

## Eco-Friendly Ancient Indian Art and Its Social Relevance

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Nature, i.e. *Prakṛti* is omnipresent and omnipotent and hence Indian religion and philosophy from the Vedic times talked about the nature and its importance.<sup>1</sup> Nature existed even before the appearance of human being. Human life in global context has evolved in close intimacy with trees, plants and flowers and in equal measure with animals, birds and reptiles. The flora and fauna forming Nature with water, fire, earth, sky and wind (*pañca-tattva* – five primeval elements) occupy a substantial and integrated (*samprkta*) place in the total plethora of Indian Art.<sup>2</sup> Virtually Indian art is the integrated visual manifestation of human and non-human forms. Also Indian art since its beginning developed in the backdrop of and in association with Nature to transmit in nonverbal language the strong message that human world could exist only with Nature.

Our ancient scriptures are full of such references, which indicate not only the importance of earth, tree, water, animal, plant for our survival but also make them sacred objects of worship. Their sacredness and thereby reverence in the mind and heart of the people automatically stopped them from causing any damage to the Nature and also encouraged them for its preservation for the survival and sustenance of the entire humanity.

The *Śāntimantra* of *Yajurveda* mentions about the *Śānti* (pacification) of earth and vegetation world – *Prṥthvīḥ śānti, Vanaspatayaḥ śānti*. The *Atharvaveda* says that the earth is our Mother and we all are her sons:

*Mātā bhūmi putrohaṁ pṛthvyāḥ*

*Atharvaveda, 12.1.12*

In another reference of *Atharvaveda* it is said that whatever the portion of

land (*bhūmi*) we dig, it should immediately be filled properly otherwise that will hurt the heart of the earth (Mother):

*Yatte bhūme vikhanāmi kṣipram tadapi rohatu*

*Mā te marma vimṛgvari, mā te hṛdayamarpiptam*

*Atharvaveda, 12.1.35*

We all are aware of the tree and animal worship in ancient India which continues even today in the worship of cow (*savatsa go*), snake (especially on *nāgapañcamī*), two fishes (*mīnamithuna* – suggestive of *yugala*), elephant like animals and reptiles and *Nīma*, *Pīpala*, *Tulasī* and *Vaṭa* trees. The traditional concept of *Kalpavṛkṣa*, that is, 'wish fulfilling tree' is also well known. By the worship of animals and trees and their representations in Indian Art from the time of Indus Valley civilization through the centuries, the perennial importance of Nature is automatically reinforced. Some of them are included also in the list of auspicious symbols and the National emblem of India (four back to back lions) and state emblem of Uttar Pradesh (a pair of fish).

Another interesting point is that Indian gods and goddesses like – Śiva, Viṣṇu, Brahmā, Indra, Vāyu, Varuṇa, Durgā, Gaṇeśa, Kārttikeya, Kāmadeva, Sarasvatī-Gaṅgā-Yamunā (deification of river goddesses since water is *Āpa-prāṇa tattva* – life essence) and Buddha and Jaina Tīrthaṅkaras are invariably associated with flora and fauna mainly as their mount (*vāhana*) or cognizance (*cinha*) and as attributes to be shown in their hands, excepting the figures of Buddha and Tīrthaṅkaras. For example, Lotus is shown in the hand/hands of Sūrya, Lakṣmī, Viṣṇu, Sarasvatī and *ikṣudhanu* (bow made of sugarcane) and five arrows made of different flowers with Kāmadeva (god of love) and cock with Kārttikeya. In most of the cases, the individual identity of Brahmanical deities and Jaina Tīrthaṅkaras rest mainly on the *vāhanas* (or cognizances) and attributes (*āyudhas*) drawn from the world of flora and fauna.

The present paper proposes to discuss above and some other points pertaining to importance of Nature in terms of specific examples of Indian art to underline how Indian art could be useful in building ecologically sustainable society today. These are important since we in the present live around those images for the sake of our faith and look at them for aesthetic appreciation, worship and inspiration. The paper aims at understanding the present through the strength of past to get acceptability of the importance of Nature in the

society in the backdrop of faith (*āsthā*), religion (*dharma*) and its visual manifestations (*kalā*). We all live in present with traditions and tangible (*mūrta*) and intangible (*amūrta*) heritage of past moving around us in the forms of our rites, rituals, fairs, festivals and worship in temples or of images. We cannot think of any present without past. Our National emblem and key-line (*bīja-vākya*) – *satyameva jayate* on it are from past. The chanting of verses, drawing of *svastika* and keeping *kalaśa* full of water in every kind of *pūjā* (worship) today are the heritage of past only.

For showing the impact and inseparability of Nature, I have chosen some examples from different places and belonging to different periods and faith. They are – the Lion Pillar of Aśoka at Sarnath, the masterpiece of Gupta art showing Buddha in preaching posture (*dharmacakra-pravartana-mudrā*) and the images of Lakṣmī, Kāmadeva and Gommateśvara Bāhubalī. I shall show not only the assimilation of nature into divine and human forms but also their vital communication in non-verbal language of art.

The Sarnath Lion Pillar of 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE (Fig.1) is on exhibit in the Archaeological Museum, Sarnath.<sup>3</sup> It has some unique features due to which it had been chosen to become the National emblem of Indian Republic. It is wonderful example to show how past is turned into present. However, I shall deal only with the presence of Nature in Aśokan pillar and also discuss how the inscription of Aśoka on it helps in understanding the purpose of presence of four back-to-back sitting lions at its top. If we remove Nature, i.e. lotus, horse, bull, elephant and lions, nothing would remain and the meaning and very purpose of its installation will be lost. Through the small figures of four animals – elephant, horse, bull and lion, four main events from the life of Buddha were suggested. However, the presence of four back-to-back ferocious lion figures as its



Fig.1: Lion Pillar Capital of Aśoka, Sarnath (U.P.), now in Archaeological Museum, Sarnath, 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE.

capital was interpreted in different ways by the scholars. But if we take into consideration the Aśokan inscription, which is a royal edict, its context becomes clear. The inscription gives the command of Aśoka against causing any harm to Buddhist organization (*saṃgha*).<sup>4</sup> The figures of four ferocious lions hence seem to indicate the royal power of Aśoka and with this his firm desire for the spread of Buddha's preachings in all the directions.

Another and again unique image is Gupta period (5<sup>th</sup> century CE) image of Buddha sitting in meditative posture in *dharmacakra-pravartana-mudrā* (Fig.2). This image is also procured from Sarnath and is preserved in Archaeological Museum, Sarnath. Besides iconographic and aesthetic features, it also reveals wonderful assimilation of Nature in the rendering of halo which is of



Fig.2: Preaching Buddha *dharmacakrapravartana-mudrā*, Sarnath, now in Archaeological Museum, Sarnath, 5<sup>th</sup> century CE.

exceptional grace and beauty created by undulating creepers flowing all around, suggesting unceasing flow of energy and life. If we remove this halo showing the creepers, the image does not remain that graceful. I have virtually done it in the photograph given here in illustration.

The other important point in this image is the presence of two deer on the pedestal which flank the central *dharmacakra*

symbolizing here the *dharmā* in command. Let us understand the reason for the presence of deer close to *dharmacakra*. What could be the ultimate objective of the preachings of Buddha or any other preceptor or Guru? Obviously it would be to tell the means and ways to attain Peace of mind leading to the Peace of body, family, society, nation and the world. In inanimate stone what better animal than deer could have suggested the ultimate outcome of the preachings of Buddha which by all means was Peace? (Incidentally the cognizance of the

16<sup>th</sup> Jaina Tīrthāṅkara Śāntinātha is also deer (*mṛga*), which was befitting the name Śāntinātha denoting Peace). Here element of Nature becomes suggestive words and this is the beauty of the image. I have noted that such vital communication of art travelled beyond our today's narrow sectarian feelings and regional boundaries. As a result, this suggestive motif was assimilated in the Jina images of western India from 11<sup>th</sup> century CE onwards. I have found likewise two deer flanking the *dharmacakra* in the centre of the pedestal of all the Jina images from Western India at Kumbhāriyā and Delvāḍā. Here also the suggestion is the same that the ultimate outcome of the preachings of the Jinas is the attainment of Peace, which alone could be the key instrument of harmony and progress of the people irrespective of caste, creed and region. This was the reality of the past which now is more relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the age of conflict, misunderstanding and the violence based on creed, caste and region. Thus, the images of past become relevant in the present for all of us.

Now we shall talk about the figures of Lakṣmī and Kāmadeva who were popularly represented at many sites. These are merely two examples out of many which reveal that if the elements of Nature associated with the deities in the forms of attributes, features and *vāhanas* are withdrawn, the images shall lose their individual identity. Lakṣmī, the goddess of prosperity, seated on lotus is shown with lotuses in two hands, while two elephants in her

*Abhiṣekalakṣmī* form lustrate her with water pitcher, best expressed at Sāñchī, Ellorā (Fig.3), Khajurāho and Mahābalipuram. The lotus and elephants both elements of Nature symbolize wealth and fullness of life to match with the concept and function of Lakṣmī as goddess of abundance (*samṛddhī*).

On the other hand, Kāmadeva, the god of love, is shown as carrying five arrows made of five different flowers



Fig.3: Abhiṣekalakṣmī, cave 16 (Kailāśa temple), Ellorā (Maharashtra), 8<sup>th</sup> century CE.

(*pañcaśara*) like lotus *aśoka*, *āmra* and bow made of sugarcane (*ikṣudhanu*) with *makaradhvaja* (flag topped by *makara*). Such images are found at Khajurāho, Halebid, Jinanāthpur (Fig.4). These attributes taken from Nature are indicative of the sweetness (*mādhurya*) and power of love personified by Kāmadeva. In *Āyurveda* also the importance of *makaradhvaja* in respect of power of *kāma* is described.

Another rare example of Nature coming closer to human body to become integral part of image is the Bāhubalī (or Gommaṭeśvara as he is called in southern tradition) images coming as they do from Bādāmī, Aihole, Deogarh, Khajurāho, Bilhari, Ellorā, Śatruñjaya, Kumbhāriyā, Śravaṇabelgola, Kārkal, Veļūr, Moodbidri, Karaikoyil and many other places in North and South India from about 7<sup>th</sup> century CE onwards.<sup>5</sup> Bāhubalī occupies a singularly venerated position in Jaina tradition and worship and hence in visual art. He was not a Jina or Tīrthaṅkara, but was merely

the son of first Jina Ṛṣhabhanātha. His unceasing faith in and observance of *ahiṃsā*, austerity and absolute renunciation inspired the Jainas to worship Bāhubalī who as a result, became a powerful symbol as well as a personification of the peace, non-acquisition, renunciation and austerity preached by the Jinas.<sup>6</sup> He stood motionless in *kāyotsarga-mudrā* for one whole year at one place when creepers entwined all his body and snakes, lizards and scorpions also crawled on the body. These representational features distinctly suggest the long passage of time in which Bāhubalī was absorbed in *tapas*. These features also symbolize



Fig.4: Kāmadeva, west facade, Śāntinatha temple, Jinanāthapur, Śravaṇabelgola, 12<sup>th</sup> century CE.

the intimate relationship and co-existence of Man and Nature.<sup>7</sup>

The images of Bāhubalī could also be viewed today with a new awareness in the context of our serious ecological concern for peaceful survival of humanity. It was perhaps due to above reason that the tallest image (of CE 983, monolithic, 58 ft. in height) ever carved in ancient India was of Gommateśvara Bāhubalī who was so close to Nature. This image is at Śravaṇabelgola (Fig.5) in Karnataka.

In a rare open air large rock-cut panel at Mahābalipuram (Tamilnadu), I could notice both the indication of time and presence of Nature. This brilliant Gaṅgāvatarāṇa panel (Fig.6) of Pallava period is datable to 7<sup>th</sup> century CE.<sup>8</sup> In the centre of the cliff there is a gap showing *nāga* figures which are flowing downward

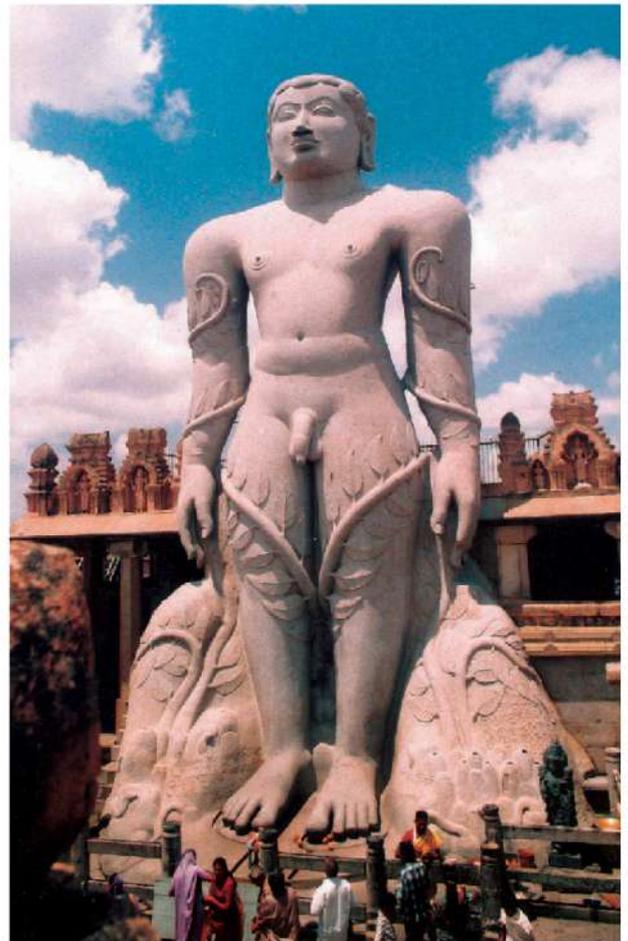


Fig.5: Gommateśvara Bāhubalī, Śravaṇabelgola (Hassan, Karnataka), CE 983.

to suggest descent of Gaṅgā on the earth. On ground level, on its right bank two figures are shown of which one is carrying water-pitcher (*kalaśa*) having *Gaṅgājala* while other one is squeezing water from his long hair after taking bath in the Gaṅgā. However, two other male figures are shown in two different gestures of *Sūrya-namaskāra*. One is in

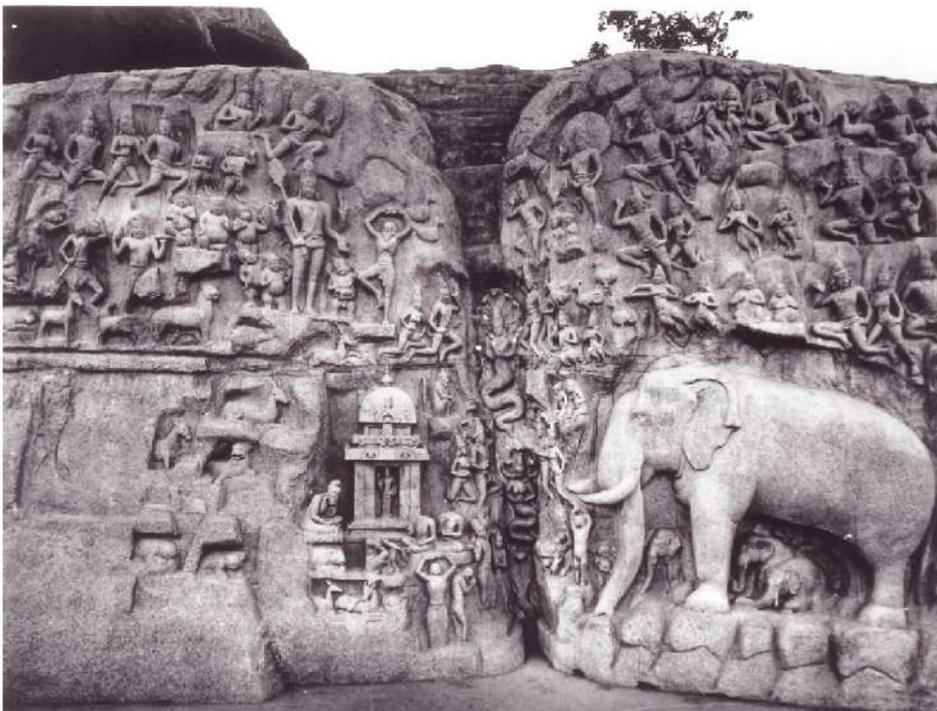


Fig.6: Gaṅgāvatarāṇa panel, Mahābalipuram (Chingelpet, Tamilnadu) 7<sup>th</sup> century CE.

*namaskāra-mudrā* while the other one is having both the hands being raised above the head with open palms facing sky and their fingers touching each other. These figures distinctly suggest that this Gaṅgāvatarāṇa panel represents the normal religious activities on the bank of Gaṅgā in the morning hours. It has also renderings of the figures of elephants (in group with baby elephants), deer and tiger to give impact befitting the occasion of penance of Bhagīratha and descent of Gaṅgā on the earth – Gaṅgāvatarāṇa.

Indian Art, thus, in all its magnitude and manifestations has always been eco-friendly imbibing the elements of Nature for giving specific meaning and identity to the forms in sculptures/icons. Besides, Nature has always beautified the sculptures and provided relevant backdrop. We may look at the plethora of Indian Art from the view point that it does represent the life and thought of the past to serve as the ideal model for the present and therefore all such visual examples become relevant for all of us today. Indian Art through and through gives perennial message for all of us today to live with nature and become eco-friendly to ensure our own existence.

## References

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4. D.C. Sircar, *Select Inscriptions*, Vol.I, Delhi, 1993 (reprint), pp.72-73, 'Minor Pillar Edicts of Ashoka', Inscription no.36; *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol.8. Aśoka's firm desire for the spread of Buddha's preachings is suggested through bigger wheel – indicative of Buddha's presence – shown above the lion figures; now kept in restored form in the Sarnath Museum close to the lion capital.
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