Chapter VII.

INDIAN DANCES AS DEPICTED IN
ANCIENT INDIAN ART AND ARCHITECTURE.

Indian art is a creative force and wherever it is depicted, whether in sculpture or in painting, it does not merely depict what is seen by the eyes. It also depicts an idea, something in contemplation. All great art is inspired by religion. It has been the paramount source of all human thinking from a very ancient time in India. The images of deities or of the Supreme Being have been depicted in the most profound and comprehensive manner. To wit, one can see the Creator of this universe in the image of Brahma, the preserver in Vishnu and the destroyer in Shiva, not to speak of the riches and plenty in Lakshmi and knowledge in Saraswati. These images clearly go to show that the all purpose of such human endeavour is self realization and the knowledge is divine in origin.

1. Supra, Preface, Page v.
Art is in fact a necessity to, and a product of, the spiritual life. Thus in Indian art and architecture it has never been the principle that it is an art for art's sake. One can notice that the artists who built Ajanta caves, Buddha in meditation or Natarāja in dancing were giving voice and shape to the visions and ideals of the life and culture in India. Men and women still find their inseparable selves in the Ardhanāriswara which depicts the love and devotion of Pārvati to Śiva. One can not correctly appreciate this image unless he looks at it through a lens of mythology. Speaking about ancient Indian sculpture, V.A. Smith has thus observed: "The art of ancient times is characterised by frank naturalism. It is thoroughly human, a mirror of the social and religious life of Ancient India—full of the creatures of gay fancy".

As has been said earlier, Indian art means the revelation of the idea presented within the artist. It is the spirit in him that is responding or coming out. The art of image-making is the direct result of the Bhakti movement. Before the Bhakti movement became

1. Clive Bell, Art, page 76. 
   Also see Seton Lloyd Thames & Hudson, The Art of the Ancient near East, page 52.

prevalent, there was no image worship and that is why we find that in the earliest period there were no images in the temples. This was even true in the early Buddhist shrines. The origin of the Buddha image in the anthropomorphic form has been the subject of controversy among scholars. Some writers are of the opinion that Indian art does not really commence until the reign of Asoka. Prof. Gardner has rightly observed that in the Mauryan period Indian sculptures were mature and there can be no doubt that the Indian art had an earlier beginning. The excavations at Harappa, Mohenjodaro and other proto-historic sites have brought to light the existence of images both of religious and secular import. Pāṇini and Pātanjali were familiar with the two noted grammarians images of the Vasudeva cult. In the Vedic period the mass of Indian people worshipped natural phenomena. However the sense of Indian artist for sculptural representation of man-god was awakened several centuries before the Christian era. This found an impetus with the growth of the Bhājurata cult. The Shakti movement gave a stimulus for making images of the Jaina Tirthankaras and of the Buddha.

2. B.G. Gokhale, Ancient India, page 137.
From the Sunga period onwards there was a tremendous upsurge in the Bhakti movement. This is borne out by a large number of extant statues of gods and goddesses belonging to the Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist pantheons.

The Indian art as represented in sculpture and architecture can be classified under two heads: Subjective and Objective. The subjective artist does not copy what he receives with his outward senses but he meditates upon his subject and then gives form and colour to that which is paramount. God is unlimited; everything that comes out of the senses or through mind must necessarily be limited. This philosophy of subjective theory is actually discernible in the attitude of Indian subjective artist. He tries to translate the idea conveyed by the reputed persons or rishis and that is why we find that the Vedic gods possess some attributes superior to those of the ordinary human beings.

The objective theory endeavours at the realization of the infinite through the finite. It is the Bhakti Yoga which has taught the objective Indian artist to regard the ordinary world as the manifestation of God. The presentation of the divine being under

   Also see: Curt J. Ducasse, Art, page 56.
prely natural form, is the characteristic of the objective Indian art. It is due to the Bhakti Yoga that we find some of the most beautiful and realistic images carved in the past.

Bhakti movement when at its peak, greatly popularised to God, and this devotion was expressed through symbols. Symbols have great influence on human mind, because they express the thought behind the objective Indian art which was full of significance and meaning. Dance in India originated as a form of devotion. Music and dance have flourished from time immemorial not only as part and parcel of drama but also as separate finished pieces of art. They have generally had their origin as part of the worship of deities in all temples.

It is needless to emphasize that the symbols in Indian art are full of imagination with an adequate understanding of various symbols. One can easily decipher the meaning behind various vahanas, ayudhas and other attributes of various Indian deities. When one concentrates on colour symbolism he will find that white represents the sattva, yellow the rajas and blue

1. Supra, Chapter I, pages 3-4.
or black the tamas gunas of the matter. Accordingly
emotions or rasas are classified under eight colours
as follows: Śringāra rasa (erotic) is represented by
dark Blue, the Hasya (comic) by White, the Rudra (the
furious) by Red, Vīra (heroic) by light Yellow, Karuna
(compassion) by Grey, the Bhayankar (terrible) by Black,
the Bibhatsa (disgust) by Blue and the Adbhut (wonder)
by Yellow. All these colour symbols are fully
incorporated in the dance, the costumes and the make up,
in all the four main classical schools of Indian dancing.

The physical action of divinity has been
symbolised in Indian art. The movement of lower limbs,
i.e. 'Asanas' and the gestures of the hands and eyes,
i.e. the Mudras' are very suggestive. There are
different names for different Asanas and Mudras. All
these details can be seen in ancient Indian monuments.

Mohanjiyar and Harappa:

In the Aryan India some evidence is found
bearing on the art and architecture depicting the life
and conduct of the people. Dance sometimes reached the
zenith of its development in the primitive stage. In

1. Supra, Chapter II, page 35.
   Supra, Chapter III, page 52.
   Supra, Chapter IV, page 80.
   Supra, Chapter V, page 90.

the Indus valley civilization, as revealed from the excavations of Mohanjodaro and Harappa, one can easily notice that the architecture did represent itself in proper style and technique. From Mohanjodaro a bronze figurine of a dancing girl has been found. This figurine with a firm and resilient modelling is a proof positive of the prevalence of dance in the urban culture of the Indus valley. The massive stone male torso from Harappa is another example to confirm the above statement. However, with the advent of Aryan culture and the spread of Hinduism, dance as depicted in architecture became more prominent.

The stone sculptures of the Mauryan period are of excellent execution and it can be said that they were far from being the first attempt. This progress was the outcome of a long course of evolution from still earlier stages. The colossal statues of Yakshas, as apsaras and asuras speak for themselves. But none of these stone statues exactly represents any dance form.

SANCHI AND BHARHUT:

The remains of the Barhut village near Satna in


2. B.C. Gokhale, Ancient India, page 186.
   Also see K. Bharatha Iyer, Indian Art, page 8-9.
Madhya Pradesh also give us the figures of Yakshas and Yakshinis. The monuments of Barhut present a grand symbolical expression of the worship of supreme personality, the Buddha. Next we come to Sanchi whose ancient name was Kakanada (Sanchi). The scenes and figures of Sanchi have been carved with the greatest measure of boldness and figures contain a sense of perspective and portrayal in nature. After the Maha Parinirvana of Buddha, Buddhism was divided in many sects among whom Hinayan and Mahayan were more prominent. Mahayanists were the followers of Bodhisattva and they were greatly influenced by Bharhatism and they imposed no restrictions upon the worship of images. Thus images of Buddha came to be worshipped, and formed an essential part of the religion. Hinayanists did not believe in image worship. It was mainly due to Mahayan sect that images of Buddha were made and at Sarnath beautiful images of Buddha are found even today which are famous for their wonderful expression of calmness and serenity depicting Buddhist ideal.

With the incoming of Bhakti cult the form of devotion underwent a change and dance was recognised as the chief form of devotion. Its different poses were displayed artistically in sculptures. The panels at Barhut and Sanchi illustrate the Jataka or birth stories
of the Buddha. The royal processions with splendid pageantry; dancers and musicians serve as one of the grand portrayals.

**SUNGA TERRACOTTA:**

Interesting description of musical assemblies held inside the pleasure gardens is found in the ancient art of the Śunga period. Three earthen plaques have been found in Mathura and they relate to the Śunga period in second-first century B.C. One of them is preserved in Mathura museum and another in Patna museum. The third is in Prayag museum. They are cast in different moulds but the same scene of musical assembly is inscribed in each of them, for example, one male person is in a sitting posture holding tantrī-ūḍā in the left hand and in his right hand a small piece of wood for playing on the strings. The āḍā is of the model of old Indian guitars prevalent in Śunga and Kuśāṇ period. Both the females are dancing. While dancing, their left hand is bent downward and the right hand is raised upward.

**MATHURA:**

Mathura being associated with lord Krishna has attained special importance and the Mathura art calls for special mention. The Mathura school of art reached the top of its glory during the Kuśāṇ period. Although Buddhism had its influence still many railings and
pillars were erected depicting Yakṣīs in dancing poses. The figure of rājñartakī is picturised on a Vedic pillar. The dancer is dressed from the waist to the knees. The right hand is seen in front of the naval and the left is raised above the head. Similarly the statue of sword-dance is also found in Mathura museum. On one pillar a woman is playing with the ball (M.M.J. 61). The scenes of bath (J. 4, 158, L.M.J. 278), music (J. 62), dance (L.M.B. 75 माया दर्शन) toilet and drink madhupāna are also carved on several pillars.

Gandhāra:

The region situated between the Kunar river and Indus valley is called Gandhāra. Being located on the north western border, it has been invaded by foreigners specially by the Persians and the Greeks. But Chandragupta Maurya brought Gandhāra within the Indian empire. Through Gandhāra, Buddhism spread across Central Asia to the west. To some extent Gandhāra was ruled by Persian and Greek rulers and so we find there the Indo-Persian and Indo-Greek

1. "Plate 18 A represents a Jain railing pillar on which is carved a Yakṣi in the conventional women and tree post; such rather immodest females adorning many of the pillars were supposed by Cunningham to be dancing girls". A History of Fine Art in India and Ceylon, page 41.

2. Lucknow Museum (S.B. 75).


influence. Due to the Persian and Greek occupation over Gândhâra for a considerable time it was but natural that the culture of the region was influenced. Costumes of dancers and are Persian and Greek. This can be seen in several sculptures at Deogarh (District Jhansi) and Suratgarh (District Bikener). The "Gândhâra sculpture depicts a vivid image of almost every phase of human life, including the appearance of dancers, and musicians".  

**AMRÂVATÎ**

Buddha legends are specially shown on the reliefs of Amrâvatî. As shown in ancient Indian sculptures, we also see the Yakshas and Yakshîs in the panels and relief of Amrâvatî. The dancing aspect has been shown in the form of Yakshas and Yakshîs. These Yakshas and Yakshîs have also played an important part in Indian sculpture of the Śunga period. The terracottas of this period most often represent Yakshîs in numerous poses of dance, or adjusting the head gear or wearing a 'Kaṭi-bandh' and mekhalâ. Yakshas and Yakshîs are shown either dancing together or in amorous pose with the typical head-dress of the Śunga period.

**BHUMRĀ**

In the Gupta Śiva temple at Bhumra which is in

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1. Apurva Prakash, The Foundation of Indian Art and Archaeology, page 129.
the Satna district of Madhya Pradesh the various dance poses of gānas are depicted. They are carved on the walls of the temple. In the plate XIII figure 2 of 'Lalitkala' (vol. 10) shows the figure of a dancing Gāna. The right hand is raised above, and the left is stretched down to the right. Figure 2 of the same plate shows a dancing Gāna of whose right hand is raised but it is broken and the left one is stretched out under the shoulders. In the figure 4 of the same plate, dancing gāna holds a dagger-like object in his raised right hand and part of upper garment in the left. In the figure 5 of plate XIV the dancing Gāna's hands and right leg are mutilated. The left foot is held straight while the right is raised up in dance.

**SARNATH:**

The varied and extensive Pantheon of the Mahayāna Buddhists is represented at Sarnath. A Colossal figure of Śiva is represented spearing his adversary, Tripūra, by his trident. Regarding dancing aspect there is a statue with a figure of Śiva engaged in a tāṇḍava dance.

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1. Prof. K.D. Bajpai, Some Interesting Gāna figures from Panna, Lalit Kala, No. 10, page 23.

ELLORA AND ELEPHANTA:

The varaha temples of Ellora are worth mentioning. The general tendency of round sculpture which flourished during the Kusāna and Andhra period reached its fullest development in the Gupta period. At Ellora such subjects as the marriage between Śiva and Pārvatī are seen. It represents vivid images of almost every phase of human life. Elephanta is also famous for the enormous carvings in its rock cut temples. Śiva as the king of dancers or Nāṭrāja performing the Tāṇḍava dance is also depicted at Elephanta. Siva's mystic dance of creation is depicted in the inspired carvings of Elephanta.

KHAJURAHÔ:

1. Kandariyā temple, which is the largest among the present Khajuraho group of temples and is a typical product of the central Indian architecture, portrays, besides the figures of the principal gods and goddesses, surasundarīs or Nāyikās, etc. There is a graceful arch at the entrance to this temple, decorated with figures of deities, musicians, Kārttimukhas etc. The beautiful dance scenes are carved on Bhaṭatji's temple and on Visvanatha and Nandi temples. Groups of musicians,

dancing figures and playing on several kinds of instruments are shown on the ceiling of the ardha mandap of Ghati temple. Similarly these dancing figures may be seen in Bhuvanesvara and Konark temples.

CHIDAMBARAM:

The Indian dance as found today originated through Bharata Nāṭya Sāstra and the originator is lord Śiva, the Nātrāja. In this connection the famous Nātrāja temple of Chidambaram deserves special mention. This temple was erected during a period of thirteen hundred years beginning from 6th century A.D. by the devotees and worshippers of god Śiva. Dancing in the temple was propagated as a means of devotion and worship. It is one of the biggest temples in the country. Dance poses are carved on every wall of this temple, which confirm to the classical dance based on the Bharata Nāṭya Sāstra. The gateways of the temple are most artistically sculptured with male and female figures in various dance poses. All the 108 Kamās described by Bharata in his Nāṭya Sāstra in the chapter on Tāṇḍava Lakṣmaṇ are beautifully carved and are preserved within the gateways of this temple. Each dance pose has a decorative frame and contains a female

2. Ibid.
dance figure in a classical pose accompanied by two musicians in the background. But the main prominence is given to the dancing figure and it is bigger in size than those of musicians. In the eastern and western towers Sanskrit texts from the Natya Sāstra are also carved on the stone frame work in each dance to provide a definite clue. According to the current tradition it is said that god Śiva himself laid the foundation of the first shrine of this temple. It was completed during the rule of the Cholas.

PAINTINGS:

Early rock shelters: The depiction of earliest and simplest form of dance may be seen in Indian rock painting scenes. It exists in its primitive state so the depiction of group dances and of some musical instruments may be seen in the pre-historic and archaic paintings in rock shelters of Pachmarhi, Abchand, and Kabra Pāhar. The oldest painting found at present in India is the Jogimara cave of the Komgarh hill. At present one of the four best preserved panels describes a male figure seated under a tree, with dancing girls and musicians on one side and a procession on the other. K. Bharat Iyer is also of the

1. Prof. K.D. Bajpai, Sagar through the Ages, Plate II (b)- Rock-paintings from Abchand Depicting a Group Dance.

2. V.A. Smith, A History of Fine Art in India and Ceylon, page 47.
view that the Jogimara caves have the oldest wall paintings. These painting sequences give us a series of panels depicting hunting even savages in their dances often reproduce the movements of different animals and dancing scenes.

**Ajanta**: The paintings at Ajanta represent the true Indian art and they are unsurpassed even today. Several dance sequences are painted in Ajanta and Ellora caves. It can never be doubted that the artist who painted Ajanta caves represented the life as he saw it and even the minute details correspond to the realities of life, a thorough knowledge of human body and nature. The depiction of dance sequence is a conclusive proof that dance was an integral part of life of the people.

**Bagh**: The art of painting seems to have reached its zenith in the Gupta period. The finest painting work and the depiction of dance poses may be seen in the caves of Bagh in Madhya Pradesh, in the temple of Sittanavasal in Puddukottai (Madras) and on the walls in Sigiriya (Ceylon). There is a dance scene painted in the cave of Bagh in which the female dancers have formed several groups and are dancing with small sticks in hand and striking against one another.

**Sittanavasal**: The walls and ceilings of Sittanavasal or the Abode of Siddhas were once fully

covered with paintings out of which only a few have survived. These consist of the figures of Apsarās dancing in the clouds.” The painter has exhibited the finest of his art in all the paintings in these caves ranging from a flower or pearl to the complete structure. We find these different forms of gestures and movements of limbs, facial expressions, beauty of the different parts of body, variety of hair dressing, style of garments, fineness of form and colour, very artistically depicted. The aesthetic excellence of the Ḍāpta period can be seen not only in the contemporary sculpture and architecture but also in paintings, coins, seals and ceilings. The field of music, dance and dramaturgy was no exception.

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1. Moti Chandra, Jain Miniature, Paintings from Western India, page 10. Also see Rai Krishna Das, Bharat ki Chitrakala, page 24.