(a) Context of Women in Classical Indian Sculpture

In ancient Indian sculpture developed and flourished long before the time of which we have archaeological records. The justification for the present effort which reproduces selected examples of Indian sculpture is the importance that the art of carving, modeling and casting has held in Indian civilization for more than 400 years. India provides today the best examples of a cultural continuity that has survived a long and diversified history, in which changes have occurred, old images of life have been altered and new elements and influences have been absorbed, enriching and variegating the cultural stands, without, however, breaking them.

Throughout the centuries sculpture in India has been a dominant expression of the people. The basic continuity of life of the majority of the population still living in villages, still mainly agriculturists, to great extent following ancient patterns of culture, including devotion to images representing the maintained pre-eminence.

Throughout history sculpture has played an important role in Indian society, serving religion, but also secular requirements such as the ornamentation of items of luxury as well as objects of daily use. These latter examples are rare, for articles used casually tend to become damaged, to wear out and then to be discarded. However, a sufficient number survives to illustrate the decorative inventiveness and skill of hand of the artists who fashioned them. The earliest sculptures came from the Indus valley. The human and animal figures excavated in that region show a high degree of finish and excellence and disclose an advance stage of development of the art in the third millennium B.C. these exhibit the skill of the sculpture in carving the figures in stone with exact anatomical details, delineating expression and movement with vigor and effect.¹

The abundant collection of statuettes in stone, bronze and terracotta, found in the buried cities of Mohanjo Daro in Sindh and Harappa in the Punjab, dates back almost certainly to the third millennium B.C., but this Indo-Sumerian art does not seem to

¹. Mathur, N.L., Sculpture in India, New Delhi, 1972, p. 19.
have any links with that of the later period of the so called Vedic time. The earliest specifically Indian sculptures in existence belong to 3rd century B.C., though there are references to various artistic crafts in literature before this time.²

As in the Harappan sculpture, the remarkable maturity of the work, which appears suddenly and without any hint of artistic context, is astonishing, quite the opposite of what one would expect at an early stage of development. A previous tradition of sculpture in perishable materials such as wood or clay has been proposed in explanation for this unusual circumstance; foreign influence has also been posited, and some connection with work at Persepolis in Iran is evident. Nevertheless, it is clear that whatever was borrowed was quickly transformed by the infusion of a plastic style characteristic of Indian sculpture. In particular, the voluminous rendering of the Didarganj Yakshi are far removed from anything produced earlier in Iran.³

The next period of Indian art, which extends roughly over the first two centuries B.C., is the best represented by a section of the railing surrounding the famous stupa of Bharhut. Not more than a hundred years separate this work from that of the preceding period, but the differences is startling. Rather than moving to an even more accomplished realization of volume, which may have seemed hardly possible, the sculptures took the opposite direction, producing highly abstract forms that stressed both flat and cubic shapes. The outlines are sharp and angular, the surface hard, and the ornament prices and detailed. The loosely joined parts of the body give the figures a puppet like character. Instead of being established on the ground, the somewhat weightless figures seem to float above it. These un-naturalistic features, together with the emotionless, masklike faces, result in a certain unearthly, hieratic beauty unique to this style.⁴

The sculpture of a woman in Bharhut depicts a woman in bed chamber. This scene is correlated with the Jataka story. This scene is showing the scene before the birth of Gautama his mother Maya Devi saw a dream in which a divine elephant descended from the Tushita heaven and entered her womb. The scene is carved on the medallion of the rail post. The queen sleeps on a couch with her right hand. A lamp with high stand burns towards her feet. Two attendants seated on cushion seem half asleep while

---

Plate-1 Maya’s Dream, Bharhut Sculpture
Plate- 2  Gaja Laxmi, Bharhut Sculpture
the third one has her hands folded in adoration. The divine elephant approaches her from above.\(^5\)

The portions of the railing and the single gate preserved form the Bharhut stupa are lavishly carved. Figures and subjects represented are frequently labeled so that they provide helpful identification of scenes from the life of the Buddha and from the Jataka tales.

The Yakshi is carved on a post of the railing with red sand stone its height is 250 cm and is represented as grasping a branch of a tree above her head with one leaf around its trunk, thus emphasizing her role as a tree deity. She stands in a dance pose on an elephant. The sculptors understanding and skill are evident in the rendering of the form of the animal. The Yakshi wears a profusion of jewelry and a diaphanous pleated lower garment, held in place by a beaded belt and a knotted sash. She is the ideal of the Indian female form with large rounded breasts, a narrow waist and ample hips. The image has a certain archaic awkwardness of pose of great appeal and decorative effect.\(^6\)

This beautiful figure of Gaja Lakshmi is carved in a medallion on both sides of rid post. It shows a full vase with overflowing stalked lotus buds and flowers. On the central flower stands Lakshmi holding a stalked lotus with her left hand and touching the left breast with the right hand. She is flanked by two elephants that stand on the full blown lotuses and anoint the deity with the vases held in their upraised trunks. From the lower outer ends of the medallion suspend buds while upper part on two corners shows swans perched on the full blown lotuses.\(^7\)

The sculptures of the Bharhut took the opposite direction, producing highly abstract forms that stressed both flat and cubic shapes. The outlines are sharp and angular, the surface hard and the ornament precise detailed. The loosely joined parts of the body give the figures a puppet like character. These non-naturalistic features, together with

---

7. Sharma, R.C., op. cit., p. 28.
the emotionless, mask like faces, result in a certain unearthly, hieratic beauty unique to this style.\(^8\)

The elaborately sculptured gates of the Great stupa of Sanchi are considered to date form the late first century B.C. and early first century A.D. There are four facing each of the cardinal directions. They are thought to have been carved and installed over a considerable period, possibly about fifty years. The Sanchi gates are lavishly carved. A Yakshi (tree spirit) of the conventional female form, of large rounded breasts, slender waist and ample hips, wearing a transparent skirt, jewelry on ears, wrists and ankles, takes a graceful pose, suggesting the dance, as the bracket reproduced here.\(^9\)

In the great stupa at Sanchi, Yakshis beneath trees that serve as brackets supporting the lowermost architrave. The image here, said to be from the west gateway, is a particularly fine, it damaged, example of these Yakshi sculptures. The deep fissure at the waist has been patched with plaster. Though the figure appears to lack a lower garment, the folded cloth brought up and tucked in at the back proves otherwise. The jewelry consists of a girdle of several strands with two long strings that cross between the breasts (where they are clasped by a rosette) as well as at the back. The hair is arranged in two flat braids joined to each other at the top and completely covering the back, above which are swinging jeweled garlands, a part of the now missing coif. This gently swelling body is filled with life is conveyed the sensuous, resilient rendering of the surface of its flesh, and this mastery of the depiction of volume and texture indicates the great change that occurred in Indian sculpture during the approximately one hundred years that separate Bharhut railing from the Sanchi gates. The form moves again towards the kind of naturalism seen in the Maurya period, though the surfaces here are markedly softer. A sense of weight again pervades the figure as it swings to the side, the carving contours of the thigh and the arched girdle providing smooth and easy counter-rhythms that flow in harmony with body’s shapes. The figure thus stands endowed with a lithe and radiantly sensuous beauty unparalleled in Indian art. In the bracket figures of Sanchi, the female form comes fully into its own as an artistic subject.\(^10\) The Sanchi stupa is a joyous exploitation of mass an volume.

\(^8\) Indian Museum, Calcutta, Section of a railing with Yakshi from Bharhut; Chandra, Pramod, The Sculpture of India 3000 B.C. – 1300 A.D., Washington, 1985, Fig. 8, p. 24.
\(^9\) Morley, Grace, op. cit., p.34; Northgate, Sanchi, administered by the Archaeological Survey of India.
\(^10\) Chandra, Pramod, op. cit., pp. 52-53; Archaeological Museum, Sanchi.
Plate- 3 Bust of a Goddess, Sarnath, c. 7th Century, Indian Museum Calcutta
Plate 4 Head of a Goddess, Banaras, c. 7th Century, Bharat Kala Bhawan Banaras
Plate 5  Bodhisattva, Sarnath, c. 7th Century, National Museum New Delhi
The forms are much fuller and soft, melting surface endow the figures with an earthiness quite different from the hieratic aloofness of Bharhut. Ornaments and jewelry are greatly reduced.

The principal episodes of the Buddha’s life, sculptured again and again on slab for stupas, or for their railings, have seldom been so neatly and economically summarized pictorially as in the panel of Sarnath stupa. This panel is to be read from the lower left. Queen Maya Devi, Siddhartha’s mother, is shown lying down. The small elephant that she dreamt had entered her body hovers above her. At the right, she stands clasping a branch with her left hand, and the child issuing from her slightly protruding right hip is received by Indra. In the centre, the child, in larger size, making the gesture of reassurance, stands on a long-stemmed lotus.

The bust of a female figure from Sarnath with drooping shoulders and globular breasts appears to have been a part of a slender body. The oval and slightly pointed at the lower end face, with almost meditative eyes is expressive of serenity and inner calm. The damaged nose, in all probability, was also gently pointed. The lips, small and closed, express a quite restraint. The hair is pulled back and tied in a large elegant bun and the locks are horizontally arranged one above the other. The pearl diadem is set in front of the head and the chignon is bound by a circular fillet. A chain ornament borders the headdress. She wears two necklaces, one of which falls between the breasts that are fully developed and treated in a typical Gupta plastic mode.

The female head from Banaras is almost similar in style. From its idealized and graceful face it may have belonged to a deity. Her face is beaming with a sweet smile. She is gazing down; the eye brows are ridged unlike the preceding example. The nose seems originally to have been sharp. The lips are thick and full, the chin is pointed. The hair treatment is similar to that of the Sarnath female bust.

In an image of Bodhisattva from Sarnath the deity is shown standing in abhanga pose against a plain stela. Stela is a single piece and carried up to the top where it serves as a frame to entire composition. The upper part of the stela is damaged, so

12. Indian Museum Cat. No. 9508/A 24229.
14. Coomaraswamy, A.K., History of Indian and Indonesian Art, Dower (ed.) New York, 1965, Fig. 176.
also the feet and the pedestal. The physiognomic features of the Bodhisattva are elegant and graceful. The torso is broad in the upper section and gradually attenuated in the lower. The arms and limbs are lithe and pliant. The ovular face is full. The eyebrows are deeply cut and the eyes are half closed. The nose seems to be pointed and the sensitive lips are well formed and firm. The facial treatment maintains the Gupta classical plastic characteristics. The neck has distinct parallel curves, a legacy of the Gupta style. The ornaments are simple and scarce. The long hair is suggested by separate vertical incised lines.\(^{15}\)

A fragmentary bust of Bodhisattva from Sarnath\(^{16}\) showing the rounded contour with broad shoulders, fuller arms and a gracefully attenuated waist is reminiscent of the Gupta plastic norms. The face is rounded and full with broad forehead. The clearly marked eye-brows and eye-lids have gained separate volumes. The nose though damaged appears to have been sharp and pointed, and the lips are tightly closed and firm. His ornaments are simple but prominently shown especially the headdress, earrings, necklace and armlets. The female cauri bearer on his right is remarkable for its tender appearance.

A fine image of a woman representing the Buddhist divinity Tara, the feminine counterpart of a Bodhisattva, was discovered to the south of the main shrine at Sarnath.\(^{17}\) The weight of body is thrown gently on the right leg, so that it is imbued with the same rhythm as the other fine examples from the Sarnath School. The lower garment is hardly visible, and an equally sheer upon cloth, the hem of which is clearly visible over the right breast and left thigh, is drawn across the body and left arm, failing at the side in pleated folds. The jewelry is rich, yet delicate, and consists of a multi stranded girdle, festooned armlets, and a series of three necklaces. One of these is made up of graded beads with an oblong central spacer, the second of coiled pearl strands, and the third, of strings of pearls that pass between the breasts and cross over the waist. Large circular earrings adorn the ears. Although the face is damaged, the gentle meditative expression remains. The elaborate coiffure consists of several rows of ringlets and curls arranged over the forehead and to the side of the head, all topped by a large bun. A fillet decorated with a tall central plaque, the beaded bands of which

\(^{15}\) The Sarnath Bodhisattva is preserved in the National Museum, New Delhi.  
\(^{16}\) Saraswat, S.K., *Survey of Indian Sculpture*, Calcutta, 1957, Fig. 64.  
\(^{17}\) Sarnat Museum Cat. No. 35.
Plate- 6 Bodhisattva, Sarnath, c. 9th Century, Sarnath Museum
Plate- 7 Tara Sarnath, c. 9th Century, Sarnath Museum
are concealed by the first row of curls, is worn across the forehead. A swath of folded
hair rests on the right shoulder, while a few loose locks stray over the left. The tall
halo, which backs the entire body, has a scalloped edge with a pearled margin. In the
left hand the figure holds a ripe pomegranate, which has burst open to reveal a row of
seeds.\[^{18}\]

The modeling of the legs and torso is tender, reticent, and of the utmost delicacy. The
shimmering, soft quality of the cloth, which is practically invisible, is skillfully
suggested by its trembling outline. The same keen observation is seen in the rendering
of the body surfaces, the puffy swath of hair resting on the right shoulder, the freely
tumbling ringlets over the forehead, and in the shape and texture of the
pomegranate.\[^{19}\]

The Amravati sculptures are very vigorous, full of movement, vibrating with life and
energy and charming in every detail. The figures are characterized by slim and blithe
features and are carved in the most difficult poses and curves. In every case there is a
refinement over the rather coarse and sensual concept of beauty developed by the
sculpture in the earlier period. Men and women are presented in a graceful form.\[^{20}\]
Figures and settings are arranged in a number of planes and these are full of
movement and excitement.

In the Tusita heaven above the stupa, the Buddha is seated on a throne receiving
worship. The figures of Nagaraja and his wife who are worshipping are very
expressive and are well drawn with anatomical details. The reliefs have numerous
carvings of scenes of music and dance which exhibit a well developed sense of
movement and composition. Figures of women are lovely, and their gait is rhythmic.
The marbles of Amravati offer "delightful studies of animal life, combined with
extremely beautiful conventional ornament. The most varied and difficult movements
of the human figures are drawn and modeled with great freedom and skill.\[^{21}\]

The sculpture of an unidentified scene was discovered at Bhitari. In the centre is a
man whose head and body are covered by a thick cloth. He offers a child to the
outstretched hands of a woman. She is accompanied by a female attendant, who raises

\[^{18}\] Samath Museum Cat. No. 28.
\[^{19}\] Chandra, Pramod, op. cit., p. 88.
a finger in a gesture of astonishment. Behind the man is a fierce, grimacing turf of astonishment. Behind the man is a fierce, grimacing figure holding a club. Two dwarfs occupy the lower section of the panel. One bends to the side and turns his back to glance in the direction of the child; the female dwarf in the centre holds what looks like a tray.  

The image of Sri Lakshmi has a globular pot at the base from which issues a column of lotus flowers, foliage, and buds, and a pair of peacocks perched on a leaf in the center at the rear. In front, with each foot resting on a rounded flower is the goddess of fertility and wealth. Her association with this lotus is stressed, for she is not only supported by this flower, but her whole body adheres to the plant and thought of as emerging from it. Depicted as a mature, womanly figure of gentle men, she rests one hand on her breast, the source of milk and human sustenance, while placing the other holding a twig of leaves, on the girdle just below the navel. The face is gently lowered, very much in the attitude of a mother nursing her child. Though her face has been damaged, the beneficent smile is unmistakable. Her hair is elaborately dressed; she wears ear rings, a flat necklace close to her throat and a long string of large beads falling between her breasts. Her arm bands are elaborately carved and multiple bracelets adorn her forearms. A skirt of transparent material, gathered into a series of pleats in the front centre descends from a scarf and a broad beaded belt, with tassels, to the ankles which are encircled by heavy ornaments. Both the iconography and style of the image derived from the Yakshi figures of Sanchi. The maternal idea of female beauty is endowed here with the same heavy, languorous grace, but is carved in a more complex manner. The function of this image is not known. The top of the pillar, leveled off at a later time, may have once supported a bowl or similar object, a feature preserved in some other images of this type.

The images of Yakshis in both sides, was once a supporting bracket, similar to the type found at Sanchi. The figures both have one hand raised above the head holding the branch of an Asoka tree, the other hand in all probability once rested on the hip. The image on the better preserved side has a gorgeous coiffure, the braided hair coiled in ten rolls that fan out behind the head in an elegant swirl. The forehead ornament is

---

22. Chandra Pramod, op. cit., p. 90, Cat. No. 33
24. Morley Grace, op. cit., p. 54, Pl. 16.
a crescent moon held in place by beaded strings. The background foliage is rendered with remarkable skill, each trembling leaf endowed with weight, volume, and brisk surging movement. Though the round face ("moon shaped") and a breast are damaged, and the portion below the waist is missing the image is in much better condition than its counterpart on the reverse.  

At Bhutesar in Mathura has representations of Yakshis, but none of them is associated with a tree, as is traditional. Rather, they are shown simply participating in the pleasures of life, dressing and adorning themselves or playing with pet birds. Carved above, in a register demarcated by a railing motif, are amorous or carousing couples.

In the example displayed here, a woman, her head tilting drunkenly to the side, is hanging onto her lover, who clings to his cup of wine. The Yakshi stands in an elegant and carefree posture, putting a garland of coiled strings of pearls around her neck. The body is animated by a lively rhythm, the face expressive of youthful happiness.

The sculpture shows a young woman in profile, leaning against an asoka tree. Her pose refers to the ancient belief that a tree will not bloom unless struck by the foot of a woman. The woman holds a flower and looks at it, head lowered in thought. Her slender body is tenderly modeled the restrained and delicate contours reinforcing the pensive and wistful mood.

Only the lower half of this sculpture has been preserved. The woman’s brisk, twisting motion accentuates the folds of flesh at the waist and causes the long chain necklace and its pendant to swing over the right thigh. It has also caused the lower garment to slip away from the waist, although this could have happened in the woman’s attempt to cast off the scorpion. The nervous flutter of folds along the edge of the skirt, where the garment has begun to peel away from the body, reinforces the sense of agitated movement. A scorpion is shown in the narrow band of cubic rocks carved in relief on the pedestal. Although the forms are full, a quick, gliding line characterizes the contours together with the soft, diffuse shadows shaping the limbs and the thin.

25. State Museum Lucknow J 598 collection; Chandra, Pramod, op. cit., pp. 54-55, Cat. 9 front and back.
26. Indian Museum Calcutta Collection; Chandra Pramod, op. cit., p. 56.
sensitive lines outlining the garment, they create a work of art of singular individuality and accomplishment.\textsuperscript{28}

This sculpture in red sandstone, of a female figure, with a bird on the left shoulder and holding a bird cage in the right hand, adorned the post of a railing of a small stupa. It has been reproduced frequently as an especially charming example of the type. It is one of a group, from a Mathura site, of which the Yakshis, either with both feet on a crouching figure as in this piece, or in a dance pose on a similar crouching figure, carry a variety of objects. Above each one is a compartment of the pillar, like a window or balcony, on which other smaller figures are depicted in different activities.

All the figures on the posts wear what appears to be a transparent lower garment, draped in various ways, below a decorated belt; they have anklets and bracelets and necklaces of different types and their hair is arranged in a variety of styles. Often on the back of such posts some Jataka story is sculptured, or there is the round form of the stylized lotus flower. Those unfamiliar with Indian sculpture are often puzzled to find such representations of female beauty associated with religious structures.\textsuperscript{29}

Mathura sculpture adds further refinements and complexities to the Sanchi style. The female figures, for example are completely unified and coordinated entities, so that the movements initiated in one limb ripples throughout the rest of the body. The rhythms animating the figures become progressively more subtle and varied; at times they are so full of life that they convey an impression of playful dance, a sense heightened by the increasing tension that enlivens the surface. Emotions are no longer confined to the face alone, but are expressed by the attitude of the entire body, a feature most evident in the figure of a woman holding a flower. All these changes result in a greatly humanized style in which the distinction between the secular and the spiritual, never very clear in Indian art further obscured.\textsuperscript{30}

The Gupta artist laid stress on naturalism. In expressing the proportions of the body, he took its measurements not from the geometrical criteria of Greeks, but from the living curves found in nature.\textsuperscript{31} The indigenous art of image making of men and deities, reached its highest watermark. No art in the world can be compared with the

\begin{enumerate}
\item \textsuperscript{28} Indian Museum, Calcutta Collection 25021.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Indian Museum Calcutta Collection.
\item \textsuperscript{30} Chandra Pramod, op. cit., pp. 27-28.
\item \textsuperscript{31} Mathur, N.L., op. cit., p. 18.
\end{enumerate}
Gupta art in the revelation of the majesty and sublimity, charm and tenderness of the human figure. The Gupta type is characterized by its refinement, a clear delineation of the feature, curly hair, greater variety of mudras, elaborately decorated nimbus, the covering of one or both shoulders and extremely diaphanous robe clearly revealing the figure and by a lotus or lion pedestal usually with figures of donor. Gupta sculpture reflects the high accomplishment and depth of human insight of the artist.

The human figure become the main subject matter for the artists in the Gupta period and the figures were sculptured in stone and other materials as far as practicable in their ideal forms. Thus for working out the ideal shapes and for different components in the body formations, the artists studied intently the possible movements and simile in nature and incorporated them accordingly.

The oval shape of a hen’s egg was imbibed for the shape of a face (Kukkutandaval). They are of a bow supplied the ideal shape of brows (capakaram); for the shape of a brow, the movement of a delicate nim leaf (margosa) was also followed in certain images. The eyes were worked out in various shapes for indicating different expressions such as like a bow (capakaram), as a lotus petal or a bud (padmapatra), like the eyes of a deer (mrgakriti), like the belly of a fish (matsyodaram) or just as the petal of utpala (blue lotus) flower. The spiral movement of a conch shell was adopted for the formation of a neck (kamburgiva), the shape of a chin followed the look of a mango seed (amra-vijam), the nose resembled the beak of a parrot (sukanasa). The pendant of an arm conformed to the shape of an elephant’s trunk (gajatundakriti), the forearm followed the formation of a young plantain tree (bula kaddali kandam), a woman’s waist the middle part of a kettle drum (damaru madhyam) was preferred. For the shape of knee-cap the outer contour of a crab was followed (karkatakriti) while for the shape of calf, the form of a fish was taken as an ideal (matsyakriti) and for showing the two feet projecting in front jointly and, preferably while showing a figure standing in sama pada sthanaka pose, the classical artist imitated a full-blown lotus with petals (carana-kamal).

The Mathura sculptures worked in red sandstone with either white or buff spots or striations. It is interesting to note that the Sarnath sculptures, which were largely

influenced by the Mathura school, even went so far as to cover their cream sandstone pieces subsequently with red pigments so that they appeared as red Mathura sandstone. Sarnath sculptures worked with buff coloured chunar sandstone. The material, as such, helped the sculptures to bring in a smooth and shining texture less surface in the figures. Sculptures made with this material appeared soft and graceful with gliding lines and rhythmic plastic surface.

(b) Women in Ajanta Cave Paintings

The paintings of Ajanta occupy a very significantly place in Indian Art History. These caves are richly decorated with paintings. These are sufficient to give us a fairly good idea of the achievement of the ancient Indian artist. The paintings mostly depict the stories of the Buddha’s past lives as described in the Jatakas and the Avadanas. In executing them in paint the artists very naturally depicted the contemporary life. The material culture that is depicted in the paintings is extremely helpful in building up a picture of life in Ancient India in general and in the Deccan in particular.

At Ajanta a rough under plaster was used on the rock, made of clay, cow dung, chopped husks and little stones, and a thin coat of shell-lime put on top. The outlines were pounced, then firmly drawn, colour filled in, and the final dark and high lights added on top, the colours being bound not only by lime crystals, as in Italy, but also by tempera made of boiled tamarisk seeds or sap of local shrubs. Some of the walls at Ajanta were waxed under Italian supervision, but the glorious ceiling of Caves 1 and 2 remain as matt and brilliant as when first painted.

Thousands of guidelines on how to paint must have been developed for the use of the members of guilds of painters. The treatise provides exhaustive details of methods used in the rendering of different kind of people, animals and landscapes; three different kind of people, animals and landscapes; three different ways of carrying out shading; instructions on way of using colours and even on how to prepare colours. From these descriptions we learn that the artist would have spent many days and sometimes even weeks just in preparing the paints which were to be used in the caves.

35. Ibid. p. 32.
One may well imagine that, after such pains taken by each artist, in the preparation of his materials, putting the colours on the walls would have been regarded by him as an action of devotion.\(^{37}\)

In the period of two or three hundred years which preceded, the earliest stone monasteries, much must have happened in the field of colouring and drawing to necessitate changes also in the technique of surface preparation. In the cave temples the rough surface of the naked stone walls was first covered with a layer of potter’s clay taken from the slimy beds of pools and mixed with molasses, bdellium and rice husks, which perhaps animal glue as a binding medium. On this a thin layer of lime plaster was applied as priming. A buffalo skin was boiled in water until it became soft. Sticks were then made of the paste and dried in the sunshine. It is started that if colour is mixed with this hard plaster, called Vajralepa, it makes it fast, and if white mud is mixed with it, it serves as a perfect medium for coating the walls. Vajralepa coating was usually done in three layers over a plaster which consisted of powdered brick, burnt conches and sand, mixed with a liquid preparation of molasses and drop of a decoction of mudga (*phaseolus mungo*). To this quantity of mashed ripe bananas or tree raisins and the pulp of Bell fruit (anglemarmelos) was also added. After the mixture had dried it was again ground down and mixed with molasses and water until it became soft.\(^{38}\)

The artists of Ajanta employed a simple palette consisting of five colours, as prescribed in the ancient treatise: white (Sweta), derived from lime, kaolin and gypsum; red (rakta) and yellow (Pita), obtained from ochre which was found in the nearby hills; black (Krishna) from soot, and green (*harit*), extracted from glauconitic a mineral which was also to be fond locally. To these was added, in the second phase of the paintings at Ajanta, the blue of lapis lazuli, which was brought from the north-western frontiers of India. These simple colours were blended to produce the innumerable nuances and shades which are found in the paintings. In the words of the *Vishnudharmottara Purana*, ‘It would be impossible to enumerate the mixed colours


in this world the mixture of two or three (primary colours) and through inventions of various states or conditions (i.e. shades or tones)\textsuperscript{39}

The wall surface was washed down with water until it was thoroughly clean and the plaster was applied with a spoon. This was the twofold process by which the wall was prepared for painting. A preliminary sketch in hematite was drawn on the surface while it was still slightly wet, followed by an under painting in grey or white monochrome, like the medieval Italian practice of \textit{terra verde}. The recent revelation of the depth to which the pigments are absorbed in the nearly two centimeter thick plaster has confirmed that the application of mineral colours on a semi wet surface, instead of a completely dry plaster, was a technique already known to Ajanta painters. On this surface an outline in cinnabar red was filled in with various colours, proceeding from under painting as the base to the appropriate colours of the subject. Finally, when dry of semi fresco was finished off, a dark outline for final definition and a burnishing process to give luster to the surface. Even in the earliest caves the “Eight limbs” of the \textit{Samaranganasutradhara} were apparently known. These were: \textit{Vartika} (the rayon), \textit{bhumibandhana} (preparation of the surface), \textit{reka-karma} \(\frac{1}{4}\) outline work), \textit{laksana} (the characteristic lineaments of types), \textit{Varna-karma} (colouring) \textit{Vartana-Karma} (plastic modeling or relief by shading), \textit{lekha-Karma} (correction) and \textit{dvika-Karma} (final outline). This art was not limited by the boundaries of any one faith or religion.\textsuperscript{40}

No painter worked singly in any one cave; in practice many worked together or at different times. This is seen in the different styles of individual artists within each cave. There are no true shadows in the paintings at Ajanta, but the most subtle nuances of shading, with almost imperceptible deepening and lightening of the same colour, persuade the eye of the roundedness of forms. Eyelids, the nose, lips and the chin are also skillfully highlighted. The brush-strokes are long and bold, producing a grace and sweep which give Ajanta a unique place in art. The artist displays a command of the technique of foreshortening, which is also mentioned in the \textit{Vishnudharmottara}, and is fully familiar with the principles of perspective.\textsuperscript{41}

\textsuperscript{39} Behl, K.B., op. cit., p. 35.
\textsuperscript{40} Singh Madanjeet, op. cit., p. 64.
\textsuperscript{41} Behl, K.B., op. cit., p. 37.
Above all, Ajanta's creative genius lies in the portrayal of women. The lovely ladies of the courts with their handmaids, the dancers and the musicians, the devotees, the common women and even the beggar girls are all drawn with brilliant zest and extraordinary knowledge. The conventions and orthodox attitudes which the painters adopted for their immortal, transcendental archetypes were deliberately set aside when they outlined the attractive mortals. The decorative, ornamental value of these lovely women was, as it were, too precious an asset to be subordinated or diminished by the pictorial formulae for drawing the Buddhas and Bodhisatvas. Whether they are painted in repose, talking to their lovers, instructing their handmaids, admiring themselves in mirrors, carrying offerings, lifting the loads off their slaves heads, or simply standing, sitting and gossiping, they are always painted with a sort of wonder akin to awe. Each time a woman is sketched, a feeling of new experience and excitement appears through the artist's veins as he struggled to reproduce the soft roundness of her breasts, the curves of her hips, the turn of her head, the contortions of her body, the gestures of her hands, or the stunting glance of her eyes. Like fresh blossoms the women are invariably refreshing and fragrant. Whether they decorate the palaces as they sit in groups like garlands, crowd together in the street scenes, embellish the windows by their graceful presence lightly fly through the air in the form of nymphs or are strewn like single flowers in the parlors of houses, they radiate that sheer joy and exuberance inherent in copying the female figure. Even when in the shape of ogresses they lure the sailors to their doom, the feminine aspect predominates, they never lose their dignity and nowhere are they besmirched or belittled. Just as the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are the central theme in painting the sacred images, in the orbit of secular subjects the women are the focal point.

The flower strewn background with hills and swaying creepers and banana trees, the gentle rhythmical inclination of the women votaries with their graceful figures and gestures, the balanced distribution of the volumes over a large area, all contribute to the lyrical feeling of unsurpassed harmony and tranquility. The figures of the women are drawn in a pose half way between strict profile and complete frontage the faces are similarly sketched, and in one or two cases the woman's head is elegantly turned towards her companion. There is a remarkable ease in the drawing of arms and hands, the arms bend at the elbows, mostly at right angles, or hang softly caressing the

---

42 Singh, Madanjeet, op. cit., p.103.
slightly curved hips. The exquisite gently bending attitudes of the votaries as they walk along in the open air with uncovered breasts wearing simple attire and very few ornaments are also essentially similar in the two processions.\textsuperscript{43}

Among men the women of Ajanta is always the queen, herself at her best, helped by the lines. The lines search for volumes to embrace, caress her contours, and underline her grace. Appearing again and again, whether walking or standing, sitting or reclining, her is the image of beauty in repose – arrested activity, floating lines at ease knitting her into the texture of nature in growth.\textsuperscript{44}

A Dark Princess in Cave no. 1, of the 6\textsuperscript{th} century, shows the crisis of the painter’s conscience. The budding beauty of the girl, with a rather melancholy bent head, is being contemplated by a monk as temptation he must resist.\textsuperscript{45} The painter, therefore, infuses into her lovely, lush, purple brown contours, all the ripeness of bursting fruit, with certain despondency in the full lower lip, as though her beauty is the harbinger of doom. The contrast of the fixed poses between the princess and the other figures around is static. The dreamy eyes seem to be manipulated like a cliché. The heavy breasted, desirable girl, with the mystic gaze, is adorned with so much jewelry that she clearly represents a stylized lady of the era of gold. If we contrast her with the wanton lady in Cave No. 17 of the Viswantara Jataka, the Dark Princess seems like a baroque figure. The brushwork is now a stylization of the sensuous art of Caves No. 9, 10, 16 and 17 into an art for the sake of sensuousness.

In Cave No. 1 and 2 therefore, decorative elements, bordering on the lovely – lovely, are being to dominate. The colours are still vivacious. The poses repeat the previous formulas. There is even the illusion of relief through shading as per usual. But the elaborate toilet of the girl, with the careful array of the tiara on the dark hair, the abstract ringlets and the kiss curls, become a study in elegance, where the inner question of the vanity of life is not echoed.\textsuperscript{46}

Her features are very refined and the delineation of the eyes, with hazel brown irises, is extremely realistic. Although the painting has suffered considerable damage, it is

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{43} Singh, Madanjeet, Ibid. p. 106.
\textsuperscript{44} Ghosh, A., Ajanta Murals, p. 10 Calcutta, 1967.
\textsuperscript{45} Aanad, Mulk Raj, Ajanta p. 52, pl.28 Bombay, 1971.
\textsuperscript{46} Anand, Mulk Raj, ibid.
\end{flushright}
Plate- 8 Dark Princess, Cave no. 1, Ajanta
still regarded as one of the finest work of Indian artistic genius and counts among the most outstanding portraits of feminine beauty made in any part of the world.\textsuperscript{47}

The first scene in Cave 1 unfortunately no more than a few fragments on the female attendant bearing a fan, and a number of male figures. As this picture is followed by the scene of the birth, this first scene can only be an event that took place before the birth of the Bodhisatva. On the basis of iconographic parallels from the earliest period, there are only two events, also depicted in reliefs, that it could be either the sojourn of the Bodhisatva in the \textit{Tusita} heaven or the conception, i.e. the entry of the Bodhisatva into the womb of Queen Maya in the form of a white elephant. The fact that in our picture, in attribution to the female attendant with the fan, at least three male figures can be recognized makes it highly unlikely that the conception is depicted here. The literary sources agree that the conception took place during the night.\textsuperscript{48}

The next picture of the right extends from an arched doorway on the left to a \textit{torana} (gateway) on the right in the Cave X. The trees which fill the space between this \textit{torana} and the middle of the picture indicate that the scene takes place in a park. To the left of the middle of the picture, four male figures are to be seen who are pointing at the event in the centre of the picture; above them there are three attendants holding fans. A drum of the right of the first fan bearer indicates that the event in the centre is accompanied by heavenly music. Beneath this drum, peacock feathers similar to those often found on female headdress can be discerned, and they can also be seen on one of the women in the Bodhi scene.\textsuperscript{49} Unfortunately, a part from loincloth and the indistinct outline of a hand, nothing more has survived of the woman who is wearing this headdress. To the right and slightly below this woman, almost exactly in the centre of the scene, a branch of a tree, while she is looking to the right with head slightly inclined. There can be a doubt that the woman we have before us is the mother of the Bodhisatva, and that our painting is, therefore, the earliest existing portrayal of the birth of the Bodhisatva in the Lumbini grove. As a comparable representation has survived neither in Sanchi nor in Bharhut, we are confronted here with the question of how our painting relates to the literary sources, and to the portrayals of the birth of the Budha developed in the art of other religious. It is feature

\textsuperscript{47} Behl, K.B., op. cit., pp. 66-67.


\textsuperscript{49} Schingloff, Dieter, \textit{Studies in the Ajanta Paintings}, Delhi, 1987, p. 4, fig. 1 to 5.
of the birth of the Buddha developed in the art of other regions. It is feature of the ‘Southern’ literary and the pictorial tradition that there are four deities present at the birth, whereas according to the ‘northern’ literary tradition and corresponding pictorial representation, it is the god Indra who is in attendance, sometimes accompanied by Brahma and other deities. The four deities in the southern tradition, like Indra in the northern tradition, hold a cloth in which they ceremonially receive the new-born Bodhisatva. In our painting, however the four gods are pointing with their four fingers at the event of the birth, while the cloth seems to be hovering in the air between the female attendant and the first of the gods. As the various sources are unanimous that the Bodhisatva emerged from his mother’s right side, in the reliefs – but unlike in our painting the female attendant is usually depicted on her left. In our painting the Bodhisatva’s mother is holding the branch with her left hand.

Cave I, depicts conversion of Nanda King. Nanda’s wife Queen Janpada Kalyani (left has been depicted) informed that her husband, once the king, has come to the palace door begging for alms. The queen is deeply disturbed by these unusual events and wonders how to win back the attention of her husband. Interestingly, this is the only panel at Ajanta in which the women are seen wearing the traditional Indian bindi (an auspicious circular symbol of marriage) on the forehead. An agitate palace attendant is portrayed in the story of king Nanda. One can well imagine the confusion and the rush of mixed emotions created within the palace by the appearance of the king in his new sate as a mendicant. A charming detail is a woman who is seated on the ground with her back to the viewer, also listening to the sermon. Her pose shows great observation and skill she is squatting on the ground with cross leg, learning on her left hand which is placed on the ground, while her right hand with the elbow resting on her knee supports her head in a very realistic manner. To her right is a dwarf, who brings an offering of flowers for the ascetic. The religious austerity of the scene is offset by the somewhat comic effect of his long trunk and wild expression.

---

51 Amravati (I). Madras, Government Museum, 221;
52 Indra and Brahma, Lalitavistara, Ch.7, ed. P. 83, 12
53 Nidana Katha, ed. pp. 52, 29.
54 Behl, K.B., op. cit., pp. 78, 81-82.
The prince and his consort and the wailing women are reproduced in colour for the first time. The story in Cave I is depicted in three episodes on the wall of the front aisle, between the main doorway and the window to the left of it.

The first episode shows Prince Sibi in a palace surrounded by ladies of the court when the pigeon alights in his lap to seek refuge. Towards the right there is a pavilion containing the detail the Prince and His Consort. The Prince, wearing a light crown and a string of pearls across his shoulder, seems to be in a dilemma, while his consort, of greenish complexion, looks at him with the story has not been established, but possibly they are yet another example of the mithuna figure which is so popular at Ajanta. The second and main episode begins immediately to the right of this pavilion. In this scene the Raja is standing by the side of the scales and appears to be on the pigeon. The three lovely figures on the right hand side of the Raja, they are lamenting at the sight of Bodhisattva is ordeal. These figures, set against the green leaves of a pipal tree beyond which the vermillion horizon can be seen, produce a pleasing colour pattern. The conventional flattened perspective of restricted tonal colour scale has been produced by deeply demarcating plain surface of pure primary colour. This style appears to have had considerable influence on the hasty, sumary technique of drawing and colouring in contemporary art.  

Cave I, shows Queen Shivali, who is perplexed by her husband’s desire to leave the palace and part from her. The artist’s minute attention to detail in these paintings is extraordinary. The gentle curve of the strings of pearls hanging beneath the queen’s bosom depicts a lightly swinging movement with exquisite realism. The curl of hair upon her neck and shoulders emphasize her vulnerability at this moment when her husband has chosen to leave her. Three of the palace maids, painted behind the queen, respond with shock and sadness to the most unexpected news that the king intends to renounce his worldly life and leave their mistress the queen. Amazement is written large upon the face of one maid and we see the sorrowful glances of the other two. The directness of the warm human touch in this moment of grief is clearly evident as they empathize with the queen’s deep sense of impending loss. A most unusual and realistic moment captured by the vivid imagination of the painters of Ajanta: a maid is shown pressing the legs of the queen, but obviously she is distracted by the dancer.

---

55 Singh Madanjeet, op.cit, p. 156.
behind her and, even as she touches the queen’s legs she turns to look in that
direction.  

Between the pavilion of the royal couple and the dancer are two other palace maids. One is in a pensive mood and the other leans upon her shoulder looking at her, as if questioning.

The composition of this scene in the painting in Cave II at Ajanta depicts in the night the Bodhisatva entered the womb of Queen Maya in the form of an elephant. The event takes place in an upper room of the royal palace with two doors leading into it. All that has survived are remnants of the lower end of the queen’s bed and the figures of a number of female attendants seated at the foot of the bed. Who show by the gestures they are making their hands that they are observing and commenting on what is happening. In Cave II at Ajanta both the recounting of the dream and the interpreting of the dream are portrayed. Maya tells the king of her dream in a small palace room above the bed-chamber while the interpretation of the dream takes place in an open palace room above the birth scene. Here the king and queen, surrounded by maidservants, are shown sitting side by side on the same seat, while three Brahmins squatting in front of them are interpreting the dream. In an ante-chamber on the right Maya is again portrayed, this time with a Brahmin who is gazing at her admiringly.  

In a hall in the palace beneath the previous scene the king is sitting on a throne in conversation with the queen who is sitting opposite him. The royal couple is surrounded by maid servants, and a guard is standing in the doorway. The gestures these secondary figures are making with their hands show that they too are participating in the conversation. In the paintings of Cave II at Ajanta the conversation takes place in a room with in the palace to the left of the city gateway, where the king and queen are again seen side by side on the same seat. In next scene the queen is sitting in a large covered litter which is proceeding out of the palace towards a gateway, though which the route then leads to a second gateway above and slightly to the left, the entrance to Lumbini grove. 

56 Behl, K.B., op. cit., p.89.
57 Schlingloff, Dieter, op.cit., pp. 16-17.
The queen is standing beneath an Asoka tree and is holding a branch of this tree with her right hand; her left hand is in front of her body. On the right there is a group of women in conversation who do not seem to be involved in the events taking place.\footnote{Yazdani, G., ibid.}

The large number of surviving representations of this central event in the life of a Buddha depict it in a similar fashion, the queen is portrayed standing and holding on the branch of a tree; to her right one or more deities receive the Bodhisat\text{\acr}va as he emerges from her hip, while to her left there is a female, who is usually accompanied by several other female figures.\footnote{Coomarswamy, A.K., \textit{History of Indian and Indonesian Art}, London, 1927, fig. 136.}

In the uncompleted painting in Cave II at Ajanta the deity is standing with his hands placed together in the ante chamber of a temple; the only part of the group of figures before the temple that has been sketched in is the parasol that is held over the Bodhisat\text{\acr}va.\footnote{Coomarswamy, A.K., \textit{ibid}.}

In the scene to the left of the temple, the King is sitting with crossed legs in a hall of the palace, his ministers are standing to the left of him and the Queen is sitting on the right it is probable that the King and the queen are looking at the nurse, who is standing before them holding the child she has just been entrusted with; the portrayal of her, however was not survived.\footnote{Schlingloff, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 24, fig. 1, 14.}

In a circular pavilion in the royal palace the Bodhisat\text{\acr}va is sitting on a low throne; at his feet there is an empty jewel box. There is a woman standing outside the pavilion, who is obviously holding jewelry in her hand that Bodhisat\text{\acr}va has presented to her. Yasodhara is sitting to the right of the Bodhisat\text{\acr}va on a stool the position of her hands shows that she is talking to him. The Bodhisat\text{\acr}va is holding a ring in his left hand which is showing to Yasodhara. There are two female attendants standing behind Yasodhara and five others are sitting on the ground outside the pavilion.\footnote{Schlingloff, \textit{ibid.}, p. 27, fig. 1, 20.} To the left of the scene of the first meditation, the king is sitting cross legged in a hall with a flat roof and is conferring with his three brothers, who are sitting on the floor in front of him. The minister and a female attendant are standing behind the king, seated to his left there is another woman who is participating in the discussion and who therefore is
probably not a servant but the King’s wife. In the women’s chamber of the palace, an elongated structure with a flat roof and a beamed ceiling, there are musical instruments, toiletry jars and a mirror hanging on the wall, the burning lamps in the foreground indicate that it is night. The Bodhisatva’s wife is lying on her left side on the far side of the bed towards its foot; the position of his hands indicates that his thoughts are occupied by what he sees around him.64

Cave 2 depicts the facial features are almost identical to those in the Raja with His Retinue, the golden-brown complexions, almost round faces, small bright eyes, full red lips, and short but pointed noses are familiar from the non-Aryan types depicted in the painting of the pre-Christian era. Here the women wear veils over their heads and the men folk elaborate turbans, but the hair style with short locks, fringes falling over the foreheads, are identical in the two paintings. There are no bulging body-curves, no cork-screw curls, and the eyes are not elongated, in fact there is none of the exaggeration associated with the late period.65

The important masterpiece of this period is undoubtedly the portrait of Dying Princess (the deserted wife of Nanda) in Cave No. 16. The balance of the various linear rhythms are here relished through a subtlety in the composition, which suggests the intuitive truth of the border line of life and death, incipient in Maya, a kind of poetry of tragedy, which must be absorbed as a lesson to keep in mind during one’s own pilgrim’s progress through life. The panel showing the Dying Princess is one of the great masterpieces of the world art in which the soul drama of conflict between authentic and non-authentic life is staged. The flow of paint and the composition seeks value through colour contrast conceived by a genius of height order.66

The sweep of the brush, which describes the contours of the woman in the centre of this panel, is characteristic of the mature, Ajanta expressionism. By tilting the head slightly and suggesting the limpness of the figure, through the falling left hand, the painter has evoked the fundamental stance of near death. The solicitude of the three maids, one supporting the woman from behind with left hand outstretched, the other watching anxiously to read the face of the patient, the third bent forward with face distraught, crystallize the intense moment. The supporting cast of the two male

64 Schlingloff, ibid, p.30, fig. 1, 23, 24.
65 Singh, Madanjeet, op. cit., pp. 176-177.
Plate- 9 The Raja with his Retinue cave no. 10, late 2nd Century or early
Plate- 10  Dying Princess, Cave no. XVI, Ajanta
attendants rushing in from outside, and the two anxious females on the balcony next door, indicate the tension in the atmosphere. The peacock in flight and the bent leaves on the banana tree in soft green shades are suggestive of sadness. The rigid white and grey pillars of the balcony and the hard chair are contrasted to the somber – Ochre red bodies, with the intense jet black hair. The drama of death spreads from within the panel outwards, making the particular statement into a general symbolic truth. The Karuna, implicit the Buddha’s teaching, is emergent here, from below the surface relation of the paint. Realism goes beyond its western definition into near total expression, because the artist has come from the realization of surface colours to suggest the depths where nature is transformed. The first inspiration to imitate outer reality has obviously been overcome by abstraction of detail.\(^67\) The temptation to record the impression has been conquered here by the courage to simplify paint with sweeping brushstrokes to recreate the melancholy. The felt expression has been elaborated, through objective skill, into the awareness of other men’s experiences. The dim awareness of the shadow of death illuminates, with not hysterical flourish, but gently, the atmosphere of suffering beyond the figures.

This is, perhaps, one of the most important paintings in the Ajanta of a period when the early native emotions had begun to be absorbed into contours, with sharply accentuated lines, deliberately filled in with deepening colours. No use is made here of light and shade, but the surface in monochromatic and the figures are almost in relief. The whole composition suggests inner stirrings. The wife is dying of the shock of the ‘going away’ of the husband, with an emotion, which seems like a subtle portrayal of a faint, or of the slow passing away of all hope, or of the fading into death. This is one of the great moments of Ajanta art, in so far is adumbrates sadness for all time – not as an illusion but as the outer form of the reality of death itself. The combination of linear rhythm with a certain directness of touch emerges here as the evidence of close parallelism between sculpture and painting.\(^68\)

The poetic view of reality, with the consecutive movement of dance, and the living music of the spheres, is shown in the Flying Apsara of Cave No.17, symptomatic of the airy flights of the poetry of Kalidasa who was contemporary with this phase of

\(^{67}\) Schlingloff, op. cit., pp. 54-55.
\(^{68}\) Ghosh, A. and Sarkar, H., Beginnings of Sculptural Art in South-East India, A colour. New Delhi, 1967, pl. 3(8).
Ajanta. The flying figures, almost part of the clouds, grouped in this panel, have all the verve, which could not be realized in the treatment of the same theme in stone work earlier and of whom the vibrations has been remotely suggested by the words of the poets. In the same Cave, we see the ultimate mastery of colour scheme and groupings in panel after panel, perhaps the highest and most sustained expression of Ajanta art. The free pagan atmosphere of the earth as heaven with lovely languorous Apsaras and Gandarvas flying about plunges us into the world of painters who’s only equal in sensuous self awareness was the bard of Ujjain. Kalidasa had realized in metaphors, the artists here visualize in colours and activate in organic rhythms.

Indra and the Apsaras on the entrance of Cave No.17, the gracious curves of the figure, flying through the blue-tinted foam clouds, with the musicians lifted by the music of their flute, as it were are contrasted to the static Kinnaras, half-men and half-birds. And below the fantasy world of the upper air are the people of the earth, in and around their dwellings, as in the Megha-Doota, the girls adorning themselves for their lovers, with oil and fards and lotions, surmounting the earth in unending flight. The contours have the necessary lightness, because the colours used, whites light brown, blue and greens, are less heavy in weight. As they float away from the earth into the empyrean, they stimulate physical desire and conduce to a certain grace in the ascent from the illusory life towards the beyond. The stage has been reached in Ajanta, in this composition, when the sensibility and the imagination are interchangeable. The artist seems to possess both, as also fantasy, which liberate the figures into something he does not yet know of the rhythmic life. Our active respirations at the sight of movement were perhaps anticipated.

The different types are informed with the life breath, until they are individuals as well as symbols. The colour contrasts of the lush landscapes, with the brown, ochre and black figures, and the movement of the breeze in the trees, are some of the finest in Asiatic art. Two of these Apsaras, with dreamy eyes, intricate coiffeur and shaking jewelry, are the kind of spirits. In the latter paintings of Cave No. 16 and 17, as in the Palace scene, the sensuous warmth of an elegant life is portrayed as a contrast between the shining splendor of the court and the evanescent feeling of the passing away of things. The faces of these figures though involved in gaiety, are titled in

---

69 Anand, Mulk Raj, op. cit., pp. 29-30,
Plate- 11 The flying Apsara, Cave no. XVII, Ajanta
Plate-12 Indra and Apsara, Cave no. XVII, Ajanta
sadness. The features are individualized. The thicker colours provide a kind of shading, from which the line moves in a gliding movement, with weightless grace, reflecting the flexibility of figures in dance. The curves of the two bodies counterpoised against a certain rigidity in the torso of the woman’s body, suggesting the first demure withdrawal at the abrupt approach of the lover. The colour contrast of the dark prince against the fair princess is also deliberately adumbrated. The concentration of the attendants offering drink and other services, accentuate the focal point of the erotic adventure.\(^7\)

Cave 17, depicts two details from the palace pavilion scenes. Prince Visvantara has been banished from the Kingdom and is seen walking out of the palace gate (left). Behind him is very five depicting of a areca nut tree. His wife Princess Madri follows. There is a fascinating depiction of two persons watching from a window. Using a most interesting device to convey the reduced light of the interior, the artist has pointed these individuals in monochrome.\(^7\)

In Cave 26, some of the finest sculptures at Ajanta are to be found. On either side of the entrance are figures of beautiful damsels, each holding a branch of tree under which she stands (opposite); such figures which are frequently seen in doorways. are considered to be auspicious and to symbolize fertility.\(^7\)

(b) Women in Ancient India: Textual Evidence

The position of women in society is one of the most important topics in the history. In ancient Indian texts women are generally treated as a uniform category, and unambiguously educated with the Sudras.\(^7\) As a daughter she should be under the surveillance of her father, as a wife of her husband and as a widow of her son. On the other hand we can see that there was no seclusion of women. They used to move freely in society, often even in the company of their lovers. In social and religious gathering they occupied a prominent position. Women had an absolute equality with

\(^7\) Benoy, K.B., op. cit., pp. 168-169.
\(^7\) Benoy, K.B. op. cit., p. 163.
\(^7\) Benoy, K.B. op. cit., p. 46.
\(^7\) Manusmriti with seven commentaries, translated with introduction by G. Buhler under the title The Laws of Manu, Oxford, 1886, IX.153.
men in the eye of religion. They could perform sacrifices independently and were not regarded as an impediment in religious pursuits.\textsuperscript{74}

In the Vedic age women were not deprived of the advantage of education and were not considered incompetent to study \textit{Vedas} or participated in philosophical discussion. They even composed some of the hymns of the Rigveda.\textsuperscript{75} During this age education was mostly centered in the family, brothers, sisters and cosines probably studied together, under the family elders.\textsuperscript{76}

It is true, that there is no explicit mention about the arrangement of girls’ education but from the references (scattered throughout Vedic texts) to woman seers\textsuperscript{77}, teachers their active participation in Vedic sacrifices, their investiture of holy thread, their involvement in music and dance, war field, as well as in different vocations, we can decipher that in spite of the absence of institution based training system, girls in Vedic India were not deprived of education.

\textit{Upanayana} was usually performed at about the age of 9 or 10 and the same age now came to be regarded as the ideal time of marriage for girls. Towards the end of this period (c A.D. 500) parents could not usually keep their daughters unmarried after the age of 12. The discontinuance of \textit{upanayana}, the neglect of education and the lowering of the marriage age, produced disastrous consequences upon the position and status of women.\textsuperscript{78} Early marriage put an effective impediment in the higher education of girls. Besides being too young and inexperienced, ceased have any effective voice in the settlement of their marriages.

In post Vedic period, women were now debarred from the study of the \textit{Vedas} and were considered to be unfit to pronounce the Vedic mantras. They were required to obtain knowledge of duty and morality by studying the \textit{puranas} only. Marriage ceremony is started to be the only sacrament for women\textsuperscript{79} who could be performed with the Vedic \textit{mantras}. Women were debarred from the \textit{upanayana} or the initiation ceremony.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{74} Altekar, A.S., \textit{The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization}, Banaras, 1956, p. 51.
\item \textsuperscript{75} \textit{Rigveda}, with Sayana’s commentary, edited with notes and translated by P. Petuson, third edition, revised and enlarged by S.R. Bhandarkar, Bombay, 1905, 1-145, 179, V- 28, X- 86.
\item \textsuperscript{76} \textit{Rigveda}, X-145, 179
\item \textsuperscript{77} \textit{Rigveda}, 1-126.7; 1.179.1.6; 2.6.8, 5.28.3; 891.1.7; etc.
\item \textsuperscript{78} Altekar, A.S., op. cit., p. 58.
\item \textsuperscript{79} Vishnoi, Savita, \textit{Economic status of Women in Ancient India}, p. 2.
\end{itemize}
Women students were divided into two classes Brahmvadinis and Sadyovadhus. The former were lifelong students of theology and philosophy; the latter used to be prosecuting their studies only till their marriage at the age of 15 or 16. Brahmvadinis used to aim at a very high excellence in scholarship. Besides studying the Vedas, many of them used to specialize in purva Mimamsa, which discusses the diverse problems connected with Vedic sacrifices. Mahabhasha speaks of a theologian named Kasakrtsna who composed a work on Mimamsa called Kasakritsni and lady scholars who used to specialize in it, were designated as Kasakrtisnas.80

The admission of women to the Buddhist order gave a great impetus to the cause of female education among the ladies in commercial and aristocratic families like the Brahmvadinis in Brahmanical circles, several ladies in Buddhist families used to lead a life of celibacy with the aim of understanding and following the eternal truths of religion and philosophy.81 According to the Jain tradition, Jayanti, a daughter of king Sahasranika of Kausambi, remained unmarried and received ordination at the hand of Mahavira after being convinced by him in discussion.

Many educated women used to follow teaching career either out of love or out of necessity and who were not necessarily scholars, were called Upadhyayanis, but women who were themselves teachers, were called Upadhyayas. Women teachers must have been fairly numerous in society. The tradition of lady scholars is known to Puranas as well; the Bhagavata, for instance, refers to two daughters of Dakshayana as experts in theology and philosophy.82

Existence of some female vocations proves the validity of the fact. For example, names of Vidalakari (basket maker), Kantakikari (thorn-workers), Kosakari (scabbard maker), anjanakari (ointment maker), pesaskari (female embroiderer), vasahpaipuli (Landeress), siri (weaver), rajayitri (dyer), upalapraskini (grinder of corns) can be mentioned83.

During the Buddhist epoch the activities of women were confined within certain spheres principally the domestic, social and religious. There are various records which

80 Padia, Chandrakala, Women in Dharmasastras “a phenomenological and critical Analysis”. p. 41.
82 Altekar, A.S., ibid, p. 13.
refer to self supporting women who were engaged in a trade or a profession. It is said for example, that a certain woman was the keeper of paddy field; and she gathered and parched the heads of rice, doing the work herself. Another is described as watching the cotton field, where she used to sometimes spin fine thread from the clean cotton in order to while away in time. Women also appear to have been capable of functioning as keepers of the burning grounds.

Women could earn the necessary income by spinning and weaving cotton and woolen yarn and piece goods. The Arthasastra of Kautilya lies down that the state should provide special facilities to destitute women to enable them to earn a living by spinning.

References to the female soldiers, women’s involvement in war, their heroic feats makes us suppose that they were provided some military training also. Not only they were able to protect themselves, but in times of emergency, they faced enemy soldiers also. The Rigveda describes her courageous heroic feats in the battlefield where she defeated thousands of soldiers. Vispala, the queen of king Khela, is another example who was severely wounded in her leg.

A wife in ancient India was known as Sahadharmini. In the Vedic age, women enjoyed all the religious rights and privileges which men possessed. Her presence and co-operation were regarded necessary in religious rites and ceremonies. The Rigveda refers to Ghosha and Lopamudra as well versed in the mantras.

Under Buddhism, women fell into two divisions: those who remained in the world as lay-votaries of the religion and those who went forth from the world into homelessness and became bhikkhunis, nuns, sisters or alms-women. They will be called by the last name here on account of their quality of receiving alms.

84. Altekar, A.S., op. cit., p. 87.
86. Ibid.
88. Rigveda, X-102.2.
89. Rigveda, I-116.15.
90. Rigveda, V-61.8
91. Rigveda, VIII- 31.5.
92. Ibid., I-179 and IX- 30-40.
In Jainism and Buddhism marriage was not compulsory for women. They were urged to become nuns without entering the matrimonial bond. Among the nuns of *Therigatha*, the majority consists of women who had renounced the world during their maidenhood. The career thus opened for women by Jainism and Buddhism attracted a large number of talented ladies and offered a somewhat freer status to those who entered the samgha.\(^94\)

Marriage in fact was a religious necessity to both the man and the woman; neither could reach heaven without being accompanied by his duly married consort. The position of the wife was an honored one in the family. In theory she was the joint owner of the household with her husband, though in actual practice, she was the subordinate partner.\(^95\)

In the Vedic age, she was married at about the age of 16 or 17; she could thus devote six or seven years to her Vedic studies before her marriage.\(^96\) It is true that in two passages of the *Rigveda* the word *arbha* has been used to denote the bride and the bridegroom. This expression, however, denotes tenderness rather than childhood for Vimada who has been described as an *arbha* bridegroom is seen to be defeating his rival in battle and winning his bride. This is possible only in the case of a full grown youth. In another place we find a wife praying for hair growing at the time of puberty.\(^97\)

It now came to be declared that a girl becomes mature not at the age of 13 or 14, but at the age of 10 to 11, when some preliminary symptoms of impending puberty manifest themselves. The proper age of marriage was therefore 10. The age of 8, however, was regarded as the ideal one; marriage in the case of girls corresponded to *upanayana* in the case of boys, and the proper age for the latter was 8. In Ksatriya families, however, girls continued to be married about the age of 14 or 15.\(^98\)

Women could not naturally command respect from their husbands. Not infrequently, parents had to marry their daughters in a hurry, lest the girls should attain puberty before their marriage. The matches arranged under such circumstances were often ill


\(^{95}\) Altekar, A.S., op. cit., p. 51.

\(^{96}\) Ibid., p. 57.

\(^{97}\) *Rigveda*, VII- 91.5.6

\(^{98}\) Altekar, A.S., op. cit., p. 63.
suited, and women were thus often compelled to spend their lives with unsuitable or unworthy parents. It is painful to find that smriti writers should have come forward to preach the gospel that a wife should always revere her husband as God, even if he was a moral wreck.99

In Vedic India wife was generally regarded as the co-owner of the family property along with her husband as the term *dampati* would show. The husband was required to take a solemn vow at the time of the marriage that he would never transgress the rights and interests of his wife in economic matters.100 A wedding hymn in the Rigveda containing two verses indicates that gifts were sent with the bride to the bridegroom’s house.101

In case of a girl who was not married or did not choose to marry some provision was made out of the father’s property. It would seem that she had not only a share in the property of her father as an unmarried daughter of the family but also the right to stay with her parents and brothers even when she became old.102

There is an earlier reference in the Rigveda regarding a daughter’s right in the property of her father which was given to her husband at the time of marriage by her brother.103 This property passed on to her because her separate property became the *stridhana*, as it was called in later times. *Stridhana* was a portion of the bride-price, returned to the bride by her father. The husband therefore had to recognize his bride’s ownership in it.

The Vedic literature is silent about the precise scope of *stridhana*. We get an idea of its scope only from the Dharmasastra works. Manu is the earliest writer to give a comprehensive description of *stridhana*. According to him it consists of six varieties; (1-3) gifts given by the father, the mother and the brother at any time; (4) gifts of affection given by the husband subsequent to the marriage; (5-6) and presents given by anybody either at the time of the marriage or at the time when the bride is taken to her new home.104 Gifts under most of these categories would consist usually of ornaments and costly apparel, and Manu is very vehement in denouncing those who

100. *Rigveda*, X-85-86.
102. *Rigveda*, I-117.7; 11.17.7; X-39.3
103. *Rigveda*, I-109.2
would deprive women of these presents after their husband’s death.\textsuperscript{105} We find that down to c. 300 B.C., the right of the widow to inherit her husband’s property was not recognized by any jurist. Vedic texts were definitely opposed to this right.\textsuperscript{106}

Kauṭilya states, “The sonless widow, faithful to her husband’s bed and living with her elders, shall enjoy her \textit{stridhana} till the end of her life, as \textit{stridhana} is meant for times of distress.”\textsuperscript{107} He further adds, “The widow remarrying shall be deprived of what she may have inherited from her former husband. But she shall enjoy it if she is desirous of fulfilling her religious obligations.”\textsuperscript{108}

Manu himself writes in his book that a wife is not to blame if she abandons a husband, who is impotent, insane, or suffering from an incurable or contagious disease.\textsuperscript{109} This abandonment of the husband practically amounted to a divorce, for Manu permits such a wife to remarry if her previous marriage was not consummated.\textsuperscript{110}

We have only one controversial verse\textsuperscript{111} in the \textit{Rigveda} which has sometimes been taken to refer to the existence of \textit{Sati} during this period. The \textit{Atharaveda} also refers to the lying of widow by the dead husband on funeral pyre as an ancient custom of \textit{Rigveda}. The classical writers like Strabo and Diodorus Siculus, as historical instances of \textit{Sati} in India in the 4\textsuperscript{th} century B.C. The latter cities the story of the younger wife of a general named keteus, becoming \textit{sati} in 316 B.C., when her husband died fighting against the Greeks.\textsuperscript{112}

The only epigraphic evidence of the performance of sati during this period comes from the Eran Pillar inscription dated 191 (A.D. 150).\textsuperscript{113} This is the earliest epigraphic reference of sati in Indian society. A Nepalese inscription of somewhat late period (A.D. 705) refers to queen \textit{Rajyavati} the widow of Dharmadeva following her husband to the funeral pyre.\textsuperscript{114} In the non religious literature of this period the post dramatists like Bhasa (\textit{Urubhanga}), Kalidasa (\textit{Rtusmhar}), Sudraka (\textit{Mrchchakatika})
and celebrated writers like Vatsyayana, Varahamihira and Banabhatta mention instances of the practice of sati, but none of them mentions of any religious sanction behind this custom.

At last we can say that in the ancient period a daughter was usually well educated and possessed full religious privileges, but she could not offer funeral oblation to her father. The girls were properly educated and married at a mature age in these republics. Cultured parents were often as anxious to get daughters as sons. Such a daughter was regarded as the pride of the family.