

## Concept of *Śilpa* in the *Brāhmaṇas*

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The term *śilpa*, a basic concept of Indian arts, an aesthetic principle of Indian artistic tradition, finds its origin in the Vedic Literature, specially in the *Brāhmaṇas*. It is recorded in the **Nighaṇṭu** (II.1) as a synonym of *karman*. Being derived from the root '*śīla upadhāraṇe*' to learn or to practise, primarily it denotes an imitative action. So any type of creative, imitative and skilful act both in the states of being and becoming (i.e. in process), is called *śilpa*, or, it may be said that any imitative action which is repeatedly practised or studied, is *śilpa* (cf. *śīlayati śīlatīti vā śilpam* Devarāja Yajvan's comm.. on Nigh. II.1).

Two basic axiomatic statements of this concept of *śilpa* are revealed to the Vedic seers :

- (1) *Yad vai pratirūpaṃ tacchilpam* (ŚBr III.2.1.5) 'a work of art is doubtlessly, what a *pratirūpa* is'.
- (2) *Ātmasaṃskṛtir vāva śilpāni* (Ait Br VI.27) 'the works of art are indeed a mode of self-perfection'.

Human creative art or *mānuṣīśilpa* is an imitation (*pratirūpa*) of divine art (*devaśilpa*) where one can find the perfection of self (*ātmasaṃskṛti*). In the context of making ornaments a Hindi term *chilavāi* (cf. Skt. root *śīla upadhāraṇe*), is very close to the connotation of *ātmasaṃskṛti* in *śilpa*.

The basic concept of *śilpa* is discussed with a multi-dimensional approach in a number of **Brāhmaṇas**. It is used in the sense of recitation of Vedic *mantras* as a nickname of *śāstra* (*śilpāni śaṃsanti*—Ait Br VI.27) or any accomplished act (*śilpāni kriyante*—Śāṅkh Br or Kauṣ Br XXV.12 in the context of *viśvajit* sacrifice). It is also used to denote manifold forms (ŚBr I.1.4.3) or image/counterpart '*pratimā-pratikṛti*' or *pratirūpa* (ŚBr III.2.1.5) or as an honorific attribute to designate a seer (e.g. *Śilpa Kaśyapa*—ŚBr XIV.6.4.33). *Śilpa* denotes both the divine acts (Ait Br VI.27; TBr III.3.2.1) and the act of manual dexterity. It supports the cosmic elements and brings them into existence (Kauṣ Br XXIX.5; Tāṇḍ Br XIV.4.1-9). An attempt has been made in this paper to understand the fundamental ideas of *śilpa* in the *Brāhmaṇas* as a source of Indian artistic tradition.

It is very interesting to note that the word *śilpa* is basically used to denote the *śilpa* verses as a particular type of *śāstra* or hymn of a highly artificial character recited on the sixth day of the *pr̥ṣṭhya-ṣaḍaha* at the *Viśvajit* sacrifice. *Śāstra* means recitation of some Vedic *mantras* by Hotā and his assistants without singing in some ritual context as an accompaniment to the *grahas* at the soma libation. As the imitation of the original Vedic *mantras* are noticed in this *śāstra*, it is called *śilpa*. *Śilpa* is the imitation of chanting the Vedic *mantras* or hymns—*śāstra* in the context of Ṛgvedic *Brāhmaṇas* and *stoma* in the context of Sāmavedic *Brāhmaṇas*.

Imitation is the most essential nature of art. In recitation also imitation is noticed. An artist imitates or copies, for reproduction or recreating the model of

divine works of art in the human level of perfection. Each and every artistic creation is the projection of the self of the artist which is actually a reflection of the *pratirūpa* or aggregate of abstract ideas in the mind of the artist. So the act of bringing forth an art form (*śilpa*) is *pratirūpa*, a prototype. In the **Aitareya Brāhmaṇa** this concept is noticed more elaborately when Hotā together with his assistants lauds the *śilpa* verses representing the works of divine art (*deva-śilpāni*). Imitation (*anukṛti*) of these divine works of art is known in this world as accomplished art work, for instance an elephant figure, a brazen vessel, a garment, a gold object, a mule-chariot etc. An artist should know the art work properly.

शिल्पानि शंसन्ति देवशिल्पान्येतेषां वै शिल्पानामनुकृतीह शिल्पमधिगम्यते-हस्ती कंसो वासो  
हिरण्यमश्वतरी रथः शिल्पम्—Ait Br VI.27.

Counterparts of this divine *śilpa* are the perfection of the self by which the sacrificer perfects himself as composed of metres. Who knows this basic idea, a work of art is accomplished in him.

शिल्पं हास्मिन्नधिगम्यते य एवं वेद, यदेव शिल्पानीं ३। आत्मसंस्कृतिर्वाव शिल्पानि च्छन्दोमयं वा  
एतैर्यजमान आत्मानं संस्क्रुते।— Ait Br VI.27.

Here *śilpa* is a name of a particular *śastra* recited in the sixth day of *pr̥ṣṭhaśadaha*. *Sāyana* comments on *śilpa* and *śilpatva* in this context very clearly :

स्तोत्रियस्यानुरूपत्वं संपाताश्च प्रगाथकाः।  
त्रिष्टुभोऽथाहीनयुक्तिमोकौ शिल्पं च वर्णितम्॥  
वालखिल्यानामष्टसूक्तानामेव पाठप्रकारैः शिल्पत्वमभिहितम्॥

The priest *Acchāvāka*, an assistant of Hotā lauds the R̥gvedic verses which are not *nārāsaṃsa mantras*, at the end of *tr̥tīya savana*, in the context of *śilpaśastra* :

तस्मादच्छावाकोऽन्ततः शिल्पेष्वनाराशंसीः शंसति  
दृळहतायै, दृळहे प्रतिष्ठास्याम इति—Ait Br VI.16.

Here the *śastra* verses are from the R̥gveda (II.13.1-13) starting with ऋतुर्जनित्री etc. The term *śilpa* is not occurred in these *mantras* but the imitation of the R̥gveda verses in a *śastra* is called *śilpa*. It is an imitative act. It is apt to mention here that *śilpākhyā śastra* is a technical term (cf. *ĀśŚrSū VIII.2.2—ata ūrdhvamanurūpebhyo vikṛtāni śilpāni śamseyuh*. *Nārāyaṇa* comments on the same : *vālakhilyādīni śilpasamjñakāni, tāni ca śilpāni dvividhāni—vikṛtāni avikṛtānīti*). Sometimes it is called *vikṛta* and sometimes it is *avikṛta*. As a goldsmith takes first a lump of original gold of *avikṛta* stage and then he makes ornaments of different (*vikṛta*) shape from it. It may be said that *devaśilpa* is an *avikṛta* form and *mānuṣī śilpa* is a *vikṛta* form.

The **Aitareya Brāhmaṇa** also shows the use of *śilpaśastras*, recited even in the *mādhyandina savana* of *viśvajit* sacrifice (*eṣām śilpānām viśvajīti ... śamśayanīti— Ait Br VI.30*).

Another R̥gvedic Brāhmaṇa, **Kauṣītaki** or **Śāṅkhāyana Brāhmaṇa** vividly shows the use of *śilpa*, specially as a connecting principle contemplating an organic

unity between *puruṣa* and *yajña*, relating to *prāṇa*, *ātman* and *āyatana*. This interrelative nature of *śilpa śāstra* are nicely described. The *śilpas* are the lower breaths; the sacrifice is man, the morning pressing is the upper breaths, the mid-day is the body, the third pressing the lower, these are *śilpas*. Therefore the *śilpas* are performed at the third pressing.

प्राणास्तानि शिल्पानि पुरुषो वै यज्ञस्तस्य य ऊर्ध्वाः प्राणास्तत्रातःसवनमात्मा माध्यन्दिनो येऽवाञ्छस्तत्  
तृतीयसवनं तानि शिल्पानि तस्मात् तृतीयसवने शिल्पानि क्रियन्त एतद्ध्येषामायतनम्—Śāṅkh Br XXV.12.

Again *śilpa* is compared with the breaths (*prāṇa*) and *ātman* is compared with *prṣṭhya*, a particular arrangement of *sāman* in a sacrifice. As the body and breaths are inseparable, therefore the *śilpa* verses are recited by the Hotā and his assistants at the midday pressing in the *Viśvajit* sacrifice as an *agniṣṭoma*, wishing a longlife, by not separating the body from the breaths. Hence all the *prṣṭhyas* and all the *śilpas* are performed in the *viśvajit* sacrifice :

आत्मा वै पृष्ठ्यानि प्राणाः शिल्पानि न वाऽन्तरेणात्मानं प्राणाः ख्यायन्ते न प्राणानन्तरेणात्मानो  
एतन्नाना तस्मादग्निष्टोम एवापि विश्वजिति माध्यन्दिने शिल्पानि शस्यन्ते नेत्राणेभ्य  
आत्मानमपादधानीत्यथो प्रजापति वै विश्वजित् सर्व वै प्रजापतिर्विश्वजित् तस्माद् सर्वाणि  
पृष्ठ्यानि क्रियन्ते सर्वाणि शिल्पानि।— Śāṅkh Br XXV.12.

The *śilpas* constitute the breath (*prāṇa*) of sacrifice. *Nyūṅkha* 'the insertion of the sound 'O' in the recitation of hymns in a sacrifice', the breaths and the *śilpas* are interrelated. *Nyūṅkha* is praised as food, the breaths are food; the *śilpas* are the breaths and by recitation of *śilpa* verses Hotā places breath in the breaths :

अन्नं वै न्यूङ्खोऽन्नं प्राणाः शिल्पानि प्राणेष्वेव तत्राणं दधाति— Śāṅkh Br XXV.13.

*Śilpa* is an unarrested or unobstructed potential force (cf. *nedacchāvākasya śilpamantaryāmi*—Śāṅkh Br XXV.13).

*Śilpa* is compared with the atmosphere as it stays in the middle in the context of recitation in the sacrifice. Being a support to other verses, *śilpa* gives efficacy even to the musical triplets—song, dance and music :

शिल्पेष्वेव तदहरहः प्रतितिष्ठन्तो यन्ति... अन्तरिक्षं वा एष मध्यमस्त्र्यह  
इदमन्तरिक्षमप्रतिष्ठानं... तानि वै तृचानि भवन्ति। त्रिवृद् वै शिल्पं नृत्यं गीतं वादितमिति-  
Śāṅkh Br XXX.5.

As a latent force *śilpa* acts as a coalescence of dexterous poetic composition of recitation, particularly in the case of triplets, which may be understood by sound in singing, gestures in dance, ritual recitations in the sacrifice. *Śilpa* rests in the middle set of a ten-day Soma sacrifice. The *śilpa* verses are recited in the middle three days, for the middle set of three days contains the *śilpas* (cf. *athaitāni śilpāni madhyme tryahe śasyante, śilpavān hyeṣa madhyamastryaho bhavati* Śāṅkh Br XXIX.5)

In the **Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa**, the basic principle of *śilpa* is expressed as : art is imitation (*yad vai pratirūpaṃ tacchilpam*—ŚBr III.2.1.5). A copy or likeness of *pratirūpa* is also *pratirūpa* as both are the imitation of the prototype. We cannot draw or make a flower in the works of art which is not in existence and not the prototype (*pratirūpa*)

or not the counterform of that knowledge of a flower. So flower in artistic creation is not a real flower, but it is just a counterform, outer-reflection or symbolic expression of the knowledge of a flower in nature. The poets or artists try to express their revealed knowledge 'as it is' (i.e. *yathātathyataḥ*—this corresponding to that). True imitation is not a matter of only resemblance but of true analogy or a matter of adequate symbolism. To a painter, likeness or convisibility (*sādṛśya*) is the foundation of painting.

The imitative nature of art is described in the context of a ritual where the sacrificer touches the spot of joining black and white, comparing the pair as *ṛk-sāman*. The sacrificer sits with bent knee, behind the skins, having touched the place where the white hairs and black hairs meet, he mutters, 'you two are the *śilpas* or images of *ṛks* and *sāmans*'. A *śilpa* is indeed a conformable replica.

अथ जघनेन कृष्णाजिने पश्चात् प्राङ् जान्वाक्र उपविशति। स यत्र शुक्लानां च कृष्णानां च संधिर्भवति-तदेवमभिमृश्य जपत्यृकसामयोः शिल्पे स्थः इति। यद्वै प्रतिरूपं तच्छिल्पमृचां च साम्नां च प्रतिरूपे स्थ। इत्येवैतदाह।—ŚBr (M) III.2.1.5.

[The same passage is also noticed in the **Kāṇva Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa** with a little variant : अथ पश्चाज्जान्वाक्र उपविशति स शुक्लानां च कृष्णानां च लोम्रां सन्धिमभिमृश्य जपति—ŚBr (K) IV.2.1.3].

Here the concept of art is assumed in the union of *ṛk* with the *sāman* and in the symbolization or replication of black colours into the white colours. Similar idea is also noticed again where sacrifice is designated as *trayīvidyā*. Here *śilpa* denotes the manifold form, assuming various colours in the black skin of an antelope (*saiṣā trayī vidyā yajñāḥ, tasyā etacchilpameṣa varṇastadyat kṛṣṇājinaṁ bhavati* ŚBr I.1.4.3). So *śilpa* is related with form where the idea of the root *piś* 'to give a form' is inbuilt.

*Śilpa* tradition is also noticed in the Brāhmanic literature. The term *śilpa* is also recorded in the **Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa** as a generic name in the tradition of teachers of Vājasaneyi school. Harita Kaśyapa from *Śilpa Kaśyapa* takes fifth position in this genealogical use : Āditya > Āmbhr̥ṇī > Vāk > Kaśyapa Naidhruvi > Śilpa Kaśyapa (हरितः कश्यपः शिल्पात् कश्यपात्। शिल्पः कश्यपः कश्यपान्नैध्रुवेः— ŚBr XIV.9.4.33)

In the **Taittiriya Brāhmaṇa** the nature of art or artwork is treated as the manifestation on a divine level. Vedic seer thinks that the art has come down from heavens and is resting on the region of the earth, with that thousand branched (many disciplined) subjects of art all the evils would be driven out :

दिवः शिल्पमवततं पृथिव्याः ककुभि श्रितम्। तेन वयं सहस्रबल्शेन सपत्नं नाशयामसि॥—TBr III.3.2.1.

Again, the art of divine creation is praised. Kaśyapa's art-work consists of excellence, is of luminous attributes and has variegated rays, in which the seven suns together are integrated in that skillful act (*śilpaṁ karmakauśalam* comm. of Mādhava) Kaśyapa establishes the king (Sun).

यत्ते शिल्पं कश्यप रोचनावत्। इन्द्रियवत् पुष्कलं चित्रभानु।

यस्मिन्सूर्या अर्पिता सप्त साकम्। तस्मिन् राजानमधिविश्रयेमम्— TBr II.7.15.3.

The term *śilpa* is also used in the sense of efficient work of primal creation. Prajāpati appears as a cosmic creator, strengthened with the skill of *śilpa*. With these *śilpas* he strengthened the heaven and made the heaven with a proper shape (*yebhiśsilpaiḥ paprathānām adṛmhat, yebhir dyām abhyapiṃśat prajāpatiḥ* TBr II.7.15.2).

In the **Tāṇḍya Mahābrāhmaṇa** (a Sāmavedic Brāhmaṇa) the Ekāha rites and their *stomas* are designated by the name *śilpa*. It is mythically explained in the text that from *śilpa* the divine wreath (*sraḥ*) was created by Prajāpati and given to Indra for acquiring supremacy over other things. Prajāpati wished that amongst his progeny Indra might be the mightiest and fastened this wreath on him. Thereupon, the beings yielded the supremacy to Indra, as they saw on him that work of art (*tacchilpam*), that they had seen on their father Prajāpati.

सोऽकामयतेन्द्रो मे प्रजायां श्रेष्ठः स्यादिति तामस्मै स्रजं प्रत्यमुञ्चस् ततो वा इन्द्राय प्रजाः  
श्रेष्ठयायातिष्ठन्त तच्छिल्पं पश्यन्तो यत्पितर्य्यपश्यन्।—Taṇḍ M Br XVI.4.3.

The two powerful *stomas* of Indra Abhijit and Viśvajit were also called *śilpas*. A person who knows that Viśvajit *stoma* is in fact a *śilpa*, beholds an art (*śilpa*) in his house. The same idea is recorded in the Brāhmaṇas :

तौ वा एताविन्द्रस्तोमौ वीर्यवन्तौ शिल्पं वा एतौ नाम स्तोमावास्ताम्, पश्यते गृहे शिल्पं य एवं  
वेद।—Taṇḍ MBr XVI.4.8-9.

Again, Viśvajit *stoma* is treated as *śilpa* (*athaiṣa viśvajicchilpaḥ, śilpam vā eṣa stomānām*—Ibid XVI.15.1-2, also cf. *Indra vai viśvajit, yad vā etena śilpenājayat tad viśvajito viśvajitvam* Jaim Br II.150).

The art property of an object is discussed in the **Tāṇḍya Mahābrāhmaṇa** (XVI.6.13) : '*uṣṇīṣam bibharti śilpatvāya*' he wears the turban (*uṣṇīṣa*) for the sake of its being an object of art (*śilpatvāya*).

In the **Jaiminiya Brāhmaṇa** the use of gold metal in the art works is mentioned which are of two types (i) pure (*avikṛta*) and (ii) wrought or in process of making art works (*avikṛta*). As described in the text : Prajāpati created this whole world. Before creation this world was like an unwrought gold (i.e. in the mass of the metal). He who knows this concept, the possibilities of all art works (*śilpāni*), both wrought (*vikṛtāni*) and unwrought (*avikṛtāni*) are revealed to him.

स इदं सर्वं व्याकरोत् । यथा ह वै हिरण्यम् अविकृतम् एवमिदं ततः पुरा। स सर्वमधि  
हास्मिञ्छिल्यानि गम्यन्ते विकृतानि चाविकृतानि च य एवं वेद।— Jaim Br III.1.

Classification of *śilpa* is noticed also in the **Jaiminiya Brāhmaṇa** relating the three castes (*traivarnika*), meter and art-objects. During the chanting of vedic verses of *triṣṭup* metre, it is compared with *kṣatriya* caste and art-objects like elephant, *niṣka*, mule-chariot, horse-chariot, *rukma* and *kaṃsa* (a bell-metal) etc; *Jagatī* metre with *vaiśya* caste and art objects like cow, horse, golden elephant, goats and sheep etc.

क्षत्रं वै त्रिष्टुप्, एतानि वै क्षत्रे शिल्यानि हस्तिनिष्कोऽश्वतरीरथोऽश्वरथो रुक्मः कंसः... विड् वै  
जगती। एतानि वै विशि शिल्यानि गोऽश्वं हस्तिहिरण्यम् अजाविकं...।—Jaim Br I.263.

All the above art works are known to the Brahmins. Vedic mantras of Gāyatrī verses are related with Brahmin caste and the art works of both *kṣatriya* and *vaiśya* group are included in Brahmin group.

एतानि सर्वाणि शिल्पान्याहृत्य ब्रह्मण्यनक्ति। ...एतानि शिल्पानि ब्राह्मणेष्वधिगम्यते। ... ब्रह्म वै गायत्री। ब्रह्मणैव तद् एतान्युभयतश्शिल्पानि परिगृह्णाति।— Jaim Br I. 264.

Some other aspects of *śilpa* as recorded in the **Jaiminiya Brāhmaṇa** are :

Prajāpati is the only possessor of all the *śilpas*, not the other gods. Indra received these art-works like *niṣka*, *maṇi*, *srak* etc. from Prajāpati. प्रजापतेष्वेवैतानि शिल्पान्यासुर् नेतरेषु देवेषु। ...तस्मा एवं तच्छिल्पं प्रायच्छत्। ...यथा निष्कं मणिं स्रजं... तस्माद् एतच्छिल्पं निरमिमीत। (Ibid II.189).

All the art objects or art-works are interrelated like the axis and wheel of a chariot: यथा रथाक्षे रथचक्रं प्रतिमुञ्चेद् एवम् एवैतानि सर्वाणि शिल्पानि। (Ibid. II.191).

In the **Gopatha Brāhmaṇa** also we find the imitation of the model of nature's art into the works of human art almost similar like the **Aitareya Brāhmaṇa**. The Hotā priest lauds the *śilpa* verses which represent works of divine art (*deva-śilpāni*). It is indeed the lauding of the form of divine world (*svargasya lokasya rūpam*). That which are works of art (*śilpāni*) indeed a perfection of the self perfect properly this man's self.

शिल्पानि शंसति देवशिल्पानि। एतेषां वै शिल्पानाम् अनुकृतीह शिल्पमधिगम्यते। हस्ती कंसो बासो हिरण्यमश्वतरिरथः शिल्पम्। शिल्पं हास्य समधिगम्यते य एवं वेद। यदेव शिल्पानि शंसति, तत् स्वर्गस्य लोकस्य रूपम्। यद् वेव शिल्पानि, आत्मसंस्कृतिर्वै शिल्पानि, आत्मानमेवास्य तत् संस्कुर्वन्ति।— Go Br II.6.7.

The **Gopatha Brāhmaṇa** also repeats the use of *śilpas* (from Ait Br VI.30), recited even in the *mādhyandina savana* of the Viśvajit sacrifice (*eṣāṃ śilpānāṃ viśvajiti... śaṃsayāniti* — Go Br II.6.9)

From the above Brāhmanic passages it may be safely concluded that the seers of the Brāhmaṇas were aware of the concept of *śilpa* with its multidimensional outlook. The fundamental principles on art '*yad vai pratirūpaṃ tacchilpam*' and '*ātmasaṃskṛtir vāva śilpāni*' of the Brāhmaṇas are now accepted as the universal truth. In Indian tradition, art is a metrical self-integration of another man, achieved from imitation of the divine forms.

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