

## Śilpa and Its Education in Ancient India

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In ancient India various kinds of activities were evolved to fulfill the basic needs of the people. All the works needed some or other kind of skill was known as *śilpa* (crafts) or *kalā* (art). It includes preparing of artifacts or tools, making of houses, sculptures, pottery or composing of poetry, dance, music and drama or doing some other kind of work which needs skill.

The first direct reference to *śilpa* occurs in the Vedic literature. In the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* the term *śilpa* is used in a very wide sense of wonderful divine and human activities supposed to be born in the knowledge.<sup>1</sup> *Kauśatakī Brāhmaṇa* refers to three kinds of *śilpas*: *gīta* (singing), *vāditra* (music), and *nṛtya* (dancing).<sup>2</sup> On the basis of many other references R.N. Misra states that in the Vedic literature the word *śilpa* is referred to for various activities like rites and rituals, artistic, work, manual work and crafts.<sup>3</sup> According to Stella Kramrish the meaning of the word *śilpa* is variegated artistic work, comprising art, skill, craft, ingenuity, rite and ritual, form and creation.<sup>4</sup> *Bṛhaspati Smṛti* defines a craftsman or *śilpin* as one who is proficient in art (*kalābhijñā*) and fashions work from gold, *kūpya*, threads, wood, stone, or leather.<sup>5</sup> Here the term is used as synonym to *śilpa*. At another place *śilpa* is also called *vijñāna*.<sup>6</sup> Generally in Sanskrit literature words like *śilpa*, *kalā* and *vijñāna* have the same meanings and significance which denote doing anything skilfully but in specific term superior or high quality of *śilpa* such as poetry and drama, dance and music, sculpture, architecture and painting which were distinguished as superior to others were called *kalās*. Ancient Indian literature provides us numerous lists of the eighteen or more *śilpas* and the sixty four *kalās*.<sup>7</sup> The *Śilpa Prakāśa* refers to five kinds of *śilpas* : wood, stone, gold work and painting<sup>8</sup>. In the *Triṣaṣṭiśalākāpuruṣa-caritra* also there is a list of five *śilpas*, those of the potter, architect, painter, weaver and barber<sup>9</sup>. In the *Vāstu Sūtra Upaniṣad* the word *śilpa* denotes sculpture.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, from the above it appears that in the beginning there was no basic difference between *kalā* (arts) and *śilpa* (crafts) as both the terms were used for

the same meaning. Later on *śilpas* and *kalās* were listed separately as eighteen *śilpas* and sixty-four *kalās*. In the early texts the term *śilpa* is used in a very wider sense as mentioned in the Vedic literature but in later texts, *śilpa* mainly implies crafts or skill and occupation (*vṛtti*), and in a specific sense it means art, sculpture or image making.<sup>11</sup> Then term *śilpa* is used for all the crafts as an adjective in general and for the sculptural art in particular.

A large number of arts, crafts and occupations are represented by many archaeological remains, sculptures and also referred to in literature and epigraphic records. This art technology because of its rudimentary nature was unchanged for a long time, until man reached from the Paleolithic to the Mesolithic and to the Neolithic and then to the Chalcolithic age when measure refinements in tool making are observed. The settlements of village and downs began to appear. The wheel was invented and now man was able to make potteries, ornaments, tools and weapons, houses and shrines etc. Perhaps he must have composed poetry in some form of religion and a rudimentary philosophy. He had developed sense of art and invented languages and writings.<sup>12</sup>

The art and crafts of Indus civilization represented by the uniform weights and measurements, sculptures, terracottas, engraved seals and sealings of different shapes and sizes, the evidences of workshops of bead makers, potters, copper and bronze workers, stone masons show the presence of high quality of skilled persons during that period.<sup>13</sup> Vedic society was both agrarian and pastoral in nature. We find references to wood, metal and leather workers, chariot, rope and bow makers, carpenters, painters, dyers, weavers, barbers, potters, smiths, musicians and other artisans in Vedic literature.<sup>14</sup> The *Jātakas* always refer to the standard number of 18 important crafts (*sippas*) like wood workers, smiths, leather workers, painters, stone and ivory workers, weavers, jewellers, potters, bow and arrow makers etc.<sup>15</sup> These arts and crafts are mentioned also in *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata*.<sup>16</sup> Later on from the Mauryan to Gupta and medieval periods many other crafts also developed and are referred to in contemporary literature and epigraphs.<sup>17</sup> About 150 crafts were known to the *Purāṇas*.<sup>18</sup>

Though in ancient India art and crafts developed and attained a much higher status, ancient Indian literature and epigraphical sources do not provide us with much evidence on *śilpa* education. An important factor for the development of art and craft in ancient India was that the young generation was trained by the

elderly skilled persons. Artisans and craftsmen were properly trained in their skill by parents in the family or by guilds or by individual masters or by educational institutions. Mostly hereditary training was popular among the artisans and architects. They learned their specialized fine-arts and crafts from their parents. It was the most convenient way of learning. Generally, the profession of the father was adopted by the son, as it was easy to accept. Thus, technical skill and accumulated experience descended from generation to generation. They were also attached to the master-craftsmen and like in *Gurukula* system they stayed with their teacher during the training period. There are several evidences that a trainee lived with his teacher. According to *Bṛhaspati Smṛti* for learning such arts and crafts and works in metal, dancing etc. one should stay at teacher's house.<sup>19</sup>

In order to get advance knowledge and specilization, the artisans were required to go through some sort of intensive training also. A new learner of a craft was known as *antevāsī*. For the first time the term *antevāsī* occurs in the *Aṣṭādhyāyī* of Pāṇinī, where it stands for a 'mere beginner'.<sup>20</sup> At another place Pāṇinī also refers to an *antevāsī* whose name was derived from that of his teacher.<sup>21</sup>

The *Jātakas* frequently refer to an apprentice of a craft and also record paying fees to the teacher.<sup>22</sup> Sometimes *antevāsī* excelled his master in skill.<sup>23</sup> According to *Mahāvagga* apprentice lived with the teacher as a family member and both stood to each other like father and son.<sup>24</sup>

During the Kuṣāṇa and Gupta periods Mathura was a great centre of manufacturing sculptural objects. Many images were produced and transported to other places of the country. Some epigraphs refer to a school of craftsmen (*śilpin*) existed at Mathura. Various inscriptions provide names of artisans and their fathers who were engaged in the same profession. A Yakṣa statue from Parkham (Mathura) preserves an inscription in Brāmhī script of Śuṅga period which informs that the image was carved by Gomitaka, who was the son of Kuṇika. The inscription engraved near the feet of the image refers to the construction of the statue (*katā* i.e. *kṛtā*) by the sculptor Gomitaka described as the *antevāsī* (a commonly used term for student or pupil studying at his teacher's house) of the master Kuṇika.<sup>25</sup> Another figure of Yakṣī, named as Lāyāva, which was locally worshipped as Manasā Devī reported from Naglā-Jhīngā in Mathura district also bears an inscription on the pedestal, which records that the statue was made by Nāka, the *antevāsī*, resident pupil, of the Kuṇika.<sup>26</sup>

Thus, from the above mentioned two inscriptions we come to know that there was a master craftsman in Mathura, namely Kuṇika who had trained Gomita, as well as his disciple Nāka in sculptural art and that these two sculptors produced the images of the famous Yakṣa (from Parkham) and Lāyāva Yakṣiṇī respectively. The school of sculpture established by the master-craftsman Kuṇika at Mathura was very famous in its locality and produced earliest statues of male and female devinities and the master's home served as a training school and workshop of learners.

One early statue of Bodhisattva, belonging to Mathura school of art, was discovered at Śrāvastī. On its pedestal there was a five line inscription which records that this Bodhisattva image was carved by Sivamitra, an artist of Mathura.<sup>27</sup> Another example of a father and son, two famous sculptors Sri Satana and his son Citanaka, is mentioned by C. Sivaramamurti in his book (Indian Sculpture, p. 5). Both were efficient in their profession. He also refers to a sculpture in the bas-relief of the temples at Khajurāho. The scene represents a master sculptor at work with a number of apprentices surrounding him. There are few sculptures depicting teaching scenes also. A panel on *Jagatī* (south) of Lakṣmaṇa Temple at Khajurāho shows a teacher drawing on a stone slate and is surrounded by trainees.<sup>28</sup> There is a stone inscription of 10<sup>th</sup> century A.D. reported from Gaṛha (Rajasthan) which provides the names of a family of architects and well skilled sculptors. The inscription records that Ardrala, a proficient sculptor, trained his son Deddulaka in this art and his son Sarvadeva learned fine-arts at the feet of his father.<sup>29</sup>

The study of various titles and designation like *Sūtradhāra*, *Śilpī*, *Vijñānika*, *Pītalahāra* and others and their association with the artists and monuments of Khajuraho shows that the family was the basic unit for the necessary training of the artists and professional competence. Many such families are mentioned in the Chandella inscriptions. The names of Somarāja and his two sons : Mahārāja who was a śilpī and Devarāja who was a *rūpakāra*; Jayasimha and Pratapasimha, the two brother; Padma, his brother and father mentioned in the Kalanjara inscription; *citrakāra* Sātana, his son Chitananka and the later's wife; Ayaskāra Dāge (Gange), his son Vijñānika Kukem and grandson Kikaka; Pālhana, son of Rājapāla, all occur in the Chandella inscriptions. They all were master-sculptors. The study also reveals that a hierarchical structure existed among the artists of Khajurāho and there was mobility from one position to the other indicating successive rise of

status in an ascending order from *rūpakāra* to *śilpi* and *vijñānika* and finally to *sūtradhāra*. Pālhana is mentioned in six Chandella inscriptions chronologically as *pītalakāra* (v.s.1223), *śilpī* (v.s.1228), *vijñānika*, *vaidagdhī viśvakramā* (v.s.1232), *śilpi* and *vaidagdhī viśvaskarmā* (v.s.1236) and finally again as a *pītalakāra* (v.s. 1239). This indicates that Pālhana was eqally proficient in metal as well as in stone crafts and he was holding various positions and titles. The study also shows continuation of the same profession from generation to generation in the family.<sup>30</sup>

The artists were also trained by various educational institutions like those at Taxila and at other places which were working as centre of higher learning in different fields. The guilds also played a key role in imparting technical training to apprentices. The individual Masters also gave technical training of the crafts to the apprentices. These apprentices learnt their craft under their Master's guidance and supervision. The Masters provides them boarding and lodging without taking any remuneration but on the cost of their labour offered during the period of training. The *Nāradaśmṛti* (c. 4<sup>th</sup> century CE) records that a young person has to take permission from his relations before initiation into certain craft by an individual Master. He was required to live with the Master and the duration of apprenticeship was fixed.<sup>31</sup> The *Bṛhat-saṁhitā* records that he who has learned crafts relating to gold, base metal and the like, worked at his teacher's house.<sup>32</sup>

In due course of time certain rules and regulations were formulated for such institutions, which were giving training and vocational education. These rules as mentioned in *Śmṛtis*, were bindings on the Master and Pupil both. According to Nārada if a young man wishes to be initiated into the art of his own craft, i.e. the craft of his own choice, he must first take permission of his guardian or relation and then proceed to live with his Master and get training for a certain period of time which should be decided prior to admission.<sup>33</sup> During the training period the Master would not only impart training to his pupil in his own house but also provide fooding and must treat him like a son.<sup>34</sup>

A teacher should not exploit his pupil's skill and labour. He must not engage his pupil on such work which is not related to his training.<sup>35</sup> He should not treat the learner as a hired labourer and teach him honestly without hiding any secrets of knowledge and craft. There should not be a breach of contract between the Teacher and the pupil. The apprentice should be humble before his teacher and he should never desert his Master during his training period otherwise the pupil

will be liable to corporal punishment and confinement. However the pupil could desert the Master on some valid grounds.<sup>36</sup> In the same way the Master should never neglect teaching crafts to the apprentice. According to Kātyāyana, if a Master neglects his pupil and does not show interest in the training, he should be fined and pupil in such a case was free to withdraw himself from the training.<sup>37</sup> According to Yājñavalkya and Nārada, the pupil should not leave his teacher even if he had completed his training before time. He should stay and work for his teacher and the profit of the work done by him during that period would go to his teacher as a remuneration of free boarding, lodging and tuition fees.<sup>38</sup> It appears that if the art could not be learnt by the pupil within the stipulated period, usually the term of the apprenticeship was extended.<sup>39</sup>

If the Master wished to retain the apprentice who had successfully completed his course, he would fix remuneration befitting his qualifications, and ask to stay with him and not to accept appointment elsewhere.<sup>40</sup> There is a reference in *Kuṣa Jātaka* (no. 531) which states that the master rewarded intelligent and meritorious apprentices one thousand *kārsāpanas* each.

Thus, on the basis of above we can say that many *śilpas* were evolved and developed in ancient India. The art and crafts reached a point of perfection in due course of time because in fact there was a system by which the young people were trained first individually by their parents in the family and thereafter some of them specialised under the master-craftsmen in the *Gurukula* like system. Certain rules and regulations were formulated for such institutions which were binding on the learner and the teacher both. The artists were holding various titles and there was a hierarchy among them moving from one position to the other. Sometimes an artist was not only proficient in stone but was expert also in wood and metal work.

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