CHAPTER – I

INTRODUCTION

The genius of India reflects the great power nowhere else than in its philosophy, literature and sculpture. And nowhere except in sculptures has it been expressed with such broken continuity to display the ageless spirits of the Indian culture. Both the literary and plastic arts of India have for their aim, the fulfillment of one or the other of the purushartha, so that it might be brought into a homogeneous pattern with the rest to secure the integration of the human personality. The unrestricted vision of existence is symbolized in art as much by the curving beauty of the foliage and the grace of the nudity of the Yakshi, the ecstatic embrace of amorous lovers and the perfect clan of the liberated soul and so on and so forth.

Ancient Indian sculpture on the whole, was almost synonymous with iconography. Although Indian architects built palaces as well as temples, the former were more likely than not made of wood or other perishable materials. Art found its home in India in the temple which was not only the physical core, but the soul of the community. It was not a monastery of the ascetic, nor the foresters of the priest claiming semi-divine power, but the home of Dharma. This meaning and significance of the Temple has persisted from age to age, though its materials have changed from bamboo to wood, from wood to the living rock, from the living rock to stone, brick and marble built into edifices.

The traditions of Indian art have been continuous. In the course of time they have assimilated new elements, rejected old ones; evolved fresh conventions, and elevated crude popular art into stylized perfection, given back the perfection in some form or the other, even to the art of the toy-maker. But the central purpose, and association with the temple, have remained the same throughout.

The roots of Indian art can be traced to the Paleolithic and Neolithic ages. However, when we come to the Chalcolithic age, some 5,000 years ago, in which both stone and copper implements were in use, we find an art comparatively well-advanced for the then age of man in other parts of the earth. The Harappa culture, of which it was the expression, dominated the river-valley settlements in the whole of North Western India from the Punjab to Saurashtra. It was a mature art as we find it in the two torsos of red stone and grey statuette found at Harappa; in the terracotta figurines of the semi-nude mother goddess with hips, dressed in elaborated Mekhala, or the girdle and ornaments like
chhanavira, the characteristics which we see in many of the female figures in all succeeding centuries; and in the bust of the Priest clad in a painted mantle, perhaps the ancestors of the stone Yaksa.

Sculpture in India is one of the media for story-telling and its theme is overwhelmingly religious. The densely populated land teems in the temples and shrines, and the buildings are encrusted with sculptural works, which form a vast picture book of popular religious tales. The Hindus were old in spiritual wisdom when the Buddha Gautama came in the 6th century B.C. but it destined to inspire mankind’s noblest, achievement in the realm of devotional art in stone.

Technically the story begins nearly 200 years earlier, for excavations at Mohenjo-Daro and Chanhu-Daro in the Sind district of the valley of the Indus and at Harappa in the Punjab have uncovered clay figurines and seals which are important in that they indicate an advanced independent culture of the Indus valley by the year 2500 B.C. Because of the profusion of seals, it would seem possible that the Sumerians, who pushed into Mesopotamia possessed a common ancestry with the people of the Indus. India includes minorities of half a dozen ethnic strains, from Negroid and Mongoloid to Dravidian and Aryan types, but the central ruling element is commonly accepted as Arya-Dravidian. The Dravidians were dominant when the Indo-European Aryans, related to Persians and Greeks, poured down through the Northwestern passes and pressed the Dravidians into the South. The Aryans established themselves as the governing power, shaped the common religion and made their Brahmans the only priests; basically they developed a Aryan language – in its literary form, Sanskrit – as first among the tongues of India. To protect their superiority, as they saw it, the invaders established the caste system that persisted down to the 20th century. Neither upheavals caused by the Hun invasions of the 5th and 6th century and the Moslem invasions that lasted over many centuries, especially the 11th and 12th; nor again the conquests by the Moguls in the 15th and 16th century were able to destroy the caste system. In a country with a loose confederation of principalities – a mosaic of near independent states – invasions and conquests before the British administration seldom involved more than a segment of the land and a fraction of the people.

Aside from the Indus valley culture, the earliest history of sculpture in India tells of outside influences. When Alexandra invaded in the 4th century B.C. he left part of his army as settlers and administrators in the Gandharan section of the country. Three or four centuries later a development of classic sculpture occurred where Buddhism met surviving
Greek influence, or as is now believed, encountered new influences from Rome. Reflections of Greek realism and clean Greek cutting are notable, especially in the free standing figures of the Buddha, already known in several parts of India and the Ceylon by A.D.200.

In the 3rd century B.C. Asoka proclaimed Buddhism as the state religion of India and commemorated the occasion by erecting a great number of stone columns upon which his edicts were inscribed. These are the first monuments that can be dated. The craving sculpture would appear to have had the simplicity and elegance of Persian work although the pillars had native modifications.

During the first half of the 2nd century B.C. however the indigenous idioms began to reappear, and from then on, a truly Indian art flourished. An exuberant type of art developed within the Hindu religion one of the noblest faith, it encourages asceticism and mystic contemplation and promises rewards of harmony and peace to those wise ones who progress beyond the dance of the senses, and at the same time it recognizes the naturalness of indulgence in the sensual world. Much of the sculpture on the walls of the temple of the Sun at Konark in the district of Orissa is erotic and would not be tolerated by religious or civic authorities in the west, and such scenes are occasionally encountered elsewhere in India on religious shrines and temples. The decorative style is thought to have a Dravidian source. The supposition is that these early inhabitants had developed a “people’s art” and that when Aryan officials of a master caste initiated large sculptural projects as at Bharhut and Sanchi, they had no choice but to call on peoples sculptors. Thus a lush and tropical element came to be incorporated in the first stupas or architectural mounds ensuring relics of the Buddha.

The gateways at Sanchi, especially seem to be in the style of an art for the masses. Thenceforward the innumerable temples were embellished with figures, panel groups, and festoons of foliation. A particular art form in ancient India was cliff sculpture, a rocky outcrop carved into a 1000 figures, or the rock-cut temple, with rooms and passages carved cut and architectural pillars and walls shaped from the monolithic mass.

When the stupa at Bharhut and the great stupa at Sanchi were built and decorated, though the illustrated stories were Buddhist, no image of the Buddha appeared. A symbol sufficed; the tree appeared, instead of the Master, in the episode of the enlightenment, the wheel in the account of the first sermon, or a lotus blossom; or footprints, or a stupa. But gradually the Buddha’s injunction against the worship of images was forgotten; and his own likeness became the central motive. Whether the image was introduced first by the
artists of Mathura or Sarnath, or of some other center but jointly touched by Hellenism, or by the sculptures of Gandhara, seems still undetermined, though the date probably was the first century of the Christian era.

Elie Faure eloquently described the Indian temples and the sculptural style that derived from the tropical South in this book “Historic de l’Art”. “Everything may swell into a figure – the capitals, the pediments, the columns, the upper stages of the pyramids, the steps, the balustrades, the banisters of stairways, formidable groups rise and fall-rearing horses, warriors, human beings in clusters like grapes, eruptions of bodies piled one over the other, trunks and branches that are alive, crowds sculptured by a single movement as if sporting from one matrix…”

It becomes obvious to know something about the gods for whom the temples were erected, for divinities are always extensions of men’s hopes and fears. These hopes and fears are not eternal. They change in degree, if not in essence, for non-religious reasons. Economic growth, political ambition, technological development, war and cultural aggression – all these kill off old gods, create new ones and above all influence the visible expressions of worship, the houses of the gods, and their representation in stone and paint. It is the historical environment that partly accounts for the immense diversity of Indian art. The classes into which society was divided were sanctioned by religion, rebellion was expressed in religious terms. In much the same way the architecture of Indian temples cannot be divorced from Indian religion. The men who built the temples did not erect them as exercises in the silence of building, nor did the sculptors who adorned them practice art as art. Their purpose was the primary purpose of all traditional art, to teach men the great truths about the universe that was the first criterion which a building or a piece of sculpture or a painting had to satisfy.

Ancient Indian art was always close to life, reflecting and using the forms of nature and man. In the early Buddhist sanctuaries everyday life is displayed in the sculptural decoration. In the painted caves, the Buddha wears the form and symbols of the aristocracy of the time. In the medieval temples the life of the gods apes that of the king. Not all Buddhist art was close to ordinary people – the Buddhism of Ajanta was probably not quite as democratic as that of Sanchi – but essentially Buddhism was an egalitarian religion. The Hindu temples of Mamallapuram and the later ones of Northern and Eastern India, however, were class structures designed for the use of the upper strata of Indian society.

1 Cheney, S., Sculpture of the world- A History, p. 40.
The masses went on worshipping their own gods in their own ways, in places of worship which owed nothing to the patronage of kings or wealthy merchants.

The cultural milieu which produced the monuments at Sanchi was one dominated by the rich mercantile class of the cities. Its sources lay in the use to which Buddhism had been put by the state. The Buddha (C.560-480 B.C.) like his contemporary, the Jina Mahavira (C.540 – 468 B.C.), founder of Jainism, was a member of the Kshatriya or warrior class, and both were opposed to the brahmanical or priestly orthodoxy which, by its claim to magic powers dominated the social order and in many ways imposed its will upon the rulers as well as the mass of the ruled. Buddhism and Jainism appealed to the downtrodden to the lowest levels of the social order, and also to the merchants who were not accorded the social status which they felt their economic importance justified. In the time of the Maurya emperor Asoka (273-232 B.C.), Buddhism became identified with the rulers, though it was not made into the religion of the state.

Asoka’s influence upon temple architecture can be seen in the development of the stupa, a massive hemispherical structure surrounded by a balustrade and surmounted by a wood or stone umbrella. Essentially it was a funerary mound, such as had been common since prehistoric times, and it was firmly established in the minds of the people as a place of sanctity and magic. Now, it was given a new interpretation and a new purpose although it remained, in a sense, a funeral mound, for in the centre was placed a relic of the Buddha or of some Buddhist saint. Under Asoka, these magical structures were placed wherever important local gods were worshipped, just as later, Christians constructed shrines on the sites of heathen cults. This is why, at Sanchi for eg, local deities such as Yaksas, as well as more important gods, became the gatekeeper and servants of the Buddha. After the collapse of the Asokan empire many of the stupas disappeared, probably because the local deities reasserted themselves in the minds of the people. Buddhism survived among the commercial classes and through their patronage new stupas were erected and old ones refurbished.

The progressively more international character of Indian trade from the 1st century B.C. onwards brought new ideas and art forms to India. This was particularly apparent in the north where, besides the continuous contact of trade, Hellensied Kingdoms (successors to the empire of Alexandra the great) existed. The most important effect of this cultural interaction was upon the Buddhist ideas and their expression. Originally, the Buddha had

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1 Edwardes, M., Great Buildings of the world Indian temples and palaces, p. 50.
been accepted as a man, a great teacher undoubtedly, but a human being nonetheless. Though in the sculpture which told the tales of his life before he achieved the state of enlightenment he could be represented in human form, therefore, he was represented only by such symbols as footprints, the wheel, or an empty throne. This symbolism was for too austere for converts. Even the presence of the old gods and goddesses in the antechambers was no real substitute if the main hall was empty. A real saviour God was called for and a God that was not an abstraction but a visible being.

This growing need was satisfied by a new type of Buddhism and a Buddha himself in human form. All kinds of influences are apparent in both the new philosophy and the new sculpture. The first personified representations of the Buddha that have survived have much in common with the Greco-Roman form of the God Apollo. The chronology and origin of these Buddha figures is still the subject of controversy; suffice it to say that the foreign influences which introduced the figure of the Buddha to Indian art were tremendous importance of its development.

While these changes were taking place in the philosophy and social appeal of Buddhism, as well as in its iconography, the religion against which Buddhism had originally emerged as a revolt was also changing. Brahmanism, as it is properly called prior to this period, was becoming what is today known as Hinduism. From a multiplicity of gods, a Trinity emerged Brahma, the creator, Vishnu, the preserver, and Siva the destroyer representing the cycle of nature.

In all this, naturally enough, the architecture of religion played an important role. The supporters of each religion sought to maintain its prestige by constructing temples. Rulers none too secure in their dominions might perhaps persecute one religion while conciliating the others with donations and patronage. It depended not as much on religious conviction as on political reality, and it is this which accounts for the survival of regional styles.

We recognize in the Buddha type of sacred figure one of the great artistic inspirations of the world. We hold that the existence of a distinct, a potent, and a living tradition of art is a possession of priceless value to the Indian people, and one which they, and all who admire and respect their achievements in this field, ought to guard with the utmost reverence and love. While opposed to the mechanical stereotyping of particular traditional forms, we consider that it is only in organic development from the national art of the past that the path of true progress is to be found.
The popularization of Indian Art has been mainly the work of Dr. Coomarswamy and Mr. E.B. Havell. To a certain extent their methods of exposition agree, the vein being interpretational, with a stressing of the literary. For Dr. Coomarswamy, “all that India can offer to the world proceeds from her philosophy”, a state of “mental concentration” (yoga) on the part of the artist and the enactment of a certain amount of ritual being postulated as the source of the “spirituality” of Indian art. The increasing hieratic art of medieval and modern India, especially in the South, in doubtless closely knit with this literary tradition. The Bronze Nataraja loaned by Lord Ampthill to South Kensington is supreme among a hundred examples of mere, hack-work. These are clothed with life and beauty of form. The miracle is a perennial one and world-wide; we marvel at the hand and eye that shaped this wonder. However, it is evident that many such images are not aesthetically worth the metal they are cast in.

The pageantry of Indian History is as glorious as that of any country in the world. Artistically it falls into two periods, the first of which, ending with the Muhammadan conquest, is an epic in itself. This period discloses the development of a great art. From the vividly pictorial, strictly popular sculpture of the period, based on a living tradition, increased skill and under vision lead to the classic art of the Gupta century. Henceforward it is evident that a literary tradition has come into being which may rightly be designated Medieval. The art of the great cave-temples give place to the art of the temple-cities of Bhuvaneshwar and Khajuraho, where the literary tradition crystallizes into the iconographical forms of the Sastras.

Indian religious history must be unfolded against a background of primitive savagery and sorcery. The Vedas, cannot be accepted as the sole source of religious thought in India, or as anything but a critical and highly selective representation of this unvoiced and necessarily formless background. This relationship between Brahmanism and the primitive, between the formulated philosophy of the schools and the worship and propitiation born of the vague fears and desires of savages, is present throughout the history of India, both religious and political. The Atharva Veda was not known to the early Buddhist writers but its practices and beliefs were and they cannot be separated from the more artistic and political polytheism of the less popular, more orthodox but not more ancient collections. In the same way the powers and manifestations of the Puranas and Epics are not necessarily modern because they do not appear in the Veda; in a sense they are more ancient, being native to the soil.
Among the lesser gods that keep their place on the fingers of the orthodox are to be found spirits of the Earth and of the Mountain, the four guardians of the Quarters with Versavana-Kuvera at their head; Gandharvas, heavenly musicians; Nagas, the snake people who have their world beneath the waters of streams and tanks, but who sometimes are identified with the Tree spirits; and Garudas, half men, half birds who by kind are the deadly foes of the Nagas.

In the Maha Samaya Suttanta is described a great gathering of all the gods of the ten thousand world systems to pay reverence to the Buddha in the great forest of Kapilavasthu. Dhatarattha, king of the East, Virulhaka, king of the South, Virupakka, king of the West and Kuvera, king of the North arrive with their Yaksa host and all their vassals. The Nagas come from Nabhasa, Vesali, Tacchaka, and Yamuna; among them Eravana. Their enemies the twice born garudas, too, are there and also the Asuras, dwellers in the ocean. Fire, Earth, Air and Water are present and the Vedic gods, and lastly the powers of Mara who bids creation rejoice at his own defeat at the Buddha’s hands.

Another list of the same description, but possibly earlier, is to be found in the Atanatiya. Both lists are, patently, the outcome of a priestly attempt to bring these hundred and one strange spirit and godlings within the sphere of Buddhist teaching, by representing them as gathered in hosts at the Buddhist feet. The group of Yaksas, Yaksinis and Devatas carved upon the stone pillars of the stupa railing at Bharhut fulfill exactly the same function. They are manifestly earth-born and possess something of the delicate beauty of all forest creatures. Like all primitive powers they are exactly in their demands and when neglected or provoked their anger is implacable and cruel. Though they are adorned with earthly jewels to represent the treasures they have in their gift, but are to be more closely identified with the trees under which they stand and the forest flowers they hold.

This primitive cult of trees and tree-spirits has a long history. In the sculptures of the early period the Buddhists are represented only by symbols, among which are their distinctive trees. Gautama attained enlightenment seated beneath the Asvattha or Pipal tree sacred form of old, for it was from the Pipal wood that the soma vessels were made and also the sacred fire-drill. In the Atharva Veda it is said that the gods of the third heaven are seated under the Asvattha and it may also be the “tree with fair foliage” of the Rig Veda under which Yama and the blessed are said to pass their time. In the Upanishads the Tree spirits have definitely materialized character. They, like all things, are subject to the re-birth. If the spirit leaves the tree, the tree withers and dies, being worshipped with perfumes, flowers, and food. They dwell in many kinds of trees but the Banyan seems most
The scarlet-flowered silk cotton tree and the Sal tree as well as the Pipal retain their sanctity to-day. The goddess of the Sal is worshipped as giver of rain by the orans of Chota Nagpur, and in South Mirzapur the Korwas place the shrine of Dharti Mata under its branches. In the Jatakas more than once, animal and even human sacrifices are spoken of in connection with tree-worship. To-day the slaughter of cocks and goats is added to the more usual offering of flowers and sweetmeats in extreme cases of propitiation (marriages of just being trees, and between women and trees, are an extension of this subject, the mango, sacred basil, and jasmine commonly).

The character and functions of these deities correspond closely to those of the Mother-Goddesses of Southern India. Among these are Mariamma-goddess of small-pox, Kaliamma- of beasts and forest demons, Huliamma-a tiger goddess, Ghantalamma-she who goes with bells, and Mamillanamma-she who sits beneath this female pantheon appears as the Ashta Shakti or eight female powers. However, all mother goddesses distinguish themselves by the fact that they are acknowledged to be local in their influence warding off or inflicting calamities of various kinds, but strictly limited in their sphere of action.

It is against this complex background of creed and culture that Indian philosophy and Indian art, and all things Indian, must be viewed. Here lies the origin of the lovely treatment of flower and fruit at the hands of Indian sculptors and painters, and also of the imagination that kindled their vision and gave such dynamic power to their designs.

It is necessary, however, to bear in mind that since the earliest phase of Indian art the human form has gained much importance being a part and parcel of all the succeeding ages till date. In the compositions of the Bharhut-Sanchi the human figure became the focus of attraction, and all other forms were subordinated to it, being used mainly to give it relief and emphasize its importance. With the growing importance of human figure, nature receded into the background, but in so doing it left behind its unending and undulating rhythm in the human form. The human figure, termed as the image, is hence the pivot of Indian sculpture, and this, as the conscious medium of the divine concept, experiences certain distinct transformations in respect of modeling. The preference of the youthful form has always been recognized in the sculptural art. Since the urge of life movement is the most vital in youth, it is always the youthful form that the artist selected for representation. Nothing was beyond the skill of these artists, neither battle-array nor the vivid delineation of episodes. They could unite a tender naturalism with idealism as never before. And in the
doctrine of transmigration, they had discovered a unity of creation which inspired them to weave animals, trees and men and women into the harmony of collective life.

In my research, I have displayed before the readers the study of those Yaksis whose shoulders loaded with broad chains, arms and legs covered with metal rings, and the body encircled with richly linked girdles which obviously prevented Indian sculptors from producing an anatomically correct form. Yet the main anatomical facts are remarkably well treated, especially the difficult movement of the hips. In fact, it is very surprising that in these forms we find such a high degree of technical achievement and such careful study of anatomy.

The swelling roundness of form is denoted further by the constructing tightness of the belt and by the contrast of the straight and angular tubular limbs with swelling convexities of bust and pelvis. A sense of vitality is communicated by the tense twisting of the torso on its axis especially in the Yaksi figures of Sanchi. In the frankness of their erotic statement the Sanchi Yaksis are a perfect illustration of the union of the spiritual and sensual metaphor that runs like a thread through all religious art in ancient India. These forms of Yaksas and Yaksis represent the beliefs of the common people and thus a common man could easily identify himself with such culture and life-style. There is an all-pervading serenity or cheerfulness and those sculptured ladies make love or display their charms with frank innocence. There is very little of other worldliness in these sculptures, voluptuousness and passion are as important as grace and spiritual charm.