

## **Buddhist Art & Archaeology as a Mode of Edutainment**

**Sagnika Bhattacharya**

Research Scholar

Dept. of Pali

University of Calcutta

### **Abstract:**

The early Buddhist art and archaeology wouldn't had been recognized until the narratives were discussed complying this prominent Indic school of thought. The early Buddhist archaeological structures which are known –stūpas, caityas and vihāras; where any fragments of Buddhism almost negligible even to scholars, they would have been remained unidentified until the narratives related to those erected structures were studied thoroughly. The time of decorative visual arts and representation Buddha's presence and the incidents related to his life were created during the reign of emperor Ashoka. Even before 1<sup>st</sup> CE no such idol or image of Buddha are found. In the early representations which are found are an-iconic representation of Buddha, like –a pair of foot-prints, an empty seat, bodhi-tree or somewhere an empty space beneath a parasol; those symbolism just justifies the presence of the enlightened one. Perhaps the only reason behind this is: Buddha neither asked his disciples to worship him on a seat of a divine persona nor any erection of his idol as a commemorative or sacred object. Hence, his immediate followers didn't show enthusiasm to do such. But, in the following periods when Buddhism were patronized and spread by the ancient royals, the urge to make his idol developed in them and eventually various schools of art created idols of Buddha with the silhouette of the respective styles of their schools of arts. The paper aims to narrate the role of narratives in identification and development of Early Buddhist art and archaeology.

**Keywords:** Buddhist thoughts, narratives, Art, Archaeology, iconography.

### **Discussion :**

Buddhist art and archaeology has a significant role in Asian art and archaeology. Without mentioning about Buddhist art, the global record of art and archaeology remains incomplete. Since, the period when only stūpas, caityas and vihāras were the only evidence of Buddhist realm, up to the later period, the style of Buddhist art and archaeology have gone through vivid vogues. The time of decorative visual arts and representation Buddha's presence and the incidents related to his life were created during the reign of emperor Ashoka. Even before 1<sup>st</sup> CE no such idol or image of Buddha are found. In the early representations which are found are an-iconic representation of Buddha, like –a pair of foot-prints, an empty seat, bodhi-tree or somewhere an empty space beneath a parasol; those symbolism just justifies the presence of the enlightened one. Perhaps the only reason behind this is: Buddha neither

asked his disciples to worship him on a seat of a divine persona nor any erection of his idol as a commemorative or sacred object. Hence, his immediate followers didn't show enthusiasm to do such.

The *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* is the immediate reference where Buddha suggested that after he left this earth what people use to do to pay homage to their king the same rituals to be obeyed—like offering garlands, perfume on a commemorative structure erected at a four-road cross (indication to a stūpa) and nothing extra; when he was asked by Ānanda.

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In Fa-hien's travel story he has given an account of legend where it is found that king Prasenjit of Kośala tried to erect an idol of Gautama Buddha during the presence of Buddha himself. And therefore, the legend narrates that —“When Buddha went up to heaven for ninety days to preach the Faith to his mother, king Prasenjit, longing to see him, caused to be carved in sandal-wood from the Bull's-head mountain an image of Buddha and placed it where Buddha usually sat. Later on, when Buddha returned to the shrine, the image straightway quitted the seat and came forth to receive him. Buddha cried out, “Return to your seat; after my disappearance you shall be the model for the four classes of those in search of spiritual truth.” At, this, the image went back to the seat. It was the very first of all such images, and is that which later ages have copied.” (Fa-Hsien, 1923, p. 30 & 31)

Another legend says that it was king Udayana of Kauśāmbi who erected an idol of Buddha carved out from sandalwood. (Jr., 1963) Benjamin Rowland Jr. found this account from Hiuen Tsang's travel story.

These travel stories by the ancient Chinese travellers like Fa-hien, Hiuen Tsang are the great sources to know about the whole scenario of ancient India. In the very first period, when Sir Alexander Cunningham where in zeal of exploring the ancient sites mentioned in the travelogues by foreign travellers of the then period and indulged himself in the expedition of excavating as well as identification of those ancient monuments of India; the inscriptions at various sites were the foremost evidences while identifying the authority and affiliation of those places whilst the travel stories helped him as a radar to find the existence and location in his further great discoveries. The travel stories thus have worked as a bridge between the scriptural narratives and visual narratives while the discoveries were made.

### The role played by Buddhist Narratives:

As said earlier that in the very beginning the only form Buddhist affiliated monuments where the stūpas, caityas and the vihāras among them only stūpas have been found with decorative

railings, gates and stuccos on walls. If they are observed it is to be noticed the presence of Buddha was allegorical but the incidents of Buddha's life, stories of *Jātaka* are portrayed; whether it is Bharut stūpa or Sanchi. These Buddhist narratives being as parts of decorative art have lifted up the quality of art piece otherwise they were just sustained only as some domes and mounds without grace.

It is to be kept in mind that until the exposition of Mahāyāna School and its offshoot Vajrayāna; the Buddhist art at its early stage was just decorative or the specimen of visual art. The stories of *Jātaka*, Buddha's life incidents along with the then sociological or folk motifs were the elements of art. With the reign of Vajrayāna, idolatry or portraits (Tibetan Thankas) of deities became the votive tool. In case early idolatry which are recorded belongs to Gandhar School, Mathura School and Amaravati School; were only the piece of art, they were not votive elements.

The ancient Indian tradition was popular through oral media; whether it is Brāhmanism, Jainism or Buddhism. Vedas thus were called as śrutis and Jainism and Buddhism are two monastic Schools of thought just at the end of Vedic era so they were not out of that tradition. Until the Srilankan chronicles were written in 29-17 BCE, Buddhist canons were transmitted through oral media.

The artefacts are the visual representation of the same story telling process. Playing of drama and storytelling are the basic features of entertainment, which runs within a certain interval and it is intangible media but visual arts are the tangible and static form of art which captures moments. At this point it is to be said that narratives presented through art helped to endorse the essence of Buddhism to commons.

For Buddhist visual art it is to be said that the creators recreated the moments or incidents related Buddha. Scholar VidyaDehejia says —“Because Buddhist legends were narrated orally for at least four hundred years before the appearance of the earliest surviving visual narratives, in the medium of stone, at the start of the first century B.C., the tradition of “picture showmen” is of special relevance.”(Dehejia, Sep., 1990)

According to Dehejia, the narration of stories or incidents are found of different kinds on the stupas; somewhere it is ‘monoscenic narrative’ where a single episode is carved; ‘synoptic narrative’ where a story has with multiple episodes are carved on a single frame; ‘conflated narrative’ where multiple episodes are found with various features like multiple scenes of a single episode are shown; then comes ‘continuous narrative’ in which stories are presented with successive episodes with the repetition of the protagonist character and the last type ‘linear narrative’ where the protagonist character repeatedly appears at different places and times. The monoscenic and synoptic narrative style are common on the pillars, railings and gates of Bharut and Sanchi. But, the conflated and continuous narrative styles are prompt at

Amaravati stūpa complex. The linear narrative style can be observed at Goli, Andhra Pradesh. (Dehejia, Sep., 1990)

The narration of *Jātaka* stories are presented on the walls of Ajanta but the format is painting or frescos, and with this kind the artistic merit of Buddhist art tilted to another facet. Not only these various aspects or characters related to Buddhist India are also depicted in these paintings, which altogether generates information regarding: the society, status of women and other gender status, cultural exchange to trade and merchandising; fashion and the aspects of performing arts too. From stone carvings to painting was a great leap toward modernization of art technique. In Ajanta brilliant stone carvings are also present but the uniqueness of narration with frescos enriches the site as well as has lifted up the merit of Buddhist artistry.

E.B. Havell says, —“The true aim of the artist is not to extract beauty from the nature, but to reveal the Life within life, the Noumenon within phenomenon, the Reality within unreality, and the Soul within matter. When that is revealed, beauty reveals itself.” (E.B.Havell, 1920, p. 24)

As it has been said earlier the early period the Buddhist scriptures were orally transmitted in that case when people hears the story they made an imagination of the scenes but the lack of skill while story telling sometimes hampers the zeal to hear among people as psychologically gets distracted or the listeners fails to enjoy the stimulating expressions of an incident; for that the visual narratives grows much more interest to learn and access them into deeper level. Hence, it can be confirmed that visual narratives at that period especially, in Buddhist India were a media of edutainment what we are again following in the modern period in schools and higher institutions by launching audio-visual classes for the enhancement of learning. And, it is to be noted that the Buddhist art form presented the foremost specimen of visual art on Indic land; and this particular school of thought originated at the dusk of Vedic Brāhmanic tradition along with the halo of hereticism followed up to contemporary Jainism.

From another context, the ancient artisans appointed by the patrons under whose supervisions those arts were created; took a brilliant step creating such pieces of artwork. It is to be considered that the stuccos or carvings were the best form of edutainment even for partially or completely visually disabled people; as on caressing with hands over the stuccos and stone carvings, the essence of those narratives or stories were reachable to them too.

In modern period, ten museums worldwide viz. Museo Tiflogico in Madrid, Victoria & Albert Museum in London, Smithsonian Insight Tours in Washington DC, National Gallery of Prague, The Mary Rose Museum in Portsmouth (UK), Istanbul Modern in Turkey, Museum Van Loon in Amsterdam, Hands on the Wall in Santiago, The Tactual Museum in Athens and De Cordova Sculpture Park and Museum in USA— have already launched some

of the tactics like experiencing objects with touch sensation with audible narrations, for visually impaired visitors, and people are accessing them with great satisfaction.(Jorgen, 2015)

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