

Elements In Early Buddhist Art

(With reference to Gandhara, Mathura and Amaravati)

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Abstract-The history of Indian art is an interdisciplinary combining the study of art historical and social historical research of the concerned period. Buddhist art is divided into Gandhara, Madhura and Andhra (Amaravati) schools, based on their characteristic features. It is natural that Pataliputra became an art centre during the times of Asoka. Similarly Mathura, on the western flanks of Uttar Pradesh became an important centre of art, imbibing in itself a favour of native Indian tradition. The region around Takshasila, under the various rulers of Greek origin became an affluent centre of art, ethnically close to the Greeco-Roman art, but a little away from the native Indian art tradition. In the post Mauryan period, the centre of art shifted from the Ganga valley to western Deccan, where it found expression in Rock-cut art forms. The case of Barhut could be studied as an expression of the Sunga art. In the far south, Amaravati developed itself into an art centre under the influence of Mauryan and Sunga art initially, but patronized by local rulers, artisans, lay-worshippers etc.

Key words: Buddhist Art, Gandhara, Mathura and Amaravati

Buddhist art as an important criterion for the study of early Buddhist society. Early art historians like Niharranjan Ray, Vidya Dehejia and Amita Ray states that the early Buddhist art as a part of social production. Art is an ideological activity and an ideological product. This ideology is mainly based on social relations and conditions of artistic production, and aesthetic conventions. The history of Indian art is an interdisciplinary combining the study of art historical and social historical research of the concerned period. Buddhist art is divided into Gandhara, Madhura and Andhra (Amaravati) schools, based on their characteristic features.

The Mauryan rule in India, particularly during the times of Asoka, heralded a new chapter in the art of history of India after the decline of the Harappan civilization. There was a time gap of nearly 1500 years

between the Harappan art and the Mauryan art. It is already known that the early art of the Mauryan empire along with the archaeological remains at Pataliputra show an unfailing impact of the Greek art. It is natural that Pataliputra became an art centre during the times of Asoka. Similarly Mathura, on the western flanks of Uttar Pradesh became an important centre of art, imbibing in itself a favour of native Indian tradition. The region around Takshasila, under the various rulers of Greek origin became an affluent centre of art, ethnically close to the Greeco-Roman art, but a little away from the native Indian art tradition. In the post Mauryan period, the centre of art shifted from the Ganga valley to western Deccan, where it found expression in Rock-cut art forms. The case of Barhut could be studied as an expression of the Sunga art. While the initial art of Sanchi can be dated to the Satavahana hegemony in the area. In the far south, Amaravati developed itself into an art centre under the influence of Mauryan and Sunga art initially, but patronized by local rulers, artisans, lay-worshippers etc¹.

After the Mauryan rule in Magadha the Shunga's who were followers of Vedic religion under Maurya's came to power and ruled during 2 nd - 1st centuries BC. They patronized the Vedic religion but they equally promoted Buddhism. Simultaneously in North India came under the rule of a new political power from 170 BC to early 2 nd century A.D. The Kushans were migrating from the Central Asia and very soon they founded an empire in north-western India. They had contact with Greeks and Romans. Their culture was the combination of nomadic, Indian and Greco-Roman elements. It was under Kanishka around the year 78 CE the Kushans emerged as a powerful empire. He adopted Buddhism and made Buddhism was the state religion. One of his major contributions of Kanishka is introducing the image of Buddha. Before Kanishka, Buddha was worshiped in the stupas

in the form of symbols. Kanishka issued a golden coin where for the first time the figure of Buddha appears. After that, Kanishka sponsored the sculptors of Greco-Roman origin to create the image of Buddha and the narrative sculptures associated with the life of Buddha. He also got his images done in large sizes. During the successful reign of Kanishka and his successors, two Schools of sculptural art emerged in North India known as Gandhara and Mathura. Gandhara was the capital city of Kushana kingdom and Mathura was another capital which located centrally in the Kushan Empire. These schools have produced distinct objects of distinct art styles.

Gandhara School of Art:

Stylistically, the Gandhara School of sculpture represents Greco Buddhist or Hellenistic art. The important features of this art form are that the sculptors are extremely fine and realistic. The Buddha and Bodhisattva sculptures display quite a sophisticated iconography in an advanced style. The Gandhara sculptures suggest the earliest representations of the Buddha. Many plaques which were the parts of a stupa earlier show the scenes of the birth of Buddha, his enlightenment, sermon at the deer park, his death and others. The most important trait of Gandhara sculpture is found in the depiction of Lord Buddha in the standing or seated positions. The seated Buddha is always shown cross-legged in the traditional Indian way. Another typical feature of the Gandhara Art is the rich carving, elaborate ornamentation and complex symbolism. The aesthetic quality of the Gandhara Buddhas is different from that of the Mathura Buddhas. The dress of the Buddha is depicted as realistic with many folds. The physical features such as muscles, nails, hair have been done with great detail. The drapery, heavy ornamentation and moustaches featured on the images of Buddha and Bodhisattva were far from the Indian idealism (*Source: Gandhra Image of Buddha, British Museum, London*).

Mathura School of Art:

Mathura also was a great center of art and culture during the period of the Kushans. In Gandhara art the Greco- Roman influence is strongly present. In Mathura art, the important religions of India, such as Brahmanism, Jainism and Buddhism are represented. It is believed that the first Buddha images were carved

at Mathura at the same time as in the Gandhara School. Mathura has produced Buddha images of various dimensions. The Mathura style evolved with native spirit and elements. There are quite a number of female figures on the railings of the stupas, and these are beautifully attired according to Indian model. The features are naturalistic rather than realistic. The Indian elements derived from the ideal yogi type, namely the lotus feet and the meditative gaze. The workshop of Mathura exported several Buddhist images to various places, such as Samath and even as far as Rajgir in Bihar (*Source: The Katra Stele, Seated Bodhisattva Sakyamunini in Abhaya Mudra*).

Amaravati School of Art:

Amaravati, is a small town located on the right bank of the river Krishna, about 35 km north of Guntur, the district headquarters. A little to the west of the present Amaravati town, located at a distance of about 1 km, is the ancient settlement of Dhanyakataka or Dharanikota. The *stupa* site is located close to Amaravati town.

The location of the Amaravati *stupa* is locally known as Dipaladinne² (Hill of Lamps). The importance of the *stupa* was first recognized by Colonel Colin Mackenzie during his survey of the region in 1797. During 1845, Walter Smith tried to excavate the southwestern portion of the mound, containing the *stupa* and recovered a few panels of sculptures. This is also called as Amaravati School of Art belongs to lower Krishna valley in Guntur district.

The study related to the *Mahastupa* at Amaravati requires insights into its phase wise development. Sarkar, H and Nainar, S. P., (1992)³ gave five phases of development perceivable in the *stupa*. According to him, the first phase which formed the nucleus of the *Mahachaitya* came up in the 2nd half of the 3rd century B.C., contemporaneous with Maurya Asoka. Tradition has it that Asoka sent one person by name Mahadeva to these parts of the country on a missionary assignment, for the propagation of Buddha Dharma. He is supposed to have laid the foundation of the complex, which in course of time has become a *Mahastupa*. The discovery of a polished Asokan pillar with partly obliterated Edict is significant in this context. In the case of most of other major *stupas* also

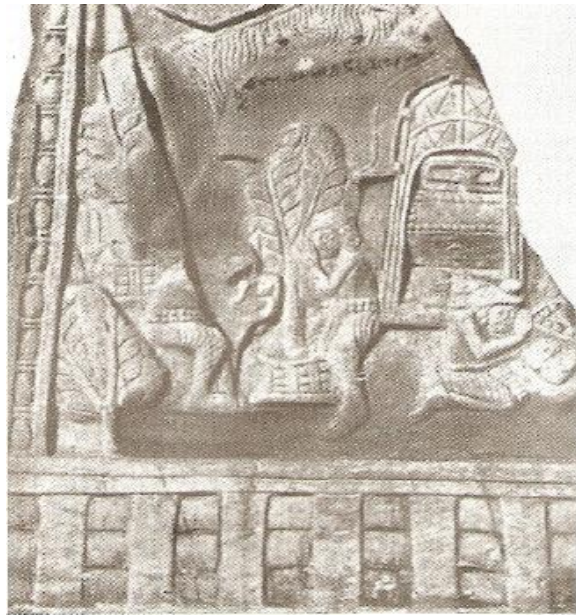
pillars planted by Asoka have become component parts as at Saranath and Sanchi.

First Phase: Mauryan

During the Mauryan times, the *stupa* at Amaravati was of modest proportions. It was enclosed in a railing of granite uprights, which had the typical Mauryan polish. Also the small inscriptions on these uprights are attributed to the 3rd century B.C., on the grounds of Paleography. The inscriptions refer to these granite uprights as *thabho* or *stambha*. A one line inscription is associated with the symbol of *Triratna*.

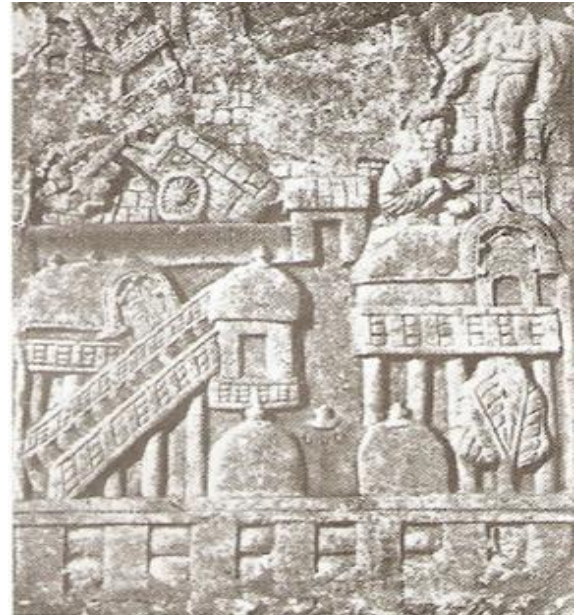
Second Phase: Post Asokan

In the second phase, which is post Asokan in time a number of Buddhist monastic establishments have come up in Andhradesa, including the lower Krishna valley. This phase is represented by a large number of donations made by common people, local guilds etc. The donations were in the form of architectural members and sculptured panels. There are indications that the *stupa* of the Asokan times underwent an enlargement. Also the granite railing of the Asokan times was replaced by limestone railing.



A foliated *Bodhi-tree* is carved in front of the *stupa*. The *Bodhi-tree* was placed inside a four barred railing. The inscription below the *stupa*, but adjacent to the *Vriksha-chaitya* reads ‘*Koramuchakana Nalarajabhasa*’⁴.

Belonging to the second phase of development of the *stupa* at Amaravati a few pillar fragments containing sculptures and inscribed with label inscriptions are found. One such pillar with scenes related to the Buddhist pantheon has been discovered, which has a great significance in the Buddhist art of Amaravati. It is from these initial beginnings, the Amaravati art records strides of development as seen in the sculptures of the limestone stele and the *Yakshi* figures, which are presently displayed in the Archaeological Site Museum, at Amaravati. It is interesting that the Stele displays scenes connected with the life of Buddha at Vaisali and Sravasti, in addition to Kusinagara, where the *Mahaparinirvana* of the Buddha took place. Also present on the stele a scene depicting *Dhanyakataka* on the right bank of the Krishna.



Source: *Scenes on the Stele, Amaravati*, (pl. no. III A & B, Amaravati by H.sarkar and S.P. Nainar, 1992)

Third Phase: Satavahana

This phase of development of the *stupa* of Amaravati is assigned to the Satavahana period. It was during this period that we find the western Indian art traditions on

the sculpture and the architectural forms of the *stupa*. It must be noted that these art traditions have already entered the *Dhanyakataka* region even before the region formed part of the Satavahana empire. This phase is characterized by excellence in technical skill

and plastic beauty. Indeed during this period itself the *Mahachaitya* has taken a highly impressive form with the addition of a veneer of sculptured panels depicting *stupas* and various other motifs. The rail was perhaps replaced by carved and highly ornamental one, which contained a number of relief sculptures and elegant designs. It is during this period that a large number of sculptured panels formed part of the *stupa* and the railing. It is said that the *ayaka*-platforms have come up in this period itself.

This artistic efflorescence might have had a few sub phases also. It is stated that a part of the railing was replaced or renovated during the time of Siri Sivamaka Sada of the Sada dynasty. The inscription of Sivamaka

Sada is found engraved on a bit of rail belonging to the Mature phase. Another land mark is the gift of the Wheel of Dharma located at the western gate of the *Mahachaitya*, which was installed during the time of Vasisthiputra Pulumavi (91-118 A.D.)⁵.

During this period, the dome portion of the *stupa* was also covered by sculptured panels. One such panel which is about 2.39 meters in height is placed in the reserve collection of the Museum and this bears an inscription of Yajna Sri Satakarni (170-198 A.D.) according to the chronology we adopted⁶. It is observed that the dome slab cited above has some carvings which lag behind the Mature phase of the Amaravati art.



(Source: Votive slab showing a Stupa, Amaravati, (fig. 98, *The Art of Indian Asia; Its Mythology and Transformations*, vol. 2, plates; by H. Zimmer, 1968)

Fourth Phase: The Ikshvaku Period

There is no line of demarcation between the Satavahana and the Ikshvaku phases of the development of the Amaravati art at *Dhanyakataka*. It is stated that some of the drum-slabs with minute and intricate carvings could be assigned to this phase. Also

a number of small *stupas*, brick built, have come up in this phase. On some of the relief sculptures carved in the form of slabs we find four cross-bars in the railings. However, so far no upright is found with four mortises.

Fifth Phase: Early Pallava to Late Medieval

This is a period which spans a period of a thousand years from 4th century A.D. to 14th century A.D. During this period the *Mahachaitya* undoubtedly was a centre of attraction. However, by about 5th-6th century A.D., there was a decline in the Buddhist sangha as is known from the travel account of Hieun Tsang. Also the number of inscriptions referring to the donations to the *Mahachaitya* and the sangha also falls sharply. Belonging to the post Ikshvaku times, a few Bronze images belonging to 5th-6th century A.D. are preserved in the Government Museum, Madras. Also we come across limestone images of Tara and other divinities during this period.

Hieun Tsang, 7th century Chinese traveller mentions that at *Dhanyakataka*, he saw 'a crowd of Buddhist monasteries but most of them were deserted'. During this period a number of images of Buddha have come up. We cannot imagine these images without the associated shrine chambers. There are evidences that *Dhanyakataka* continued to be a centre of Buddhism till about 10th century A.D. Belonging to this period, we have images made on limestone and granite. Iconographically they can be identified as the Buddha in *Bhumisparsamudra*, *Simhanada Avalokitesvara* and *Manjughosa*, exhibited in the Government Museum, Madras.

Significance of Ayaka-platforms

The *ayaka*-platforms in the four cardinal directions carried five *ayaka*-pillars each. Regarding the significance of the *ayaka*-pillars, it is stated that they symbolize the five important events in the life of Buddha. They are the Birth, the Renunciation, the Enlightenment, the First Sermon and the Extinction. Alternately another view popular among some of the scholars is that these *ayaka*-pillars symbolically represent the five Dhyanī Buddhas namely *Akshobhya*, *Vairochana*, *Amitabha*, *Ratna Sambhava* and *Amogāsiddhi*. It is considered that the five Buddhas embody the Mandala and each one of them rules over a direction "Vairochana- the Sun or the brilliant- is at the centre *Akshobhya* - the Unshakable - is in the East, The *Ratnasambhava* - Jewel birth, is in the South, *Amitabha* - Infinite light - is in the East and *Amogāsiddhi* - Attainment that is not void is in the North. The Jina Buddhas are expressions of the world in the light of total knowledge that accrues with perfect enlightenment" ⁷

The presence of *ayaka*-platforms is seen at Vaisali. This feature, however, did not form part of the stupa architecture of north India or Deccan. It may be surmised that the Mahasanghikas of Andhra have developed this design of the *stupa* and popularized it across the lower Krishna valley and the vicinities ⁸.

The Buddhist art of the lower Krishna valley influenced the South East Asian Buddhist art, particularly the standing images of Buddha with heavy physique and the robe covering the forearm along with the Abhayamudra of the right arm have influenced the art of South East Asia. Also the Urna, a circular mark on the forehead of the images of Buddha of Krishna valley along with a topknot of the hair have been adopted by the South East Asian Buddhist establishments. The Bronze images of Buddha excavated in Celebes and in Malaya along with the Pong-Tuk Bronzes of Thailand datable to 5th Century A.D., recall features common to the Buddha images of Amaravati. At Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka, particularly the Runaveli stupa is adorned with images of Buddha which received similar influence. The rock paintings at Sihagiri dated to 5th Century A.D. are abundant in images of Buddha, which received similar influence. Thus, the Buddhist art that was developed at Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda had a deep impact on the art of South East Asia and Srilanka⁹.

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