

Buddhist Art of India

Dr Radha Banerjee Sarkar

Indian art is an expression of Indian life and thought attuned to its vast natural background and its socio-religious traditions. It is not exclusive or sectarian in the narrow sense of the term. Its style, technique or general tenor has nothing to do with any particular religious outlook. It is fed and fostered upon a vast storehouse of Indian traditions, symbols and designs. Buddhist art is meant popularly those monuments and paintings which have for the main purpose the edification or popularization of Buddhism. Fortunately enough in India and outside where Buddhism did exist, or still exists, there are innumerable monuments representing different phases of Buddhism and these help us to visualize the trend of Buddhist art through the ages.

In Buddhist legends and Mythology, Gautama Buddha has been represented as superior not only to the popular cult divinities of the soil, such as the Yakshas, Nagas, etc. but also to Indra, Brahma and others of the earlier Brahmanical pantheon. Everything with him has been described as transcendental. This is amply represented in Buddhist art.

Buddhist art reflects very faithfully all the important aspects of Buddhism. In primitive Buddhism, Gautama Sakyamuni has been regarded as an ideal human being and quite naturally we find that the early Buddhist art of Bharhut, Sanchi, Bodh-Gaya and Amaravati and other places shows no anthropomorphic representation of the Master. His presence is indicated by means of an empty throne, or a *Bodhi* tree or a pair of foot-prints, or a *dharmachakra*, symbolizing one or the other event of his life. As the time passed, Buddhism acquired greater popularity and drew adherents from all sections of the people. The discipline and austerities of the early Buddhism were beyond the comprehension of the ordinary followers of the religion. A religion without a personal god in whom one can repose faith had but little appeal to them. The demand of the popular mind as met by the Mahayanists who defied Buddha and introduced the concept of divine Bodhisattvas and several other deities. With the progress of time, the

Buddhist pantheon was enlarged to include several hundred deities. Among the male deities, the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara became the most popular because of his great compassion for the living creatures. He is an emanation of the Dhyani Buddha Amitabha and his shakti Pandara (the Sukhavati-Vyuha or the Amitayus Sutra, translated into Chinese between A.D. 148-170, seems to refer for the first time to the name of Amitabha or Amitayus), Avalokitesvara is the personification of universal compassion. As described in the *Karanda-vyuha* he refused or renounced Nirvana in favour of afflicted humanity. He is supposed to impart spiritual knowledge to fellow creatures so that all, by a gradual process, may advance on the path of salvation.

The Sunga-Andhra epoch (2nd-1st Century B.C) 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 Amaravati and Jaggayapeta in South India, at Bhaja, Nasik, Karle and Janta and at several other places in Western India. 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 toranas (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 B.C. 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.

One of the main interest of the Bharhut sculptures consists in the representation of the birth-stories of the Gautama Budha. These stories (or the Jatakas) are of two main classes, those relating to the previous births of Buddha as a Bodhisattva (a Buddha potentia), and those of his last appearance as Gautama Shakyamuni when he attained Enlightenment of Buddhahood. The Jatakas represented on the Bharhut panels include Mahakapi-Jataka, Latuva-Jataka, Miga-Jataka, Sujata-gahuto-Jataka, Mahajanaka-Jataka and

Vidhurapandita-Jataka, Chhadanta Jataka, etc.

The scenes on the Bharhut sculptures, relating to the life of Gautama Shakyamuni include, among others, the dream of Maya (Illustrating the descent of a Bodhisattva in the form of an elephant into the mother's womb), the defeat of Mara, Gautama's Enlightenment under the Bodhi tree, the worship of the Bodhi tree, the worship of Gautama's hair-locks by celestial beings, the visits of king Ajatashatru of Magadha and of Prasenjit of Kosala, etc.

The worship of the Bodhi tree, seems to have been widely prevalent, as there are many representations of it on the sculptured panels of Bharhut, Sanchi and Amaravati. Again, in the Divyavandana it is related that the Bodhi tree was Asoka's favourite object of worship. The lowest architrave of the Eastern Gateway Stupa I, Sanchi (1st Century B.C.) depicts the ceremonial visits of king Asoka and his queen, Tishyarakshita to the Bodhi Tree. In the centre of the panel are the tree and the temple of Bodhi Gaya. On the left is seen a crowd of musicians and devotees carrying water vessels. On the right are the king and the queen descending from the elephant and paying homage to the Bodhi tree.

Sanchi Stupa

The main interest of the art at Sanchi centres round the Great Stupa. Originally built of brick, during the reign of Asoka (3rd Century, B.C.), it was encased in stone and brought to its present dimension about a century later. The other additions, such as the erection of the toranas and the ground balustrade were done still later, probably about 50 B.C. of all the four gateways, the south gateway seems 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 B.C.), who was evidently the son of Simuka, the founder of the Satavahana family of the Deccan. Of all toranas 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 dharmachakra 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.

About 50 yards north-east of the great stupa of Sanchi is another monument of the same nature but smaller in proportions. Inside this stupa the relics of two very important disciples of Buddha, Sariputta and Maha-Moggalana, were discovered by General Cunningham.

Amaravati Stupa

The Buddhist art in South India during this period is best illustrated by the remains of the Maha-Chaitya (or stupa) of Amaravati. As the earliest Buddhist Sculptures found here are primitive in style resembling those of Bharhut, it can be presumed that the Maha-Chaitya was built during the 2nd Century B.C. to 250 A.D. Its earliest pieces as noted above, show affinities to Bharhut art. The images of Buddha were introduced here about the 1st –2nd Century A.D. The Amaravati art of this period is highly elegant and sensitive.

Gandharan Art

Buddhist art entered upon a new phase with the rise of Mahayana Buddhism during the 1st Century B.C. to 1st Century A.D. 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 A.D.) a new school of art flourished in the Gandhara region, i.e. 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 Nagarjunakonda. 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. Mihirakula, 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.

Mathura Art:

Mathura also was a great centre of art and culture during this period. Here flourished side by side all the important religions of India, such as Brahmanism, Jainism and Buddhism. It is believed that the first Buddha images were carved at Mathura simultaneously if not earlier, with the Gandhara school. Mathura has produced Buddha images of various dimensions. The Kushana Buddha or Bodhisattva images of Mathura served as the prototypes of the more beautiful specimens of the Gupta period. The workshop of Mathura exported several Buddhist images to various other places, such as Sarnath and even as far as Rajgir in Bihar. It is well known that Friar-Bala an inhabitant of Mathura had several Bodhisattva images set up at different places. Two of them were found at Sravasti and Sarnath. (The Kushana art of Mathura is somewhat heavy. The style and technique which the Kushana artists were trying to evolve were brought to the Gupta period. But the art of South India during this time is more elegant and sophisticated. The sculptured panels of Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda, Goli, Ghantasals, belonging to the 2nd – 3rd Century A.D., are characterised by delicacy of forms, and linear grace.

Gupta Art:

The Gupta period (4th – 6th Century A.D.) marks the bright period of art in India. Gupta art is marked by restraint combined with a high aesthetic sense and discipline. The main centres of Buddhist art during this period were Mathura, Sarnath and Nalanda in the north. The Buddhist images of Mathura and Sarnath are some of the best specimens of Indian art, never equalled by any art creations of later period. The delicate folds of the transparent garment adorning the Gupta

figures were done in a beautiful style. The profusely decorated halo is another special feature of the art of the Gupta figure. The delicate modelling of forms with meditative repose has rendered the Buddha and Bodhisattva figures of the Gupta period most attractive. The Gupta artists showed an equal ingenuity in the carving of metal images also. The bronze Buddha image from Sultanganj and also one from Dhanesar Khera together with a number of specimens found in north-western part of India are some excellent specimens testifying to the skill and ability of the Gupta metal carvers.

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. The beauty and variety of the pillars are remarkable. Caves 16 and 17 were excavated in the last quarter of the 5th Century A.D. 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 Tradition

The Gupta art tradition was followed in 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 A.D). is a peculiar synthesis of the Mahayana ideals and tantric elements. The concept of the Adi-Budha, 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 jewelleries. 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 grace show 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.