly organized.

At Amaravati one sees the transition from aniconic representations characteristic of Theravadin Buddhism to representing the Buddha in his anthropomorphic form. The stupa consisted of a huge, solid dome mounted on a cylindrical, drum like platform and the whole was surrounded by a great railing. Like at Sanchi, this railing is made up of pillars, crossbars and a coping. There is a gateway or torana at each of the cardinal points that lets into the railing into the pradikshanapatha or the circumambulatory processional path that is paved with black flag stones. All these along with the drum and the dome are decorated with sculptures in high relief. There are early engravings dating from the third century to the first century BC and were influenced by the art of Bharhut and Sanchi. However the best known sculptures come from the second and third centuries AD that coincide with the rule of Satavahanas in Andhradesa, and the later the Ikshavakus continued to adorn the stupa here at Amaravati and also at Nagarjuanakonda. The sculptures at Amaravati have a profound and quiet naturalism in human, animal and floral forms. There is a sense of movement and energy in the sculptures. The human figures are slender and slightly elongated. The faces are oval with sharp and well delineated and expressive features. The animals such as makaras have scaly naturalism and the vegetation environment is lush. There is emphasis on the narrative element with stories from the life of Buddha and Bodhisattva dominating such episodes relating to the Birth, the miracles, Enlightenment and the victory over Mara, Sundari and Nanda, Tushita heaven, Angulimala. There are few Jataka scenes such as the Shibi, Nalagiri and Chhadanta Jatakas. The perfection of form and proportion seen in the middle phase of Amaravati as well as some of the themes continued to influence art at Nagarjuankonda and also later Vakataka and Gupta art styles.

Conclusion

Buddhist art received the greatest incentive from the great Mauryan emperor Asoka through whose efforts Buddhism became a popular religion in India. Thus, I concentrated on the Buddhist art and salient artistic and beautiful features of architecture. The region also has a vast number of sculptures scattered at different sites. An analysis of these sculptural remains has been undertaken to further demonstrate diversity in types of sacred sites, existence of various sacred sites not available in the archaeological records and diversity in deities worshipped within different areas in India

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