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DEVELOPMENT OF BUDDHIST ART IN INDIA

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Abstract: *Buddhist art in India came into being after the historical life of Gautama Buddha during the sixth to fifth century BCE and then it developed by contact with other cultures as it spread all through Asia and the world. The presence of Lord Buddha was portrayed by the symbols of an empty throne, a pair of footprints, a lotus, or a Bodhi tree. The sculpture developed later into more precise and explicit definition of the episodes relating to the life of Buddha and his teachings. It is in north India that the first anthropomorphic representation of Buddha is said to have emerged. The two main proponents of Buddhist art in India are the Gandhara School and the Mathura school of art. One of the main purposes of Buddhist art in India was to popularise the religion of Buddhism. It is proposed to examine the development of Buddhist art in India.*

Keywords: *Culture, Teachings, Buddha, Ancient Indian Art, Mathura Art, Gandhara Art.*

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Buddhist art flourished in the Indian subcontinent during the reign of the Maurya dynasty under the reign of emperor Ashoka, who embraced Buddhism. The several *stupas* like the one in Sanchi and the pillars adorned with Buddhist symbols were some of the earliest instances of Buddhist art in India. These *stupas* comprise a

hemispherical dome with a *harmika* supporting the umbrellas. The sculpture of Bharhut depicts stories from the life of Lord Buddha and also tales from the *Jatakas*. The sculpture dealing with the life of Gautama Sakyamuni includes Buddha's enlightenment, the vision of Maya, and the defeat of Mara among others. In the

sculptures of Bharhut, Amravati and Sanchi the worship of the Bodhi tree is widely prevalent. The Buddhist art in south India during this era is best represented by the *mahachaitya* at Amravati which resembles the art at Bharhut. The Buddhist art at Amravati is noted for its sophistication and elegance. Buddhist art also continued to receive limited patronage during the Gupta and Post Gupta period also.

Mathura School of Art

Initially, a complicated kind of symbolism was prevalent in the Gandhara style, but Mathura style broke from it by developing the custom of translating Buddhist symbols into human form in accordance with Kanishka's rule. An indigenous form of sculpture evolved in Mathura, which mostly used red sandstone. The representations of Vaishnava and Shaiva faiths, as well as Buddhist images, are prevalent in the Mathura style, which is known for its assimilative quality. The pictures of Siva and Vishnu, as well as their consorts Parvathi and Lakshmi, were carved out in the Mathura school, and the female forms of *yakshinis* and *apsaras* were also carved out magnificently. It's worth noting that the images of Shiva and Vishnu were created by their respective *ayudhas* (Ghosh: 2001:66-67).

The Jain Tirthankaras' records can also be found in Mathura Style. Sarnath and Kausambi arose as key centres of art creation in the Mathura School of art, which is known for its vibrancy and assimilationist nature, although Mathura remained the principal art production location. The Mathura Buddha images continue to depict folds in the drapery and the halo around the head is lavishly adorned. More emphasis was placed on internal beauty and face sentiments in Mathura style than on bodily gestures (Sastri:1942: 21). The big pictures were carved with audacity since the earliest Mathura image-makers never intended to construct an anatomically realistic human Buddha.

Mauryan Period, c.322–185 BCE

The remains from the Mauryan period are very few and consist mainly of the Asokan Rock Edicts and the Pillars, which are generally inscribed and surmounted by lions, elephants or bulls (only a small selection of them are shown here). In Kumraha on the edge of modern-day Patna are old architectural remains of the ancient city walls, and from Didar Ganj on the banks on the Ganges a splendid human-size *Yakshini* modelled in the round, and highly polished, has been found. The excavated rock caves at Barabar, although later inhabited by Buddhists, were carved out for the Ajivaka sect, but their main importance lies in the fact that they provided the models for the great rock cave complexes at Ajanta, Ellora and elsewhere in the coming centuries (Edouard: 1989: 219).

After the fall of the Mauryan a new dynasty arose known as the Sungas. The *stupas* at Sanchi and Bharhut, although originally built during the Mauryan period, were rebuilt and expanded during the Sunga period, and it is the work carried out beginning at this later period that we see today, including the dome, the stone casing and the harmika. It was also during their reign that the Chaitya at the Bhaja Caves at Karle in Maharashtra was built (The Sunga-Andhra epoch (2nd-1st Century BCE) was one of the most creative periods of Buddhist art. Though the Sunga rulers were followers of the Brahmanical faith and Buddhism was deprived of the State patronage which it enjoyed during the reign of the Mauryan rulers, like Asoka and some of his successors, there was no set-back in the propagation or popularity of the Buddhist faith. Buddhist establishments flourished in Bodh-Gaya, Bharhut, and Sanchi in Northern and Central India, in Amravati and Jaggayapeta in South India, at Bhaja, Nasik, Karle and Janta and at several other places in Western India (Schepens: 1997: 258). The art of this period consists mainly in the excavation of the rock-cut temples or viharas (some of which

are embellished with paintings) and the erection of railings and Torana (gateways) to the Buddhist Stupas at different places). General Cunningham found remains of the railings and on gateway of the Stupa at Bharhut (Madhya Pradesh) during the years 1872-74 and had them deposited in the Indian Museum in the year following. The Stupa in question was built during the 2nd Century BCE. In the absence of the Stupa itself it is difficult to ascertain its shape and size. But it was probably similar to the Stupas represented on its panels and the almost contemporary Stupas of Sanchi. All these Stupas consist of hemispherical dome with a harmika above supporting the umbrellas. Buddhist art in India gained more prominence. It was combined with restraint and aesthetic sense. Nalanda, Sarnath and Mathura were the three pivotal regions which marked the Buddhist art in this period. The images of Lord Buddha from Sarnath and Mathura are hallmark of Buddhist Indian art. The caves of Ajanta contain illustrations depicting stories from Buddha's life and also tales from the Jatakas. There are numerous statuettes of Buddha and Bodhisattvas present in the Ellora caves (Beal: 1992: 101).

By the seventh century CE with the invasion of the Huns Buddhist art gradually disappeared from the northern India leaving its trace only in Bengal and Nalanda. Buddhist art in this last phase of its development in India was produced under the patronage of the Pala and Sena Dynasties. The principal site of this last centre of Indian Buddhism and its art was the great university of Nalanda. The architecture reveals a style that is a continuation of the architectural form of the Gupta period. This last phase of Buddhist art flourished in Bengal from the eighth century until the extirpation of the religion by the Mohammedan invasions. Buddhist art in India gradually came to an end in the twelfth century CE.

In addition to Bharhut, the other important centres of Buddhist art and religion in north India during this period were Sanchi (Madhya Pradesh)

and Bodh Gaya (Bihar). The main interest of the art at Sanchi centres round the Great Stupa. Originally built of brick, during the reign of Asoka (3rd Century, BCE), it was encased in stone and brought to its present dimension about a century later. The other additions, such as the erection of the Torana and the ground balustrade were done still later, probably about 50 BCE of all the four gateways, the south gateways seem to be the oldest. On one of its architraves, there is an inscription showing that it was the work of one of the artisans of king Sri Satakarni (1st Century BCE), who was evidently the son of Simuka, the founder of the Satavahana family of the Deccan. Of all Torana or gateways, the best preserved is the northern gateway which enables the visitor to have a complete idea of the appearance of all the gateways. Each gateway is composed of two square pillars with capitals at the top. These capitals of standing dwarfs or elephants support a superstructure of architraves. Finally, on the summit of the gateway is the dharma-chakra symbol in the middle. The pillars and superstructures are elaborately decorated with representation of Jataka legends (stories of Buddha's past lives). There are also representations of the sacred trees, stupas and other motifs to indicate the presence of Gautam Buddha symbolically. As in Bharhut art, here also, in conformity with the tradition of early Indian art, there is no anthropomorphic representation of Buddha (Sastri: 1944: 67).

Satavahana Period, circa 2nd Century BCE to 2nd Century CE

With the collapse of the Mauryan Empire, the kingdoms in the south of India were united by the Satavahana dynasty, and it is during this time that the great railings at Sanchi, Bharhut and Amaravati were made. The elaborate carvings found on these monuments are the main sources for the aniconic period of Buddhist art, in which the Buddha was represented only by symbols, such as the Vajrayana, the Bodhi Tree, the Dhamma-Wheel

and the Sripada, or Holy Feet (Fisher: 2006: 62). It was also at this time that the rock-cut Temples at Ajanta and Ellora and the other cave complexes in the western regions were first carved out. The Satavahanas were succeeded by the short-lived Ikshvaku dynasty (2nd century to 3rd century CE), and it was during this time when the great stupas were built at Nagarjunakonda and elsewhere.

Gandhara Period, 1st Century BCE to 1st Century CE

Following the invasions of Alexandria in the 3rd century BCE, many of the Greek forces settled on the borders of India, giving rise to the syncretic Greco-Indic civilisations at Gandhara, in what is modern day Pakistan and Afghanistan. In this confluence of cultures, the first statues and reliefs of the Buddha were made. They were evidently modelled on the Greek statues of Apollo, and present the Buddha with Caucasian facial features, and flowing, wavy hair on the head. The halo behind the Buddha's head is plain. During the Kushan period (1st c AD–3rd c AD) this empire stretched right into the heartland of India, and also gave rise to the great and influential atelier at Mathura (Mishra: 1998: 252-260).

Buddhist art entered upon a new phase with the rise of Mahayana Buddhism during the 1st Century BCE to 1st Century CE. The period is remarkable in that it gave for the first time the figure art or the anthropomorphic representations of the Buddha. Under the patronage of Kushana rulers (1st 2nd Century CE) a new school of art flourished in the Gandhara region, i.e. Afghanistan, Peshawar and its neighbouring districts. Because of its strategic geographical position, the region became a meeting place of various races and cultures. As a result of this, the art of the region shows mingling of both Indian and foreign ideas and motifs. Gandhara art is a hybrid product; though Buddhist in theme it is Graeco-Roman in style or technique as is evident from the physiognomy and drapery of the images.

The artists of this region have produced a large number of Buddha and Bodhisattva images along with other Buddhist deities. Gandhara art flourished for about four to five hundred years and to a great extent it influenced the indigenous art of Mathura, Amaravati and Nagarjuna Konda. It exercised a profound influence upon the art of Afghanistan and Central Asia. The Buddha and Bodhisattva images of many sites in Central Asia show an affiliation to the Gandhara style. The art of the region received a great blow at the hands of the Huna invaders. Mihir kula, a cruel king of the Huna had destroyed, as Xuanzang was told during his travel to this country, the Buddhist monasteries of the region. The main centres of Gandhara art were the cities of Peshawar and Taxila, and also Afghanistan where a large number of stupas, monasteries and sculptures have been unearthed by the archaeologists (Watters: 1973: 173).

Mathura School of Art, 1st Century CE to 4th century CE

Initially, a complicated kind of symbolism was prevalent in the Gandhara style, but Mathura style broke from it by developing the custom of translating Buddhist symbols into human form in accordance with Kanishka's rule. An indigenous form of sculpture evolved in Mathura, which mostly used red sandstone. The representations of Vaishnava and Shaiva faiths, as well as Buddhist images, are prevalent in the Mathura style, which is known for its assimilative quality. The pictures of Siva and Vishnu, as well as their consorts Parvathi and Lakshmi, were carved out in the Mathura school, and the female forms of *yakshinis* and *apsaras* were also carved out magnificently. It's worth noting that the images of Shiva and Vishnu were created by their respective *ayudhas* (Ghosh: 2001:66-67).

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Gupta Period, 4th Century to mid 6th Century CE

The Gupta Empire was centred round their capital at Pataliputra in modern-day Bihar, and is normally thought of as the Golden Age of Indian artistic creation. It is during this period that the murals we find in Ajanta and Ellora were begun, which provide the earliest examples of Indian painting. Also during this time, the great universities at Nalanda, Vikramsila and elsewhere were built, and they in turn gave rise to great schools of sculpture and bronze casting, all with classical elegance. In this period the Buddha figures are modelled with the characteristic curly ringlets of hair, and sheen-like close-fitting robes. The halos are normally decorated in this period.

Pala Period, 8th to 12th Century CE.

This period is also known for excavations of several rock-cut *viharas* and temples at Ajanta and Ellora, in Maharashtra, under the patronage of the Vakataka King. Caves 16, 17 and 26 at Ajanta are excellent examples of pillared halls with usual cells with shrines in the back containing Buddha figures (Asad: 1987: 159-204). The beauty and variety of the pillars are remarkable. Caves 16 and 17 were excavated in the last quarter of the 5th Century CE by a Minister and feudatory of the Vakataka king Harisena. The mural paintings in the Ajanta caves of the Vakataka period contain representations of scenes from Buddha's life from

the conception to enlightenment. Some of them are devoted to the illustrations of Jataka stories, including one of Prince Visvantara, hero of immeasurable bounty. The Ajanta paintings both in composition and technique are characterised by a delicacy and depth of feelings. The artists excel not only in depicting human and animal figures but also in decorative genius. They adorned the ceilings, pedestals of columns, door and window frames, with patterns and motifs of kaleidoscopic variety. Several Buddhist caves are to be found also at Bagh (Madhya Pradesh) and Ellora (Maharashtra), containing numerous Buddha and Bodhisattva figures (5th – 6th Century).

Post – Gupta– Developments

The Gupta art tradition was followed in the later period also. The art of Nalanda, Kurkihar, Sarnath, Orissa and other places during the mediaeval period is based upon the Gupta art idiom. The north Indian Buddhism of the mediaeval period (8th – 11th Century CE). is a peculiar synthesis of the Mahayana ideals and tantric elements (Silk: 2008: 22-28). The concept of the Adi-Buddha, the Dhyani-Buddhas, the divine Bodhisattvas as well as the concept of Shakti or the female energy figures most prominently in the Buddhist art of the period. One anachronism of Buddhist art in mediaeval period is the introduction of the crowned Buddhas with jewellery. Though incompatible to the idea of renunciation which Buddha followed and preached, such images were made probably to lay emphasis on the concept of Buddha as a Chakravartin, the supreme universal monarch.

Nalanda

The art of Nalanda shows very high standard of stone carving as well as metal casting. The minute execution of the bronzes specially of the smaller ones, has excited the admiration of all art lovers of the world. Several Nalanda bronzes were exported to Nepal and Tibet and also to Java.

Equally interesting are the palm leaf illustrations of the Buddhist manuscripts of the Pala period. Their miniature size, colour scheme and linear graceshow the skill of the painters of these illustrations. The Pala style of painting, as Pala sculptures and bronzes, very much influenced the art of Nepal, Tibet and the further East. Bodh-Gaya and Nalanda in Magadha drew pilgrims from different parts of the Buddhist world.

Nagapattinam

It was a flourishing centre of Buddhism in South India during the period was Naga-pattinam, near Madras on east coast. There existed here in the mediaeval period a colony of the Malaya Buddhists who, patronized by the Cholas erected here two temples in the 11th Century A.D., with the aid granted by the Sailendra kings of Java and Sumatra. One of the temples was called Rajarajaperumpalli and the Rajendra Cholaperumpalli. Nagapattinam was a place of pilgrimage for the Buddhists of different places in India as well as outside. Since 1856 about 350 bronzes have been found in these vihara sites. Some of them are of the early Chola times while the rest belong to the later Chola period. The Nagapattinam bronzes are some of the finest metal works of South India (Borchert: 2011: 162-192).

Pala Period, 8th–12th century CE

The Pala Empire grew up in the eastern areas of India, in what is now Bihar and Bengal, both east and west, but during the height of their power their Empire also reached as far as the Kabul valley in modern-day Afghanistan. The universities were still flourishing during this time, and there are very many architectural and sculptural remains from this period. The art of this period is much more elaborate and intricate in style. We see at this time a great flourishing of representations of the various Bodhisattvas and gods in the developed Buddhist pantheon. It was towards

the end of their reign that the Muslim invasions finally brought Buddhism to an end in India, and with it the Buddhist art traditions there. Before that had happened though, Buddhist culture and art had spread all over Asia.

Conclusion

The development of Buddhist art in India was a dynamic and evolving process that spanned centuries. From the early symbolic representations of the Buddha's presence to the later anthropomorphic depictions, Buddhist art in India underwent significant transformations. The art form was shaped by various factors, including the Buddha's teachings, Indian cultural and artistic traditions, and foreign influences. The iconic stupas, sculptures, and cave paintings that dot the Indian landscape are testaments to the artistic and spiritual expression of Buddhist communities. The Mathura and Gandhara schools of art, in particular, played a significant role in shaping the visual language of Buddhism. The intricate carvings, majestic sculptures, and vibrant paintings that adorn Buddhist monuments continue to inspire awe and wonder. Buddhist art in India not only reflected the spiritual aspirations of its creators but also served as a medium for conveying the Buddha's teachings. The art form continues to be an integral part of India's cultural heritage, influencing artistic and spiritual traditions to this day. As a symbol of India's rich cultural diversity, Buddhist art remains an essential part of the country's identity, inspiring future generations to explore the depths of human creativity and spirituality.

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