

Art and Architectural Grandeur under Emperor Ashoka the Great

V. Saranya*

Ph.D. Full Time, Research Scholar, Department of History, Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli, Tamilnadu

Abstract – During the reign of the Mauryas art and architecture reached a highest level. The artefacts of Chandra Gupta Maurya and his son Bindusara were destroyed. But their sense of architecture can be studied from Greek literatures. Emperor Ashoka is well known for his buildings, pillars, stupas and inscriptions. These monuments are very famous for their perfections. The pillars obtained from the archeological site of Pataliputra describe their heritage and contributions towards art. The architectural marvel of Emperor Ashoka stood as a symbol of the flourishing art and culture of ancient India.

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INTRODUCTION

History of Art is concerned with no single class of objects. Every manmade structure and artefact from furniture and ceramics to buildings and paintings from photography comes within the field of the art. Although, traditionally art history has concentrated on painting, sculpture and architecture, the Mauryan emperors were great patron of art, literature and sculpture. The fine art developed and progressed under their patronage.

MAURYAN ART AND ARCHITECTURE

The art remains of the Mauryan period have been so overshadowed by their closeness in style to those of the Achaemenid period of Persian history that they tend to be regarded more as ammunition in the battle between those art-historians who treat them as products of Persian craftsmen and the opposing school which regards them as purely indigenous. Art remains of the Ashokan period are found in association with the inscriptions.

The inscriptions were placed either in sacred enclosures or else in the vicinity of towns. The most commonly found remains are the animal capitals of the pillars. It is not difficult to determine the origin of the pillar as a structure goes back to the monolith of the prehistoric period. These were generally cut from a single block of stone and stood in an enclosure which was regarded as sacred. The engravings on pillars, rocks, caves and walls also enlighten us on many aspects of life and society in the days of Mauryan rule. The Monuments of this age give a glimpse of the progress of art, literature, sculpture and architecture. There are ruins of many stupas and caves which still preserve the art of Mauryan reign.

ASHOKA'S PILLARS

Ashoka's pillars (Sthambhas) are the best specimens of the Mauryan Art. They were made out of single stones cut out from the grey chunar sand stones. There are about 30 pillars installed at different places of India. Some of the places with the pillars are Rampurva, Lauriya, Nandangarh, Sarnath and Sanchi. These pillars are usually installed in front of religious shrines or places of worship. The highly polished, tall and well proportioned pillars with slightly tapering monolithic shafts and standing free in space and complete and independent by themselves are admittedly the best representatives of the court art of the Mauryas.

The Mauryan columns are chiselled out of grey chunar sand stone and have a lustrous polish due to the application perhaps of silicious varnish on the stone. A study of the workmanship of the columns and the crowning animals shows that there was a chronological sequence in the installation of these columns. The earlier stage is marked by the one at Basarha Bakhira with lion as the crowning animal. The pillar consists of a shaft and a capital. The shaft is circular in section and tapering towards the top. The capital has three parts: (a) a bell (b) an abacus and (c) sculpture in the round. The most beautiful is the Sarnath pillar.

The Sarnath Lion Capital is the most celebrated of the monuments of Ashoka. It has an inverted lotus with petals. It has the beautiful depiction of four lions standing back to back carrying on their heads the great wheel of the law. Below the lions has a frieze of an elephant, a galloping horse, a bull and a lion. The shaft and the capital are chiselled with that extraordinary precision that characterize the workmanship of the Mauryan age and have never

been surpassed elsewhere in the world. It is really a marvelous feat of technical skill and talent for engineers to have transported the huge and heavy pillars from mines to the places of their erection. It is also a tribute to their engineering ability to have replanted them firmly on the ground.

SCULPTURES

The most important sculptures of the period are the animal figures placed on the top of the Ashoka pillars. The representations of the bull, lion, and elephant on these columns were excellent pieces of art. One of the most impressive representation is found in the bull capital of Rampurva. The lions carved on the capital of the sarnath are powerful representation of the animal form. The elephant carved at Dhauri, shows the plasticity and life and movement in the hard rock.

Among the other sculptures the figures of yaksha and yakshinis deserve our attention. Some of them were carved on the chunar sand stone. They are the beautiful portrayal of the human physic and decorative art. The Yaksha of parkham, and the female chauri bearer of Didarganj are the two sculptures representing the most important sculptural forms of the period. A large number of independent figure sculptures of various sizes and portions have been ascribed to the Mauryan period.

MAURYAN PALACE

In the art of India, the Mauryan art constitutes a notable epoch. Most of the surviving, Monuments belong to the period of Ashoka. The secular building of palace at Pataliputra (Kumrahar) is an excellent piece of architecture. The excavations of Waddell and Spooner confirm what is stated by Arrian and constitute a proof of the fact that before the employment of stone for building purposes, wood was generally the only material used to build even the most sumptuous and magnificent building.

The Greek Writes inform that the Mauryan palace excelled than that of Persian palaces at Susa and Ekbatana. They describe that the Place was adorned with gilded pillars decorated with plant and bird motif embossed in gold and silver. Though not available in its entirety, the excavated Audience Hall suggest that it was devised and constructed on the persepopolitan model. The city itself was an extensive one with moat and high walls.

STUPAS

A Stupa was a funeral mound which was originally made of bricks and stone. It was also called Chaitya which literally means a monument raised on the spot of the funeral pyre. It was usually the practice to plant a tree on the spot where the dead body was buried or burnt. Hence the sacred tree is called Chaitya tree. Sometimes, a monument was raised on

the spot to enshrine the remains of the dead person in the form of the burnt bones and ashes.

Ashoka is said to have opened the original eight stupas and distributed their relics over the 84000 stupas which he built. Of the Ashokan stupas that have come to light, the stupas at Bharut and Sanchi are important. Both the stupas were raised on a foundation. Each stupa consists of 3 parts (1) A Circular base, (2) Solid hemisphere (dome) and (3) Harmika. The circular base has a pradakshina (vedika) with entrance gateway on all (torana) and the vedika usually contain beautiful sculptures.

The torana at Sanchi was famous for its beautiful decorative sculptures. The dome was made of large bricks and rubble. Stones were used by Ashoka in the encasing of stupas. The dome also has a pradakshinapaatha. They were also carved with festoons and flowers. The harmika at the top has also a vedika. It is surmounted by three umbrellas (chatravali). The chief purpose of the stupa was to enshrine the body relics of Buddha and his disciples.

INSCRIPTIONS OF ASHOKA

The inscriptions of Ashoka are important and very reliable source of the history of his reign. Ashoka is mentioned in the inscriptions as Devanampiya or Priyadarsi. His name is mentioned only in the Maski edict. The language used in the inscriptions is Prakrit and the script Brahmi. In two inscriptions, the Kharoshthi script is used. The inscriptions located throughout the country fall under 3 divisions.

- ▶ Rock Inscriptions
- ▶ Pillar Inscriptions
- ▶ Cave Inscriptions

These three can be again sub divided into eight divisions in chronological order.

Two types of Minor Rock Edicts:

The first type of Minor Rock Edicts deals with the personal life of Ashoka. The second type lists the sacred principles of Dhamma or law of piety. The Maski Minor Rock Edict unique by itself is the only one which mentions the personal name of the Emperor Ashoka.

(i) Bhabru Rock Edict

The Bhabru Rock Edict proves beyond the doubt that the personal religion of Ashoka was Buddhism.

The Fourteen Rock Edicts

Rock edicts are fourteen in number and have been found in eight different places. These places are 1)Shahbazgarhi in Peshawar District, 2)Mansehra in Hazara District, 3)Kalsi, a village in the Dehradun District, 4) Girnar hill, 5) Dhauli, 6) Jaugada, 7) Yerragudi, 8) Sopara in Thana District, where only a fragment of edict VIII is found. Rock Edicts XI, XII, and XIII are omitted on the Dhauli and Jugada rocks. The fourteen Rock Edicts located in different places mention Ashoka's principle of government and ethical system.

- **The Kalinga Rock Edicts:**

The two Kalinga Rock Edicts deals with the method of administration followed in the newly conquered province of Kalinga.

- **The Four Cave Inscriptions in the Barabar Hills:**

There are four caves on the Barabar Hill about nineteen miles north of Gaya. In the walls of the three of these caves are found the inscriptions of Ashoka informing us that he dedicated these caves to the Ajivikas (Jain Monks). This speaks volumes of his religious toleration. The language used in these inscriptions is Prakrit and the script Brahmi. Only in two inscriptions i.e., at Mansehra and Shehbazgarhi the script is Kharoshthi, a name given by Buhler to those North-Western cursive characters running from the right to the left as in Urdu, Persian and Semitic languages.

- **The Two Tarai Pillar Inscriptions:**

These two pillar inscriptions which are of a commemorative nature prove that Ashoka went on Dharmayatra to holy places connected with the life of Buddha.

- **The Seven Pillars Edicts:**

The Seven Pillar Edicts deal with the Dhamma and the steps taken by Ashoka for the propagation of Dhamma.

- **The Four Minor Pillar Edicts:**

These inscriptions mention the punishments to be meted out to schismatics in the Buddhist Vihars.

The cave inscriptions represent about half a century of building activity. They do not represent, except in their high polish any conscious attempt towards architectural achievement. Every little detail is sharply and precisely chiseled. Every single letter is cut into the stone with accuracy and care. Lines are more often than not straight and well ordered and mistakes are few and far between.

CONCLUSION

The Mauryan Art was a class by itself; of course there was some Iranian and Greek influence. But in the final consummation, the Mauryan Art excelled in artistic expression. According to Marshall, the Mauryan Art was noted for its "Massive simplicity, extraordinary precision and accuracy and spirited realism". The magnificent palaces of Pataliputra were once a matter of awe and inspiration for the Greek and Chinese travellers. The Stupas at Sarnath and Sanchi are the best specimens of the sculpture of the period. In the words of Dr. V.A Smith, "The skill of the stone-cutter of Ashoka's period may be said to have attained perfection and to have accomplished tasks which would perhaps be found beyond the powers of 20th century.

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Corresponding Author

V. Saranya*

Ph.D. Full Time, Research Scholar, Department of
History, Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli,
Tamilnadu

sevathimohan@gmail.com