

Maurya-Śunga Sculptures

Dr. T.K. Biswas

The art of the Maurya period owes to a large extent to the personality of King Aśoka (Ca. 272-232 B.C.). He is known to have unified politically greater part of India under one sceptre and he gave India a strong centralised administration. Peaceful atmosphere pervaded the period and there was practically no possibility of foreign aggression. After the devastating war of Kalinga, Aśoka adopted Buddhism and he contemplated a new world order based on non-violence and universal well-being and these concepts were found reflected in the contemporary art.

The Mauryan period witnessed the earliest phase of historic sculptures. The said period also witnessed the use of stone, the use of permanent material for its sculptural expressions. It appears that the artistic activities of pre-Mauryan days were carried out with perishable materials such as clay, wood and bamboo which failed to survive. By carving stone, the Mauryan period ushered in a dramatic change. Mauryan sculptors chiefly used a kind of sandstone quarried from Chunar. Recent explorations and excavations laid bare a workshop in the vicinity of a village Baragaon, four kilometers south of Chunar railway station in the Mirzapur district of Uttar Pradesh which is scattered with unfinished or partially finished sandstone columns.

Remarkable examples of stone sculptures belonging mostly to 3rd century B.C. have been discovered. These discoveries posed a difficult question. Earlier there was no tradition of stone carvings. After the fall of Harappan culture, sculpturally there had been a big hiatus. Mauryan sculptors worked on stone and without any previous experience, the sculptors produced sculptures with commendable excellence. How was it possible? Some scholars argued that it could be possible with expertise borrowed from the neighbouring countries with whom the Indian rulers including Aśoka maintained friendly relations. Master sculptors and lay artists were brought from the Achaemenid Persia by Aśoka and they were commissioned for carving pillars and capitals on them.

During Aśoka's rule a number of free standing pillars were made with different types of capital at various places of north-eastern India and visibly these differ from the Achaemenian pillars. The Achaemenian pillars were never made free standing. They are shown carrying the roofs of big halls, of palaces and mosques. Aśokan pillars are free-standing and monolithic while the Achaemenians were made of sectional stones. The latter has a base while Aśokan pillars are without any base. The shaft of Aśokan pillar is plain while the Achaemenian pillars are fluted. In spite of these visible differences there are elements in Aśokan pillar which hailed from alien countries. These include the twisted rope design below the abacus, relieved with non-

Indian floral and vegetable motifs such as acanthus, honey suckle, rosette, palmette etc. The placing of animals on capital is also taken as an impact from the Achaemenid Persia. Certain scholars also believed that the technique of glossy polish on Aśokan pillars was imbibed from the same source. This notion has, however, been strongly challenged and it was proved that the technique was indigenous (Indian).

The tall (about 50 feet), tapering and circular in section the Aśokan pillars were found from Meerut, Topra, Sankisa, Allahabad, Sarnath, Sanchi, Rampurva, Lauriya Nandangarh, Lauriya Auraraj, Basarh Bakhira, Rummindei, Nigalisagar and so on. Of the pillars, the Basarh Bakhira and the Rampurva pillar with full capital are found uninscribed. Besides, the stunted size of the pillar and the uncomfortable sitting posture of the crowning lion led a few scholars to consider the pillar of Basarh Bakhira as of pre-Mauryan period. The Rummindei and Nigalisagar pillars are engraved with the dedicatory inscriptions in Brāhmī script. The Basarh Bakhira, Lauriya Nandangarh (Bettiah in Champaran district) and Rampurva (one of the two pillars) are topped by the single figure of a lion. The capital of Sankisa pillar shows the figure of a standing elephant, the capitals of Sarnath and Sanchi are endowed with four addorsed lions, a mutilated capital discovered from Salempur (Muzaffarpur, Bihar) shows four bulls seated back to back. According to some scholars the pillar at Lauriya Auraraj was topped by the figure of a *garuḍa* and the pillar at Rummindei had at its top according to some, a horse while to others, it had the figure of an young elephant.

Scholars differ widely with regard to the related symbolisms of the pillars and the different elements attached to them. Of the pillar capitals, Sarnath lion capital by far drew the attention of maximum number scholars. The wheel which was at the top of the four addorsed lions denotes according to some, a solar disc; to others it stood for Good Law; some take it to denote the Wheel of Law and yet others consider it as referring aniconically the Buddha and the thirty two spokes in the wheel denote the thirty two auspicious marks with which the Buddha was born. There are also scholars who take the wheel at the top of Sarnath capital as symbolising cycle of time or cycle of birth and rebirth and yet there are others to whom this wheel refers to the world conquest of Aśoka. The four addorsed lions, likewise, explained as representing the four noble truths; they are explained elsewhere as representing the Buddha who with a roar preached his sermons to a huge congregation. To some, they constituted a lion throne on which the Buddha as a symbol of wheel is shown seated.

Similarly, the animals i.e. the bull, elephant, horse and lion are endowed with a number of explanations. To some they bear definite Buddhist association. The Buddha was born in Zodiac Taurus (Bull), Buddha's mother dreamt of a white elephant before his conception, Bodhisattva rode on a horse (Kanthaka) during his great departure, and the Buddha was called the lion of Śākya race (Simha). To a

scholar, these animals theriomorphically represented Śiva (bull), Indra (elephant), Durgā (lion) and Sūrya (horse). Some scholars feel that these four animals refer to four Dikpālas viz., Virupākṣa, Virūdhaka, Vaiśravaṇa and Dhṛtarāstra. To others the four animals may also be connected as attributes of Ādinātha (bull), Ajitanātha (elephant), Śambhavanātha (horse) and Mahāvira (lion). To some scholars these animals were not related to any religion. To them they are secular in content and they are there to draw the chariot of a Chakravarti ruler. The wheels on the abacus are provided with hubs and spindles and therefore, they are to be taken as chariot wheels. The element at the bottom of the Sarnath capital includes a sacred pitcher covered with lotus petals suggesting thereby a *pūrṇa-kumbha*.

A stylistic and sculptural analysis shows that of the animals, the lion capital of Basarh Bakhira appears to be the earliest. In course of evolution, the capitals that were executed, had been the elephant on Sankisa and four addorsed bull of Salempur capital. Stylistically, the lion capitals of Lauriya Nandangarh and of Rampurva could be placed next to them and finally, the four addorsed lion of Sanchi and Sarnath were carved. The single lion of Basarh Bakhira capital betrays a lower level of artistic execution. The Sankisa elephant stands with clumsy and wooden coldness. Though vigour and dynamic movements characterised the lion capitals of Lauriya Nandangarh and Rampurva yet in the schematic arrangements of their manes, it appears that these were sufficiently stylised. Comparatively, the figure of standing bull on Rampurva pillar capital was more naturalistically treated; its anatomical perfection, its nervous tension, alert realisation of ears, pent up volume call for its comparison with the bulls on the Indus seals.

The efforts, experiences, and expertise of Mauryan sculptors attained their logical acme in the carving of the lion capital at Sarnath. The four addorsed lions of this capital are characterised while the animals on the abacus are shown in movements with evident realistic approaches. The combination of static rest of the animal atop and the movement down below and the inverted lotus petals with bold incision betray the acumen and heightened expertise attained by the Mauryan sculptors. So far as the animal carvings are concerned, the period witnessed the best production in the figure of the half finished elephant at Dhauli (Orissa). Perhaps, the sculptor intentionally kept the elephant half finished just to show the emergence of the best of elephants (*gajatame*) from the deep clouds behind. The fore parts of this elephant with its volume, mass and movement surpassed other contemporary realisations of animal sculptures. The linear composition of Kalsi elephant, or rows of elephant above the doorway of Lomaśarṣi Cave, the elephant capital of Sankisa or the elephant on the abacus of Sarnath can not stand comparison with the Dhauli elephant.

The period also witnessed the carvings of colossal figures of *yakṣas* and *yakṣīs*. Of such figures mention may be made of *yakṣa* figures from Parkham and Baroda in Mathura, of Pawaya and of Patna. These figures are not only colossal and muscular but stand as symbolic of power. With their monumental size and volume, they appear quite impressive. No less remarkable are the figures of *yakṣī* from Besnagar and Didarganj. These female types appear urbane, sophisticated and classical. The full and rounded plasticity of these females with prominent breasts, narrow waist and broad hips, the delicate bend and the mild stooping they appear modest and attractive.

The Maurya and post-Maurya periods yielded a number of ring stone and these were found scattered in various historical sites from Taxila to Pataliputra (Patna). These stone discs are in certain cases have holes in the middle. Mostly made in Chunar sandstone these betray maximum number of carvings in minimum of space. The decoration includes the floral and vegetal motifs such as palmette, honey-suckle and lotus creepers, the figures of animals and birds both real and mythical, reptiles such as lizards (*godhā*) and allegator (*makara*) and nude female figures, occasionally, attended by worshippers or priests. The nude figure is always shown relieved in strictly frontal and hieratic pose with full breasts and prominently shown vulva; although nude she wears a few jewelleryes. The decoration of these discs were very carefully executed with 'jewel like workmanship and exquisite finish'. Some scholars relate this female figures as representing Earth Goddess, while others connect her with the Śakti cult and specially relate her either to Pārvatī or to Durgā while there are other scholars who take her as representing Śrī or Lakṣmī.

Mauryan art was, to some scholar, a court art. This conclusion appears more or less correct as majority of Mauryan sculptures were patronised by Aśoka who as a patron tried his best to reflect his own personality and dhamma through the medium of art. It appears that the artists of the period hardly had any say in the execution of or in the selection of the theme. They only went on carving and recording the will and desire of Aśoka in particular and his court in general.

Puṣyamitra is known to have deposed the last Mauryan ruler Bṛhadratha in or about 185 B.C. and he founded the Śuṅga dynasty. His descendants ruled upto 75 B.C. The last ruler of the Śuṅga dynasty was uprooted by Vasudeva who founded the Kāṇva dynasty that survived till 30 B.C. This was the period when Cheta dynasty was ruling in Orissa and the Sātavāhanas were the lords of Andhra deśa. For convenience, the entire period between 185 B.C. to 30 B.C. was designated from the point of view of art as the period of Śuṅga art since no significant change in the mannerisms of art was noticed.

Though the Śuṅga rulers were Hindu but they were tolerant to other religions. The period appear more concerned in Buddhist art activities. Of the centres of art in

this period, mention may be made of Bharhut and Sanchi (Central India), Bodhgaya (Bihar), Mathura (Uttar Pradesh), Udaigiri-Khandagiri (Bhuvanewar, Orissa), Amaravati (Andhra Pradesh) and Ajanta and Bhaja (Maharashtra).

The period witnessed the construction of Buddhist relic chamber (*stūpas*), in certain cases stone encasement of brick *stūpas* were made, substitution of wooden railing and gateways were undertaken with the lithic translation of these, and a number of enshrined *stūpas* (*chaitya* halls) were hewn in the mountains and hills and a few caves were painted with murals. At Bharhut, the discovered remains indicate that both the railings and gateways of Buddhist *stūpa* were carved with relief sculptures whereas at Bodhgaya, on the railings on either side of the road through which Buddha trod after his attainment of Bodhi were relieved while at Sanchi *stūpa* I, only the four gateways were carved with relief sculptures whereas the railings of *stūpa* II laid bare many relief sculptures and *stūpa* III's single gate is found relieved.

The gateways and railings of Bharhut were made of red sandstone quarried from the nearby hill called Lal-pahar. Among the donors of this *stūpa* mention may be made of king Dhanabhūti, son of Gotiputra and grandson of Viśvadeva built the Eastern Gate of Bharhut *Stūpa* during the reigning period of the Śuṅgas. This is inscribed in Brāhmī. Another donor was queen Champadevī, wife of King Revatī Mitra of Vidiśa. There are other donors who hailed from various places of India such as Pataliputra, Kauśāmbi, Chekula, Śrīputra, Nasik, etc.

The theme of sculptures at Bharhut were Buddhist and the technique was narrative. Most of the narratives were drawn either from the **Jātaka** stories or from the **Avadāna** stories and the relieved panels are mostly labelled with inscriptions in Brāhmī script. In most of these panels the presence of the Buddha or the Bodhisattva is indicated through aniconic symbols or theriomorphically. On a few instances human effigies of Bodhisattva are shown.

The aniconic symbols include lotus (symbolic of Buddha's birth or nativity-*jāti*), a tree within railing (Bodhi tree indicating the attainment of Enlightenment), Wheel (symbolic of the Turning of the Wheel of Law), and *stūpa* (the great demise-*mahāparinirvāṇa*). The aniconic symbols also include shaddled horse without rider but with an umbrella atop, foot prints and *tri-ratna*. In connection with the **Dure-nidāna kathā**, the presence of Bodhisattva is shown in animal forms such as in the relief showing Ruru Jātaka, the Bodhisattva appeared as a golden horned stag, in the case of **Chhadanta Jātaka**, he appeared as a six tusked elephant and in **Mahākapi Jātaka** he participated as the leader of the monkeys. But in the narrative panels concerning **Mugapakka Jātaka** or **Viśvantara Jātaka** or in **Vidūra Paṇḍita Jātaka**, the presence of the Bodhisattva was shown through his human effigies. The period did not approve the iconic representation of the Buddha.

The medallion of Bharhut that shows the dream of Māyā includes the descent of an elephant in the womb of reclining Māyā devī. The related inscription refers the scene as '*bhagavato Ukramti*' i.e. the elephant represented theriomorphically the Buddha. Another panel in the same place shows a garlanded wheel and the attached inscription called it '*bhagavato dhamachakam*' 'wheel', aniconically represented the Buddha and in yet another relief at Bharhut the Bodhi tree is labelled as '*bhagavato Sakamunino Bodho*' that is the tree represents the Śākyamuni Buddha.

The panels whether square, rectangular or circular include narratives with very low reliefs. The human figures participating in the composition do not have individualistic features. All figures look alike, characterised by same ethnic features, all are attired common type of dress, costumes and jewellery. They appear as if produced from the same mould. The stone carvers could not satisfactorily use at Bharhut the technique of foreshortening and oversecting methods. They were not concerned for optical illusion either.

On the pillars of the railings at Bharhut one notices the carvings in high relief the figures of *yakṣas* (Kuvera, Gāṅgeya, Ajakāla, Supārśva etc.), *yakṣīs* (Chandrā, Sudarśanā etc.), *Kokās* (*Chulokokā*, *Madhyamā kokā* and *Mahākokā* etc.), *Sirimā devatā*, and *Nāga devatās*. These are frameless tall figures, two

dimensionally conceived and are found flattened in terms of surface; they are static and exhibit mechanical rigidity and frontality and at times, specially in female figures one finds the incorporation of *bhaṅgas*, ample bends and turns. In the figures of *yakṣīs* and *Kokā devatās* the swelling breasts and ample pelvis point to their relation to the cult of fertility or to the *śāla bhañjikā*.

The list of donors of the Bodhgaya railings include the names of queen Kuraṅgī, the wife of king Indrāgnimitra and Nāgadevā wife of king Brahmamitra. The ruins of the railings are to be seen in situ while a few fragments are in the collection of Indian Museum, Calcutta. The Bodhgaya sculptures were also Buddhist and maintained the same narrative technique as at Bharhut. An analysis of the relief sculptures at Bodhgaya would show that artistically these are better than the Bharhut sculptures. In Bodhgaya the narratives were abbreviated and summarily told. The labels are withdrawn as the narrative became more popular and known. The reliefs are less crowded and the non-essential elements of the narrative are found withdrawn. The sculptors gave the reliefs more depth and the figures became more rounded than at Bharhut. In the figure sculptures, the heaviness of form still persists but the weight and rigidity no longer exist.

Among the ruins at Sanchi, three *stūpas* survived. These are designated as *stūpa* I, *stūpa* II and *stūpa* III. The relief sculptures on the railing of *stūpa* II are earlier in date and comparable to relief sculptures of Bharhut. But sculptures of the four

gateways of Sanchi *stūpa* I are considered, by far, the best specimens of art and point to the artistic excellence attained by the Śuṅga sculptors.

Sanchi is known through early inscription as Kākarāva or Kākanāga and subsequently it was called Śrīparvata. Aśoka built a *stūpa* and a pillar in front of it. The brick *stūpa* was encased in stone and a stone railing with four gateways was made in the last quarter of 1st century B.C. The relief sculptures of Sanchi *stūpa* I are noticed only on either side of these four gateways. Its railing has been kept severely plain. It appears that the gates were made in one man's life time. The middle architrave of the south gate (the earliest of all gates) and the right pillar of the western gate bear the name of a common donor Balamitra who was a pupil of *Ayachuda* (Āryakṣudra). These records prove most probably the four gates with carvings were made in one man's life time or within a period of twenty five years.

A donative inscription of South Gateway informs the gift one(?) one architrave by a certain Ānanda, an architect of the Sātavāhana King Śātakarṇī who was reigning at about 1st century B.C. (c. 50 20 B.C.). This also points to the date of these carvings. Of the gates, the south gate was made first and thereafter northern, eastern and western gates were made respectively.

The subject matters of the relieved sculptures were as usual Buddhist and the technique was narrative. Like Bodhgaya, the narratives were summarily told and abbreviated. Inscriptions indicating titles are found withdrawn. In the carvings of relief, there is evidence to prove that the stone carvers, carpenters, ivory carvers, painters joined their hands at this place. The horizontal panels on the architraves with volute ends and the bordered panels one after another on the pillars of the gateways remind us the impact of scroll painting on these reliefs. The inscription refers to the participation of the ivory carvers of Vidiśā at Sanchi.

In the narrative panels, where a group of people appear, each individual is found carved with his own characteristic features and each differs from the other. The figures are carved with greater depth and attempt was made to offer fuller roundity in the figures. The artist successfully used the technique of optical illusion, foreshortening and oversecting methods in the narrative panels. The theory of forthcoming from the background has been successfully employed here. One of the greatest attractions of Sanchi sculptures in the bracket figures showing *vṛkṣakās* or *śālabhañjikās* which are found conceived almost three dimensionally and they display both from the front and from the back the possibilities of considering them as pre-classical sculptures.

The sculptures of Sanchi gateways if analysed carefully, would lay bare a transparent view of contemporary life lived in cities, palaces, towns, forests, and wayside. A clear perception of contemporary architecture both religious and secular,

dresses and costumes of men and women, every day utensils and furniture, musical instruments, arms and armoury, means of transport and in a complete social backdrop of the period may be discerned.

The art of the Śuṅga period was not court art. Though among the donors of the period, one finds the names of kings and queens but it appears they never poked their nose in the artistic activities of the period. Whatever they did it was to attain merit (*puṇya*). It further appears that a number of rich traders and merchants also patronised the artistic activities of the period. Among the donors names of monks and nuns also occur. In general, the artists were apparently given a free hand in the composition and execution of the art. It appears that the art of the Maurya period made a marginal impact on the art of the Śuṅga. In technical perfection, the Mauryan sculptures are better than the art of the subsequent period. Since the Mauryan art was out and out a court art and as the artists of that period did not enjoy any freedom, the artists of the Śuṅga period did not like to continue that tradition. Instead they initiated a new tradition and therefore it started with some amount of crudeness but the productions emitted flavour of earth which was essentially Indian. To some, the real history of Indian sculptures began with the Śuṅga artists.

*(This is the gist of the In-depth Study Course on the Mauryan and Śuṅga Art conducted by Dr. N.P. Joshi, Prof. R.C. Sharma and Dr. T.K. Biswas at Jñāna Pravāha from Feb. 13 to 26, 2001)