



## Reflection of Hindu Philosophy in the Buddhist Art of Shunga Period

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Ancient Indian literature and art have always harboured an eco-friendly spirit, imbibing elements of nature to give meaning, message and identity to the form. The presence and integrated forms of Nature are to be looked into the various manifestations of Indian art like sculptures, images, terra-cotta, textiles, paintings, architecture, jewellery etc. In the history of Indian art, the Maurya and Shunga era art holds its own special place. The characteristic of the artists are even more evident from the examples of the gateway (toran) at Sanchi. Many examples of beautiful and delicate imagination of our ancestors related to flora, fauna and gospel (Jataka stories) are visible here.

Indian art transmits in a non-verbal language a strong message about how humanity and the divine world can exist and survive only along with nature. All forms of manifestation of Indian Art are full of references indicating the importance of the earth, trees, water, animals, and plants for our survival. Prithvi Shanti, Vanaspatayah Shanti — this line of the Shanti Mantra from the Yajur Veda (verse 36:17) talks about shanti, pacification, of the earth and the vegetation world. The Atharva Veda (12:1:26) says that the earth is our mother and we all are her sons. Our welfare depends on her prasannata, happiness; and our purna vinash, annihilation, is due to her aprasannata, unhappiness. In the Gita (10:19-40) Krishna tells Arjun about some of his forms; He says He is the best in worldly manifestations including flora and fauna. He is the Ashvattha (pipal) , among trees, Airavat among elephants, Vasuki in snakes, Anant in cobras, simha in animals, garuda in birds, the Ganga in rivers, Meru in mountains, and Sagar, ocean, in all water bodies.

In the history of Indian art, the Maurya and Shunga era art holds its own special place. The characteristic of the artists is even more evident from the examples of the gateway (toran) at Sanchi. Many examples of beautiful and delicate imagination of our ancestors related to flora, fauna and gospel (Jataka stories) are visible here. In the third century BC, Chandragupta Maurya and his beloved teacher, Acharya Kautilya of Taxila University, laid the foundation of the Maurya Empire and established a strong and firm empire. His son Bindusara put all his energy into building it a strong, just and welfare state.<sup>1</sup> It is said that his son Ashok was established as a great king in the history of the world due to his good deeds. His efforts led to the development of the country. He made special efforts for the art and developed new features under his patronage. Through the various specimen of art Ashoka Maurya not only introduces his personality and ideology but also expresses about his love for nature.

The best examples of Ashoka's art are the pillars whose upper part is made of lotus petals protruding outwards in a complete ghat shape which can be termed as Ghat-pallav feature. There is a panel (abacus) made in square and sometimes circular shapes on top of this. They serve as outposts for the animals and at the same time provide the place to exhibit the conscious attitude of the king towards the environment. These abacuses are decorated with various motifs which represent the nature. Example of these motifs are as animals and birds especially the swans in different poses, many types of leaves

especially the muchkund leaf, the palm leaf and the leaf of lotus etc. On the circular abacus of the pillar with elephant figure on the top and received from Sankisa, there is a leaf of muchkund flanked by lotuses joined with each other by their branches. This pattern is again separated by the symbol of tri-ratna. Thus Tri –ratna is flanked by lotus. The pillar with the crowning figure of lion, obtained from Rampurwa, has an attractive row of swans on abacus. The swans are bowing down in various postures and eating grains. This specific style is termed by Dr V S Agrawal as ‘mukta- lolup- hamsa- punkti’<sup>2</sup>

Another specimen from Lauria Nandangarh has a lion at the top of the pillar. On its abacus about twelve swans are made in a row with their heads bowed and walking towards the left in such a way that they are circumambulating the lion sitting on top of them. The Swan is known around the world for its beauty, elegance, and grace. The swan is a genus of waterfowl that has the ability to swim and fly with incredible speed and agility. This bird is also very intelligent, devoted to its mate, and highly aggressive about defending its young. Ashoka's expectation towards his subject or the aim of his efforts is obtained from this small example. Lion pillar received from Sarnath is the best example of Mauryan art. It is inscribed in a very beautiful way. The upper part of the pillar is preserved in the Sarnath museum, there is a live marking of four animals on its abacus and these four animals are separated from each other by the Dharma Chakra. These four animals, elephant, horse, bull and lion are recognised as four categories of indian social system and each is governed by its religion (Dharma). Underneath is the base of the lotus. There are four Babbar lions sitting with their backs joined on the abacus. Thus, in Mauryan art, the symbols of nature are coordinated in a beautiful way. Nature is symbolized to propagate the message of mauryan king. Also, this is a beautiful example of co-existence of nature and man in the contemporary art.

The two styles of art are found in the Maurya period. The first, court style was patronized by Mauryan kings especially Ashoka, in addition to this, the other style is named as folk art which reflected the mind tradition and culture ideology of larger section of people unlike the court art. Examples of Mauryan folk art also find expressions of association with nature. Mother Goddess statues have been received, whose parikar (the outer circle), is beautifully carved with the coordinated decoration of various types of trees, animals, birds and human worshipers. Here again nature has been given a prominent place. The examples of Mauryan art are the indicative of the cultural upliftment of the society at that time, where the craftsmen were trying to carefully observe the various moods and elements of nature and mark it on stone in its prettiest form.

During the period of Pushyamitra Shunga, engraving of relief sculpture was in vogue with the purpose to decorate the stupa architecture and to spread the messages of Buddhism. Thus, the railing, pillars, gateway of stupa and the space available in the parts of the medallion is decorated with infinite innumerable forms of vegetation like different types of trees, leaves, creepers with leaves, fruits and flowers etc., It seems that the artist is trying to show that there is only one element between the different subjects and aspects of life that is his own inner happiness. The inner happiness is depicted in the waving creeper and its own ductility. The basic vision is to utilize the given space in the craft so as to fill it with the ornamentation spread throughout. The indicator of the natural growth is lotus creeper which has various botanical meanings. Where the beautiful coordination of various types of botanical meanings is visible, the human figure has also appeared as a part of it and accordingly its outline and shape imagination is developed. Seeing the priority of nature in art, the sage of art Shri Anand Kumaraswamy has suggested the name 'Vanaspatik style' for these markings. In the 2nd and 1st centuries BCE, the major art sites of northern India are Bharhut, Sanchi, Vidisha, Bodh Gaya and Mathura, etc., in which the gradual development of the middle country art style is visible.

The movement of folk art spread in all four directions at that time. This art, which is spread from north to south and east to west, shows some local craftsmanship, but the signs of the universal consciousness are dominant in the art, found at these places. Evidence of this has been found upto Amer in

Kurukshetra and Chittor in Rajasthan. There is a conscious rise of art in Pauni in the Dakshinapatha and Kalinga or Orissa in the eastern region. In the Vengi region of South India, the movement of collective consciousness through the art appear to flourish in the centers of Amaravati, Jagayyapet, Gundapalle etc. This was the natural process of that nationwide cultural awakening, the foundation of which was laid during the time of the Maurya emperors.

In fact, the purpose of Shunga art was to represent the life of the great man Mahatma Buddha and through him the concepts and principles of religion for the satisfaction of the curiosity of the people and to develop the feeling of fulfilment<sup>3</sup>. In the story of the Buddha's previous birth (named as Jatak story), the Bodhisattva is shown in whatever form he was born, animal-bird-deity etc. However, in depiction of his historical life sketch, his presence has always been personified by some symbol. Under symbolism, the meaning and ornamentation derived from nature are the basic element and beauty of the Shunga art. Shunga art is an illuminating commentary on the contemporary Indian life and attitude towards life as conceived and planned in early Buddhism. Here, along with Buddhist subjects, there is also a marking of folk beliefs and rituals prevalent in the society. In this folk art, it is important to display man as a part of nature and it directs the eternal quality of Indian culture, according to which, considering the existence of God in every particle, man should be considered an integral part of that infinite nature. The ancient sages recognized the indispensability of nature in human life and gave importance to its conservation and promotion. For planting a sense of gratitude towards the various elements of nature, animals and plants, etc. in human society, they gave them an important place in various religious and social rituals and associated them with various deities too. Not only this, they laid down the directive principles for limiting the sense of ego and tendency of ownership of human beings, the phrase 'Tera Tujhko Arpan' was used. This sense of oneness towards nature has been beautifully expressed in this sentence of Ishavasy- Upanishad that the man who sees only the being in the Supreme Personality of God on the basis of all, sees the Supreme Lord, Supreme Soul in a mere creature too. How can such a person hate or envy someone? He always bows to everyone in his heart while seeing his Supreme Lord everywhere. His aim is to serve everyone and bring them happiness.<sup>4</sup>

Seeing the divine, one becomes so engrossed that the shadow of mourning does not remain in his mind, due to this harmony and generosity, Indian man has united with nature. He is a small part of this vast nature, he is a living being, he has also accepted this fact. It is the duty or religion of the living beings to live in co-existence while doing each other favour - 'Parsparopagaho jeevanam'. With this positive ideology, Indian society has already developed an unprecedented way of living which is the need of present society. The representation by the connoisseurs of art, in the context of glory, luxury and vibrancy, justify that even though the subject matter of Shunga art is Buddhism, the soul is Hindu.

In Maurya-Shunga art, the marking of natural elements is mainly found in two forms - the nature as is and the other is the symbolic marking of natural elements, such as Kalpa-Lata and Padma-Lata which is actually a symbol of fertility and continuity. On the western face of the left pillar of the southern gateway, three scenes are found in the grove of lotus creeper (Padma-Lata). In these, clothes, ornaments and Mithun are shown coming out of the branches of Kalpavriksha<sup>5</sup>. Many stone panels have natural markings of trees, but when worshipers are seated or standing or worshiping in front of a tree surrounded by an altar, then that tree is a symbol of Mahatma Buddha. The stupa is a symbol of Mahatma Buddha. In the context of life character, it is a symbol of Mahaparinirvana of Mahatma Buddha. In the Stupa of Sanchi, one can see the group of stupas and trees engraved in various style, on the top architrave of the gateway. Three stupas and four Bodhi trees are displayed on the back of the upper architrave of the southern archway of Sanchi. Here three stupas are erected each separated by the Bodhi tree, in front of which are seats worshiped by humans and gods. It is clear from this symbol that the set of these three stupas and four trees is the symbol of the seven human Buddhas. Here, also is a tendency to give divine form to the trees as they are not ordinary trees. These trees are representative of the pre-Buddhas. Counted from left to right, Karkutchand is related to Buddha as Shirish tree,

Udumbar tree represents Kanaka Muni, Nyagrodha tree is for Kashyapa Buddha and Peepal tree represents Shakyamuni. Along with these four trees, three stupas have been built symbolically for the other three pre-Buddhas. This is a representation of the seven human Buddhas. Similarly, in the next part of the upper bar of the east gateway, the first and seventh Buddhas are shown by the Bodhi tree and the remaining five Buddhas by the stupas. They have been re-designed on the back side of the upper beam of the eastern gateway itself. Where they can be recognized by the seven Bodhi trees with pious seat built under them. Apart from the qualities of the real nature of animals and birds, their fictional and mythological notations have also been made, they can be seen in the forms of Vyal etc. The marking of Shri Lakshmi is found on the southern gateway of the Stupa of Sanchi, this goddess is built in the middle of the front part of the upper architrave of the gateway. The goddess is standing on a lotus and flanked by elephants on either side. They are holding a pot with their trunks and consecrating the goddess. The creeper is spread on the remaining part, on whose leaves and flowers the birds are depicted sitting. On the middle architrave of the gateway, which is protruding from the pylon, on the left side there is a group of elephants playing in a lake full of lotus flowers and fishes, and in the back part there is a figure of a building with beautiful markings of women looking out. The Gana figures in different postures in the foreground on the lower beam with lambodar (protruded belly) have been identified with the half-deities called Kushmanda. The Jatak story of Shaddant has been engraved in detail on the back side of the central arch of the southern gateway. On the left, the Bodhisattva in the form of a six-toothed elephant is shown playing with his companions in the lotus forest. Then they are shown going towards the banyan tree where a huntsman named Sonottar is about to ambush them with a bow and arrow from behind the rock. The story of Shadant Jataka is also depicted on the back side of the upper beam of the north tower. Another pylon inscription shows that the craftsmen of Vidisha, who worked in ivory, had composed a formation 'Roop karma, which depicts the softness of the craft work and the subtlety and charm of the space-division. This is a complete sign of the consistency of this inscriptional evidence. The original attempt to bring the linear rhythm of the shape to the surface with a flowing ease that began in Bharhut, the practice of showing the sculptural roundness and the three dimensions was started. In Bodh Gaya, it was marked with more success and we see the culmination of this craft and practice in the art of Sanchi. In the art of Sanchi, the craftsman has now become empowered to fully explain the three dimensions of the art including the depth on the stone faces and the roundness in the embossed notation. He is now fully aware of the proportion and orderliness in the combination of scenes in Sanchi. Thus, this art style basically demonstrates an indigenous tradition of stone carving in the ornamentation of stupa architecture.

In this indigenous style of art, the craftsmen of Sanchi not only reveal the diverse and wonderful forms of the human figure but their markings also focus on other forms like fruit-flower, animal-bird etc. with great detail and care. The shapes depicted are rich and dramatic in imagination as well as alive and poetic in the transmission of emotions. The artist's chisel to their existence full of life qualifies the multifarious parties of the craft in proper interpretation. Art flowed in this period with the rise of Mathura school of art. Two phases of art are visible in Mathura, the first phase is influenced by Maurya-Shunga art, but the second phase of art is developed under the umbrella of the Kushan kings, which are different from it. Marking of life in harmony with nature is the main feature of pre-Kushan period art because from the Kushan period independent sculptures rather we should say 'sculpture in round' were made in place of the tradition of being quoted or engraved on architecture (Vastu). Thus, the main foundation stone of Indian iconography was laid during the Kushan period. Now in the Maurya period, the traditional imperative or symbolic and figurative or engraved, decorative or ornamental and gradual descriptive or story-revealing craftsmanship has been replaced by a broad and quadrilateral shaped structure. Instead of the traditional creepers with leaves and ornamental decorations, the artist now recognized the human form in its various postures and gestures and started bringing it to life in stone. Instead of being an ornamental decoration of an architecture, it started being completely revered as an idol craft. This was an era when the craftsmen of Mathura were the source of sculptures for all of northern India. The exquisite and supernatural deity idols made by the artisans of

Mathura were in demand far and wide. It was revered by taking it to distant religious centres and regions. Evidence of this was found in many distant places like Shravasti, Etah, Faizabad, Kaushambi, Sarnath, Bodh Gaya, Sanchi, Mehrauli, Palwal, Sanghor, Taxila, Andheri, Shahji ki Dheri and Butkhra etc. There are indisputable ascetic idols in Kushan period at Mathura. The craftsmen of Mathura used locally available white-spotted red sandstone extensively whose mines are found in Bayana, Rupwas, Tanakpur, Agra and Fatehpur Sikri etc.

Mathura had been the centre of art from pre Kushan era and the craft which is evident from the railings of the Jain stupas found from Mathura itself is no different from the art style of Bharhut, Bodh Gaya and Sanchi. From this point of view, it is far more primitive that there is no marking of man in it at all. Like the marking of Padma Lata made on the flowers of the Vedika pillar and medallion (Ushnish). Along with this, the semi-fish body and winged animal shapes made in circular lotus like figure often known as 'padmak' are also of special importance. From this point of view, this art is very close to Bharhut, Bodh Gaya and Shunga art, although there is no complete lack of human form. Many specimens of the Mathura are much more ancient than the Kushana period. Thus, pre- Kushana art of Mathura also expresses the indigenous idea elaborated in ancient scriptures that acknowledges nature as a divine power. A popular mantra in Yajurveda prays to make the whole environment in peace; a disturbed mother earth and father sky cause our unrest. In Yajurveda there is a soulful prayer to maintain peace at one place. Vedic sages consider every particle of the universe to be the kin of human beings. All this together is our family and so is the environment. The Prithvi Sukta of Atharvaveda containing 63 mantras has been described by Bloomfield, an American scholar as the best poem in the world.

Nowdays the whole world is concerned about keeping the environment balanced. For the first time an international conference was held in Stockholm on this problem, in which 119 countries joined, accepted the same earth principle and passed a resolution to celebrate World Environment Day on 5th June every year. After this, in 1992 in Brazil conference, 174 countries held earth summit. In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, environmental talks were no longer led by scientists and research experts. Instead, national developmental interests drove prime ministers, presidents, heads of state and ministries of foreign affairs to take more of a lead alongside other stakeholders. The Summit's participants agreed to encourage conversation and stewardship in the future, on matters of preserving the environment. The Earth Summits are decennial meetings of world leaders, organized since 1972 with help of the United Nations, to help defining ways to stimulate sustainable development at the global level because there is no planet –B. Only 'one earth' is the message of all these summites now<sup>6</sup>. With this reference there is a need to re-establish and re-analyze the ancient indian art and religious practices. Indian tradition is worshiping the environment from the very beginning. Every act and thought of Indian philosophy and scripture is a religious ritual of circumambulation and protection of nature. Indian Philosophy specifies the Natural path for a person to become longlasting 'Chiranjeevi', not a 'Charan Jiva', once the downfall begins, it leaves us in the swamp. We have to improve ourselves. Without improving oneself society, country or the world cannot be improved. One can find Shivatav only by following the true path, if Shivatav comes, then beauty will come by itself. Complete realization of Satyam Shivam and Sundaram is the essence of life and it is not only the feeling but the reality of life, that there is nothing beyond nature.

A single drop of water is the creation of Him and the ocean filled with abundant water is also created by Him. He has given the art of converting seed to tree and seed into fruitful crops, not for his own nourishment but to make man healthy, happy and long-lived. He has given abilities too to realize the abilities given by that God to man. Running in the blind race of the consumption of convenience has given such a formidable form, seeing that everyone's soul trembles. The most surprising thing is that even the most intelligent animal does not spread as much pollution as humans. Thus, man who speaks so much about the environment is actually the biggest enemy of the environment. Our ancient

scriptures have given stress for developing many methods for worship only on the concept of nature conservation.

Bhagvatgeeta (7.4&7.5) says that Earth, water, energy, air and sky, these Panchamahabhuta and mind, intellect and ego, these eight types of sentient beings are my inferior nature, O great arms, know my superior nature by which this world is held.

India is the oldest country filled with the spirit of 'Sarve Bhavantu Sukhin: Sarve Santu Niramaya' which is clearly written in Article 51 of its constitution that it will be the duty of every citizen of India to protect the natural environment including forests, lakes, rivers and animals. And improve and have a sense of compassion towards living beings. The first book of Indian literature, Rigveda, gave importance to the protection of various components of the environment and for their protection, linked them with religious activities. There is the abundance of the examples for environmental protection ideas in ancient Indian literature and art. If we read Mimamsa philosophy and Vedanta philosophies, we will see that Vedas are the starting point of these two philosophies and nature has been given more importance in these scriptures. Agni, Vayu, Indra and Varun etc. all the presiding powers are part of nature. Life and survival are all considered dependent on their grace thus if we go in the way of Vedanta philosophy, then we can clearly understand the group of environment. If we read Vedanta philosophy, then we can understand the efforts made by Indian sages for the upliftment of the environment in it.

Nature knows and performs its religion, even though we forgot to fulfill our religion towards nature, exploiting it for our physical facilities and hurting it, but nature has taken its own way to combat the greed of man. Nature has the capacity to cure our wounds by giving shelter in her lap. It reminds us that the same herbs and spices which man started neglecting, falling for false temptations, are actually life-saviours. Forgetting this way of life and ridiculing it is not the right way of life. We should be understanding our Indian rituals, instead of making fun of them. We should not forget that both humans and nature actually have the same religion - that is the tradition of giving and giving more. Today we should maintain a sense of dependence on nature, a sense of faith in its generosity, and observe the nature's wish. Let us remember that we are the carriers of that culture of India, where animals, birds, trees, plants are all interconnected and coexist peacefully. Where cow and rivers are mother, Sun is considered as Suraj Baba, the moon is maternal uncle- Mama, cloud is brother, electricity is sister, Banyan tree is Baba and Peepal is Vasudev, Neem is Sheetla Mata, where in all these God and Goddess- all these were worshipped in the form of the deities.

The Earth as an embodiment of unlimited kindness and benevolence that makes no demands for its sustenance and generously the products of its life's activity. Untamed, it is a forest, domesticated, it is a field. Lessons of complexes social systems are professed by the forests, sharing the same sun with an ideology that there is enough for everyone, stopping the spread of disease by not overlapping on canopies and sharing nutrients and water from under the Earth, the art of social forestry in its austere form is a lesson to mankind in itself.<sup>8</sup>

The ecological heritage of India is based on the belief of experiencing nature as experiencing the cosmic system, as opposed to the ideology of considering it as a mechanism to be experimented. Even today when science has proved the geological processes, Indian faith continues to sustain the legends and the doctrine remains an integral part of the future generation as well. The ancient practise of worshipping animals and plants still continues. Many of us worship the cow with calf (savatsa go); snake; meena-yugal, two fish; elephant; tulsi; and neem, pipal and banyan trees. Some of these are also considered auspicious symbols. The Sarnath Lion Capital of Ashok that has been adopted as our national emblem shows four asiatic lions standing back-to-back; a lotus, horse, elephant and a bull. The state emblem of Uttar Pradesh includes a pair of fish. These are present day symbols

derived from the past. Vedic Puranic gods and goddesses, along with Jaina, Tirthankaras and the Buddha — are all associated with flora and fauna in some way. The vahanas, mounts, or chinha, cognizance, are derived from nature/environment. For example, the lotus is shown in the hands of Surya, Lakshmi, Vishnu, and Sarasvati; and Ikshudhanu (a bow made of sugarcane), and pancha pushpashar (five arrows of five different flowers like lotus, amra) are associated with Kamadeva, the god of love. In most cases, the individual identity of deities and Jaina, Tirthankaras rest mainly on the vahanas and chinhas, and attributes drawn from the world of flora and fauna. And if these are withdrawn, their very identity will be lost<sup>8</sup>. It is the baseline of a spiritual response, and a conscious reorientation of inner commitment. Nature is considered to have nurtured and nourished human intellect with food for thought and food for the body. The Maura-Shunga art is the best specimen of this ideology of Vedas.

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