

Indian Architecture Through Ages

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INDUS VALLEY CIVILISATION The Indus civilization or the Harappan civilization, which flourished during the Bronze Age i.e. 2500-2000 BC is ranked among the four widely known civilizations of the old world. Extensive excavation work that has been done since Independence has so far identified more than 100 sites belonging to this civilization. A few prominent among them are Dholavira (Gujarat), Kalibangan (Rajasthan), Lothal (Gujarat), Sarkotada (Gujarat), Diamabad (Maharashtra), Alamgirpur (U.P.), Bhagwanpura (Haryana), Banawali (Haryana), Kuntasi, Padri (Gujarat) and Mauda (Jammu). Extensive town planning was the characteristic of this civilization, which is evident from the gridiron pattern for the layout of cities, some with fortifications and the elaborate Lothal relic drainage and water management systems. The houses were built of baked bricks, which is rare in contemporary civilizations at Mesopotamia and Egypt. Bricks of fixed sizes, as well as stone and wood were also used for building. Buildings in the lower area are rather monotonous, being mainly functional rather than decorative. But many houses are two storeyed. The most imposing of the buildings is the Great Bath of Mohenjodaro. It is 54.86 metres long and 32.91 metres wide and with 2.43 metres thick outer walls. The Bath had galleries and rooms on all sides. Another important structure was the Granary complex comprising of blocks with an overall area of 55 x 43 metres. The granaries were intelligently constructed, with strategic air ducts and platforms divided into units.

THE MAURYAN PERIOD

If the remnants of the Indus culture are excluded, the earliest surviving architectural heritage in India is that of the Mauryans. The Mauryan period was a great landmark in the history of Indian art. Some of the monuments and pillars belonging to this period are considered as the finest specimens of Indian art. The Mauryan architecture was embalmed in timber, for rocks and stones were not as freely in use then. The art of polishing of wood reached so much perfection during the Mauryan period that master craftsmen used to make wood glisten like a mirror. Chandra Gupta Maurya had built many buildings, palaces and monuments with wood, most of which perished with time. In 300 B.C., Chandragupta Maurya constructed a wooden fort 14.48 km long and 2.41km wide, along the Ganges in Bihar. However, only a couple of teak beams have survived from this fort.

Ashoka was the first Mauryan Emperor who began to "think in stone". The stonework of the Ashokan Period (3rd century B.C.) was of a highly diversified order and comprised of lofty free-standing pillars, railings of the stupas, lion thrones and other colossal figures. The use of stone had reached such great perfection during this time that even small fragments of stone art was given a high lustrous polish resembling fine enamel. While most of the shapes and decorative forms employed were indigenous in origin, some exotic forms show the influence of Greek, Persian and Egyptian cultures.

The Ashokan period marked the beginning of the Buddhist School of architecture in India. It witnessed the construction of many rock-cut caves, pillars, stupas and palaces. A number of cave-shrines belonging to this period have been excavated in the Barabar and Nagarjuni hills and Sitamarhi in Bihar. These rock-cut sanctuaries, quarried from large masses of rocks called gneisses, are simple in plan and are devoid of all interior decorative carvings. The caves served as the residences of the monks. There are several inscriptions, which indicate that these rock-cut sanctuaries were constructed by Emperor Ashoka for the monks of the Ajivika sect, who are more closely related to the Jains than to the Buddhists.

The Ashokan rock-edict at Dhauli, near Bhubaneshwar, is considered to be the earliest rock-cut sculpture in India. It has a sculpted elephant on the top, which signifies the Emperor's conversion to Buddhism after his Kalinga victory. The monolithic Ashokan pillars are marvels of architecture and sculpture. These were lofty free standing monolithic columns erected on sacred sites. Originally there were about thirty pillars but now only ten are in existence, of which only two with lion capitals stand in situ in good condition at Kolhua and Laurya Nandangarh respectively. Each pillar was about 15.24 metres high and weighed about 50 tonnes and was made out of fine sandstone. The pillar consisted of three parts-the prop, the shaft and the capitol. The capitol consisted of fine polished stone containing one or more animal figures in the round. Made of bricks, they carried declarations from the king regarding Buddhism or any other topic. The pillars did not stand in isolation and were usually found near stupas in a spot either unknowingly marked by the Buddha himself or along the royal route to Magadha, the capital. The Sarnath pillar is one of the finest pieces of sculpture of the Ashokan period. The Ashokan pillars also throw light on the contacts India had with Persia and other countries. Two of the Ashkan edicts have also been found at Laghman, near Jalalabad in modern Afghanistan.

Ashoka was responsible for the construction of several stupas, which were large halls, capped with domes and bore symbols of the Buddha. The most important ones are located at Bharhut, Bodhgaya, Sanchi, Amravati and Nagarjunakonda. The Buddhist shrines or the monasteries were built in somewhat irregular designs following the Gandhara style of architecture. Built on the patterns of a fort and defended by a stone wall, the monastery evolved from the site of an ancient stupa. The principle buildings were housed within a rectangular courtyard with a stupa in the south and the monastery in the north.

Ashoka had also built a number of palaces, but most of them have perished. Ashoka's palace near Patna was a masterpiece. Enclosed by a high brick wall, the highlight of the palace was an immense 76.2 metres high pillared-hall

having three storeys. The Chinese traveller Fahien was so impressed by this palace that he stated that "it was made by spirits" and that its carvings are so elegantly executed "which no human hands of this world could accomplish". Made mostly of wood, it seems to have been destroyed by fire. Its existence was pointed out during the excavations at Kumrahar, near Patna, where its ashes have been found preserved for several thousand years.

THE STUPAS

Sanchi Stupas: The early stupas were hemispherical in shape with a low base. The hemispherical shape symbolized the cosmic mountain. The later stupas assumed an increasingly cylindrical form. The early stupas were known for their simplicity. Apart from the than ruins of stupa at Piprahwa (Nepal), the core of stupa No 1 at Sanchi can be considered as the oldest of the stupas. Originally built by Asoka, it was enlarged in subsequent centuries. An inscription by the ivory carvers of Vidisha on the southern gateway throws light on the transference of building material from perishable wood and ivory to the more durable stone.

Amaravati Stupa: Amaravati stupa, built in 2nd or 1st century BC was probably like the one at Sanchi, but in later centuries it was transformed from a Hinayana shrine to a Mahayana shrine. The diameter of the dome of the stupa at ground level was about 48.76 metres and its height was about 30 metres. Amaravati stupa is different from the Bharhut and Sanchi stupas. It had free-standing columns surmounted by lions near the gateways. The dome was covered with sculptured panels. The stupa had an upper circumambulatory path on the drum as at Sanchi. This path had two intricately carved railings. The stone is greenish-white limestone of the region.

Gandhara stupa: The Gandhara stupa is a further development of stupas at Sanchi and Bharhut. In Gandhara stupas the base, dome and the hemisphere dome are sculpted. The stupa tapers upward to form a tower like structure. The stupas of Nagarjunakonda in Krishna valley were very large. At the base there were brick walls forming wheel and spokes, which were filled with earth. The Maha Chaitya of Nagarjunakonda has a base in the form of Swastika, which is a sun symbol.

THE SUNGAS, KUSHANS AND SATAVAHANAS

The Mauryan dynasty crumbled after Asoka's death in 232 B.C. In its wake came the Sungas and Kushans in the north and the Satavahanas in the south. The period between 2nd century B.C. and 3rd century A.D. marked the beginning of the sculptural idiom in Indian sculpture where the elements of physical form were evolving into a more refined, realistic and expressive style. The sculptors strived at mastering their art, especially of the human body, which was carved in high relief and bore heaviness and vigour. These dynasties made advances in art and architecture in areas like stone construction, stone carving, symbolism and beginning of temple (or chaitya hall) and the monastery (or vihara) constructions.

Under these dynasties the Asokan stupas were enlarged and the earlier brick and wood works were replaced with stone-works. For instance, the Sanchi Stupa was enlarged to nearly twice its size in 150 B.C. and elaborate gateways were added later. The Sungas also reconstructed the railings around the Barhut Stupa. The Sungas also built the toranas or the gateways to the stupas. An inscription at the Barhut Stupa indicates that the torana was built during the reign of Sungas i.e. 184-72 B.C. These toranas indicate the influence of Hellenistic and other foreign schools in the Sunga architecture.

The Satavahanas constructed a large number of stupas at Goli, Jagghahpeta, Bhattiprolu, Gantasala, Nagarjunakonda and Amravati. During the Kushan period (1-3 A.D.), the Buddha was represented in human form instead of symbols. Buddha's image in endless forms and replicas became the principal element in Buddhist sculpture during the Kushan period. Another feature of this period was that the Emperor himself was shown as a divine person. The Kushans were the pioneers of the Gandhara School of Art and a large number of monasteries; stupas and statues were constructed during the reign of Kanishka.

THE SCHOOLS OF ART

The Gandhara School of Art (50 B.C. to 500 A.D.): The Gandhara region extending from Punjab to the borders of Afghanistan was an important centre of Mahayana Buddhism up to the 5th century A.D. The region became famous throughout the world since a new school of Indian sculpture known as the Gandhara School developed during that period. Owing to its strategic location the Gandhara School imbibed all kinds of foreign influences like Persian, Greek, Roman, Saka and Kushan. The origin of Gandhara art can be traced to the Greek rulers of Bactria and Northwest India. But it was during the reign of Kanishka that the art received great patronage.

The Gandhara School of Art is also known as the Graeco-Buddhist School of Art since Greek techniques of Art were applied to Buddhist subjects. The most important contribution of the Gandhara School of Art was the evolution of beautiful images of the Buddha and Bodhisattavas, which were executed in black stone and modelled on identical characters of Graeco-Roman pantheon. Hence it is said, "the Gandhara artist had the hand of a Greek but the heart of an Indian." The most characteristic trait of Gandhara sculpture is 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 best specimens of Gandhara art are from Jaulian and Dharmarajika stupa at Taxila and from Hadda near Jalalabad in modern Afghanistan. The tallest

rock-cut statue of Lord Buddha is also located at Bamiyan in modern Afghanistan and dates back to 3-4 century AD.

The Mathura School of Art: The Mathura School of art flourished at the holy city of Mathura, especially between 1-3 A.D. It established the tradition of transforming Buddhist symbols into human form. Buddha's first image can be traced to Kanishka's reign (about 78 A.D.). The earliest sculptures of Buddha were made keeping the Mathura Style yaksha prototype in mind. They were depicted as strongly built with the right hand raised in protection and the left hand on the waist. The figures produced by this school of art do not have moustaches and beards as in the Gandhara Art. These figures can be seen in the museum of Mathura. The standing Buddha figures resembles the yaksha figures and indicates the Kushan influence. The seated figures are in the padmasana posture. The Mathura School not only produced beautiful images of the Buddha but also of the Jain Tirthankaras and gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon. Many scholars believe that the Mathura School of Art, although of indigenous origin, was greatly influenced by the Gandhara School of Art. The Guptas adopted the Mathura School of Art and further improvised and perfected it.

The Amravati School of Art: This school of art developed at Amravati, on the banks Amravati Architecture of the Krishna River in modern Andhra Pradesh. It is the site for the largest Buddhist stupa of South India. Its construction began in 200 B.C. and was completed in 200 A.D. The diameter of the stupa at the base was 51 metres. The height of the dome was 31 metres and its outer railing was 5 metres wide. The stupendous stupa could not withstand the ravages of time and its ruins are preserved in the London Museum.