

THE EARLY HISTORICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL EVOLUTION OF THE STŪPA

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The sixth century BCE saw monumental changes in the process of urbanisation deeply affecting polity, economy, society and culture. There was a remarkable spurt in philosophical deliberation and one of its remarkable outgrowths was Buddhism. This was a new kind of philosophy which gained instantaneous popularity owing to its 'utter contemporaneous utility' (D DKosambi) This new type of teaching reflected its orientation through a new type of literature like the *Tipitaka*. Also new forms of architectural structures evolved out of the Buddhist philosophy of which the Stūpas can said to be the most unique.

Dilip K Chakrabarti has theorised that Stūpa as a commemorative structure was popular among other sects in India also, but they became very popular with the Buddhists and later came to be associated with them. (*World Archaeology*) The Buddhist Stūpa was a simple structure to commemorate the bodily relics but later along with elaborate ornamentation, votive Stūpas and other forms also evolved from it. With a close look at the fabric of Indian history which is interlinked through Buddhism with Sri Lankan history, we can discover a syncopated *kulturgeschichte* of the Stūpa.

It is from the Harappan civilisation that we get extensive materials of art. Animals, especially elephant, which are represented with loving observation and sympathy, are also found in the Buddhist tradition. The connection between the two cannot be clearly established but the similarity is there. Although no art remains date from the Vedic period, there can be no doubt that ideas, forms and symbols developed during this period acted as seed and mould for the succeeding ages. The medium must have been wood which could not survive but influence of carving and engraving in wood is unmistakable on the work of stone carving of early Stūpas. The influence of

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the cosmic symbolism developed in the 'fire altars' and the *Yupa* has been traced by scholars on later architectural forms.

In the age of Mahajanpadas a number of changes provided a transition from the older Vedic traditions. The tension between spiritual and sensuous and the urge to overcome it became a characteristic feature of the classical tradition and expressed itself through art in diverse ways. One of the expressive example of this dialectic was the stolid *Stūpa* structure contrasted with the sculptural richness of the *vedika* and *torana*. (G C Pandey: *Foundations of Indian Culture*)

The notion of a perfected human being emerged through the Buddha, who denied to be looked upon as a *deva*, *gandharva*, *yaksha*, or *manava*. In fact, the Buddha was always seen to be imbued with divine essence. Thus, a simple *Stūpa* with relics, bodily or material, was the most suitable expression. He was further represented through symbols. In due course the symbology was interpreted in terms of iconography. The aim of the artist was "to render the human form transparent for superhuman reality." (G C Pande) These symbols were gradually incorporated in the *Stūpas* too.

Growing royal power and pomp reached a climax in the Mauryan Empire. If we consider only the materially surviving monuments of art, we would have to regard the Mauryan or rather Asokan period as the earliest period of Indian art. There are some examples of the pre-Mauryan art also, like the crystal vases from the Piprahva *Stūpa* but the use of stone on a large scale for artistic purpose was not common earlier.

Buddhist and imperialist aspirations after universality fuse in Asokan art just as traditional symbolism fuses with the new urge for permanence through stone, appropriate to the new imperial achievement. (G C Pande) The Asokan *Stūpas* were enlarged, elaborated and carved in the Sunga and Satvahana period. Of these the great *Stūpa* of Sanchi is the most significant. It has been argued that the *Stūpa* shows a cosmic symbolism. If so, it must be conceded that the Buddhists have adapted an ancient symbol to a new use because there is no doubt whatsoever that the Buddhist *Stūpa* is above all

the symbol of Nirvana. The very simplicity and solidity of the hemispherical form is suggestive of the finality of the Great Decease.

As the practice of worshipping the Stūpas became more and more popular, the place developed into a huge monastic structure with the Stūpa in the centre. The Stūpa structure became ornate with the creation of the *torana*, *vedika*, sculptural engraving etc. The themes of sculptures were veritable sermons in stone but the Buddha was still represented only symbolically. The Stūpa remained a favourite architectural object of the Buddhists. In North West of the Indian subcontinent, then called the Gandhara region, an elongated structure or several storeys were added. The Stūpas travelled to Deccan, where Amravati represented the high water-mark of this art.

Between 1st century BCE and 1st century CE, the image of the Buddha emerged with the development of Mahayana, and the transition of aniconic art into iconic art. The not so well-known Stūpas at Kholvi in Rajasthan show a Buddha statue in the centre of the Stūpa. There we also find an illustration of a 'Stūpa within a Stūpa'. Thus, the Stūpa branches out into different forms but in various forms the aim is always to converge the thoughts and sentiments of the devotee to the path of enlightenment and liberation.

Keywords: Stūpa, philosophy, Indian history, Pre-Mauryan, Mauryan, Mahayana

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