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A Study on Depiction of Nature in the Sculptural Art of Early Deccan

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Abstract – By the title *Depiction of Nature in the Sculptural Art of Early Deccan*, we mean to understand how nature, Le., fauna and flora in the context of the present study, came to be conceptualized by the sculptor in its depiction on sculptural art that primarily reflected his perception of understanding nature as he saw it. It also involved representation that was usually embedded in a religious meaning or symbolism that was being conveyed since many of the monuments on which this sculptural art was (bund were centers of worship. Hitherto, very few scholars have exclusively studied nature in sculptural art but a large majority of these studies have focused on understanding it only as a marginal or decorative part of art history. In fact, no special attention has been made to study the depiction of nature in its varied natural forms in the context of regional history. Therefore, the present research undertaken by us in this thesis essentially aims at describing the depiction of nature in sculptural art in a regional context, namely, of the early Deccan. In an overall sense this was conceptualized by the sculptor to be embedded in a naturalism that was essentially linked to an ideological belief system that saw human intervention with nature in a holistic and integrative way rather than being separated from it.

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INTRODUCTION

Indian naturalism, through various ages and with different degrees, has always relied on the outer aspect of things as a means and proof of understanding a preexistent inner situation within a cyclic vision of nature. In contrast, in a capillary system, one and the same fluid rises in different and connected tubes emphasizing on a linear view of understanding the human intervention with nature. The creative acknowledgement of this internal and living connectedness of an inner experience of nature and the visible world, by putting it into form, is a characteristic hallmark of Indian naturalism. It comprises innervations as well as transubstantiation and can be seen palpably depicted in various images and not simply those representing nature.

Ever since primitive man scratched his drawings on the walls of caves, the concept of art has embodied the natural expression of man's environment and tempo of the times in which he lived and this has continued throughout history, despite wars and strikes, political vicissitudes and religious disturbances. Nature worship opened the door to art appreciation but also constrained it. The visual art had to limit the infinite and so art came to be only important in its representation of nature. In a strict sense creative activity could never be as important as nature and artists worked within the limits of nature since the power of nature predominated over human will in all work. Thus, it can be said that naturalism and realism were themselves highest values, because of nature's inherent existence in them. Further, just as nature was

moral and religious, so the highest art would have to be moral and religious, so that it could be comprehensible to society at large.

Art has developed different meanings based on the ideological notions of scholars and their environment. Primarily two major schools propagate their versions of the definition of art. The one represented by the idealist school is based on the principle of a divorce of art from social life. Art is regarded by them as a product and expression of the absolute spirit, universal will, and divine revelation, or as an emotion of the artist. In contrast to the above view, the other school is represented by the historical materialist school, which observes that art is a reflection of the social being which has much in common with the manifestation of society. Further, according to this opinion, aesthetic relation to the reality is the specific subject matter of art and its task is the artistic portrayal of the world. While the earlier school propagates the theory of art for art's sake, the latter deals with social realism. In the other view to define art, its specific form of social consciousness and human activity has to be highlighted. In keeping with the latter view, the specificity of the present study is important to take note of. It will enable us to appreciate, from different angles, the most important means of aesthetical comprehension and portrayal of the society that produced the art. At the same time, since art is a universal phenomenon, which is as old as human beings, it has to be also underlined that art is not merely an imitation or record of facts and phenomena in Nature, but an interpretation. In other

words, the effort of the human mind to grasp the inner beauty and meaning of the external facts of nature.

Stella Kramrisch further elaborates that Indian sculpture from the very outset was profoundly, naturalistic. In India appearance of art for its own sake and as an end in itself was never made an object of study. Nevertheless, the surface of things was appreciated for the artist took their visible quality as the result of the living and forming principle in them. Thus, a flower was not rendered only for its swaying and dewy grace. The sap that surged into its petals found parallel channels in the creative attitude and achieved the appearance of a flower. The artist looked at nature and found in it further incitement and actual proof for his experience of it. Thus, in this view Indian naturalism at various ages and with different degree always relied on the outer aspect of things as means and proof of understanding a pre-existent situation.

The creative acknowledgement of this internal living was connected to an inner experience of nature and the visible world. While all form was essentially homogeneous as far as qualities of nature was concerned because of emphasis on inner experience different types are made to interchange, that is, varieties of animals amongst themselves, or man with animals and so on.

The seeds of sculptural art in India have bloomed ever since early human societies engraved the sculptures of organic things from their environment. However, the writings on the sculptural art in India began fairly recently as part of the larger writings on art history. The first scientific writings emerged with western scholarship and its notions of art. These scholars collected information as travelers, antiquarians, orientalist, administrators, and archaeologists.

In contrast to the views of these scholars, we have during the 19th century and early twentieth century, the writings of British scholars usually administrators and officers who in most of their writings viewed Indian art critically. Scholars like Vincent Smith often compared it with the Greek and Roman art, and found Indian art as less impressive compared to the former. Since these scholars were looking at Indian art through the foreign eye, using their own parameters, they naturally could not appreciate the nature of Indian art.

Scholars in the eighteenth century without exception were convinced that the sexual imagery of ancient classical and Indian sacred art could only be an allegorical explanation of a different kind. According to Partha Mitter, the leading writers to discuss these problems were P:erre-Sylvain Marechal, Pierre-Francois Hugles, called d' Hancarville, Richard Payne Knight, and Charles Dupuis. Their main interest was in erotic art. They were thus, the first scholars to make serious attempts to gain knowledge about Indian art not only from literary sources but also from among the few known examples of Indian sculpture and painting

in European collections. For instance, Mitter points out that Sylvain Marechal in his *Antiquities a" Hancarville* drew parallels between the Priapus. He was convinced that the respect paid to the phallus in Greece and Rome and the same paid to the linga in India was not a local and isolated phenomenon but was a portrayal of nature in this manner. Similarly, it is pointed out by Mitter that Charles Dupuis' concerns on principles of nature led him to believe that the Indian linga represented a philosophic idea in the form of the union of the two great causes of nature.

Ruskin attacked Indian art. He found Indian art 'unnatural' and 'wanting in truth'. He criticized Indian decorative art in saying that inferior nations were able to produce excellent decorative art, which involved neither the intellect nor a developed moral sense. He closely studied nature. The study of nature for Ruskin did not mean the traditional concern with representation but an empirical study of nature. He studied nature to separate easily Indian art from the European art. Ruskin divided the climates of the various parts of the world into five groups according to their fitness for art. He felt that the tropical forest lands, characterized by moist and enervating heat and represented by India were not conducive to the growth of mind or flowering of good art. He gave descriptions of Elephanta within what he called as a rational approach. A personal conception of nature was central to Ruskin's art theory. The study of nature in his opinion was many-faceted and the role of nature in art had to be elaborated in each context. The conception of nature in Ruskin was ultimately related to his notion of truth.

However, the Buddhists generally accepted animals to be as important as human beings. Therefore, the Buddhists prohibited the killing of animals. The *Pancagatidipana* states that the slayers of goats, sheep, jackals, hare, deer, pigs etc; are reborn in the Sanghata hell where they are huddled up in one place and beaten to death. It goes on to explain that somewhere in the hell, the sinners are fastened by the neck and cut to pieces for the sin of slaying fishes, boars, cattle, bulls and goats for food. It also mentions that those who hunt beasts and slay birds will suffer terrible pain in hell. These references indicate that animals deservedly attained a worthy place in Buddhism. It is learnt that punishment for killing animals was severe. The ancient Buddhist law advocated that slayer of animals is as equal to a person involved in a murder case. The *Pancagatidipana* further states that those who caused death of living beings by throwing them into fire, etc are reborn in hell and are burnt in the dreadful fire. In regarding animals as important as human beings it is conceded in Buddhism that animals that listen merely to the Law of the Buddha deserve the heaven. Thus in one instance it is narrated that even a frog that attentively listened to the teachings of the Buddha was reborn in a golden mansion, twelve yojanas in size.

Twenty-five sutras of the Samyuttanikaya describe Sakka's character. The sixth sutra states that kindness to animals should be shown. According to this, a real Buddhist should not plunder and destroy the other's properties and not think of taking life of anyone whether of animals or human beings. Animals were important in the socio-religious life of tribes in ancient India. They used particular animals for economic life and worshipped them. They used to give animals as inherited property to their family members. For example, taking a contemporary example, domestic animals played a considerable role in the life of the Lepchas. Anthropological study among them shows that nearly all the ceremonies in their, life demanded animal sacrifices; they were essential for the socio-religious celebrations of birth, marriage and death. This study indicates that animals had an important bearing on their psychological development. The most objective observers of higher animals cannot avoid allowing him to be repeatedly drawn into making analogies with his own subjective experiences. This close association of animal and human life had a long history though historical data describing it is limited.

The sacred images of Hinduism abound with numerous human figures provided with animal heads or, human heads with animal bodies. Characteristically, Hindu mythology provides explanations, which attempt to see these hybrid forms as essential to the personality of the deity. The nature of the boar in this regard is important for the boar as the Varaha, incarnation of Vishnu is said to have lifted the earth from the depths on his tusk. The terrific nature of the lion is said to interpret the man-lion, Narasimha form that Vishnu is presumed to have taken in order to devour a particular demon-king. Semi-divine beings and a whole range of mythological creatures are also depicted in hybrid form. The most important among the hybrid animals is the serpent or the (naga) who appear in a variety of forms; their divine nature indicated by multiple cobra heads. A canopy of hoods sometimes combines human and reptile-aspects most intimately. The mythological bird, Garuda has been considered the traditional enemy of the serpents and sometimes holds a pair. Garuda is mostly depicted in a hybrid form with a human torso and bird beak, wings and claws. Other hybrid creatures also combine human and bird forms. Among these are the continuous references to the Kinnaras who have a bird body with a human head.

Visnu rides on the eagle, Garuda. This bird has been considered to have the capacity to see through long distances. It indicates the qualities a devotee should have in serving the lord namely, a vision of spirituality, capacity to transcend the mundane barriers and a constant desire to serve the master. Siva rides on the bull (Vrsabha). The vehicle of Lakshmi is the owl that represents perversion of attitudes in material prosperity. Lion, the vehicle of Durga represents power, will and determination. Qualities of lion

symbolize the qualities required to meet the challenge of ego.

Ganesa's carrier, the rat symbolizes his ability to find his way out of any trap or obstacle. The river goddesses, Ganga and Yamuna, are identified by their accompanying mouths-the crocodile monster or Makara for the Ganges and the tortoise from Jamuna. It may be noted here that though almost all animals and birds, big and small are associated with Hindu deities, the so-called unclean dog is not the vehicle of any god. They do, however, accompany Siva when he appears as a heretic beggar or, are associated Yama, the god of death. Similarly, the cat is uncommon in Hindu mythology though she is considered sacred to Sasthi, the goddess of child birth.

Hindu mythology is full descriptions of animals and birds in relation to its various sects and cults. The artists of ancient Deccan used their skill in depicting these animals and birds as part of the larger mythological story. As parts of these narratives in the data collected by us serpents appear fifteen times, Garuda seven, four boars, elephants, man-lion, fish and bull each three times, horse, Hanuman Ganesa and Jatayu twice each and cow, donkey, crane, a row of swan and tortoise once primarily relating to Vaisnavite explaining aspects of Vaisnava mythology. As part of Saivite stories Ganesa and the bull emerge three times each. Nineteen buffaloes appear depicted as part of the Durga cult. In the broader Hindu context, these animals and birds can be divided into three major categories for purpose of discussion, namely; animal and birds as the Gods and saints, animals and birds who were fought by the God and Goddesses and finally, animals and birds as vehicles of deities.

Artistically, they are depicted as entirely zoomorphic or in complete theriomorphic forms. The monuments of early Deccan are embellished beautifully with the things from nature in terms of flora like trees full of flowers and foliage, fruits, lotuses, creepers, flowers, honeysuckles and fauna like horses carrying royal personages and engaged in war, elephants both in war scenes and as helpers in public activities, elephants in hunting, camels in travel, oxen and bulls in everyday life, buffaloes, bulls, cocks in the role of amusements and birds such as doves carrying fruits and parrot breaking fruits.

HYPOTHESIS:

The hypothesis of this study is that the artists commonly used the things found in nature as decorative motifs and exchanged their ideas through art motifs from both within localities and abroad. The number of flora and fauna in each theme varied from region to region and over time. In this regard there was no uniform pattern or iconographic rules that

were followed but rather, artistic convention was followed and the relevance of the subject matter for the viewer of these depictions.

CONCLUSION :

Nature played a vital role in influencing artistic endeavor since earliest times. Trees and flowers, birds and bees, animals and fish, the streams and rivers, snows and mountains, men and women, all figure as motifs to show the craftsmen's skill. The various art motifs in India indicate that not only religion and the way of life but Nature also played a vital role in their creations. For instance, inspiration was taken from the parable stories of the Jatakas that were used to explain the various incarnations of the Buddha and these abound in descriptions of Nature. Similarly, the fine descriptive Nature hymns of the Rg Veda, the oldest sacred book of the Hindus reflect the close association of human beings to nature. In addition, going back to civilisation of the Indus valley, one finds that simple patterns like trees, animals from the Nature were utilised in their ornamentation. According to Devangana Desai, in the medieval Hindu temple the teaching of sages explaining the worldly knowledge to devotees including sexual education was decorated. Stella Kramrisch views sculptures of animals and birds that had decorated the perishable architecture of Mohenjodaro return to the structures of later periods as well. It is important to note that through the decorations on architecture it is possible to discriminate the doctrine of any religion, personal experience, and way of life of the people for any period.

Before the invention of studio education, the artist had to learn things not only relating to religion but from the all abounding Nature. Further items of relaxation and sport or amusement, like gambling, cock-fighting, archery found a part of decoration on the architectural facades.

The Deccan region has been rich in natural resources from time immemorial. A variety of natural rock and cave formations as well as the availability of different building materials has allowed its inhabitants to occupy and construct monuments relating to Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism. Our main concern has been to study nature as depicted on only the Buddhist and Hindu monuments built from roughly 3rd century BC to the 10th century AD. It is striking that the artists of ancient Deccan brought to the forefront nature, especially Fauna and Flora in decorating these monuments. Was this done because nature was central to these religious philosophies or, merely because as part of decoration they were instructed to do so by their patrons? Flora and Fauna on religious buildings did have an underlying philosophical and symbolism. Infact, even when not depicted as part of the divine beings, their decorative elements were also imbued with a rich meaning. In many ways therefore, depiction of nature in early art of the Deccan reflects not only the religious ethos but also a close

relationship between human beings and their natural environment.

The early twentieth century thus also saw writings that gave special emphasis to understanding the ethos of Indian art while writings of the post independent era brought about a study of art on the particular regions of the subcontinent. Scholars like Coomaraswamy and Kramrisch began a trend that was appreciative of the integral view of Indian art that was built on the concept of nature. This included the depiction nature in the art of the different regions of the Deccan. In fact, it is only now that some articles came to be written exclusively on nature emphasizing on the depiction of flora and fauna in Indian art. Finally, studies on regional art began to proliferate during the mid-twentieth century. These were mainly dynastic or site studies and some of them discussed depiction of nature by giving examples. However, they are mainly descriptive and give iconographic details rather than making any attempt to analyze the depictions. Methodologically, too they did not change the earlier practices of how art studies had been moulded under the colonial period.

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