

Classicism In Indian Sculpture

Abstract-

Classicism in Indian sculpture is a concept that cannot be viewed from the understanding of western aesthetics. According to Scholar Stella Kramrisch 'naturalism depicted in Indian art, as far back as the Indus valley civilization, is not an endeavour as in western art but an unavoidable condition.

The main medium in India from actual seeing to artistic form is modelling. This modelling, a legacy of the Palaeolithic period had crystallized through the ages into a phantom of pristine force. Innervation is the energy that brings about movement but in the animal seals found in Indus valley, this Innervation seems to be present even while the animal is still, bringing about the feeling of pent-up energy from within the creature. This feeling of Pent-up energy or '*Prana*', as described by Stella Kramrisch is what we see evolving in Indian sculpture from Bharut to Amravati, ultimately achieving its high point in the Gupta period sculptures.

She further states that this feeling of '*Prana*' that the Indian sculptor invokes in his art is through the plasticity that he achieves in his work, which trans-substantiates it from the realm of the physical to that of the spiritual.

Introduction-

Indian art is based on the ancient scriptures that have laid down canons regarding the creation of all forms of art. In the 9th century, the scholar Shanku talked about '*Chitra turang nyay*' which essentially expounded on the idea of capturing the character of the object being painted instead of aiming at a naturalistic depiction.

E B Havell Said "*Indian art is not concerned with the conscious striving after beauty as a thing worthy to be sought after for its own sake; its main endeavour is always directed towards the realization of an idea, reaching through the finite to the infinite, convinced always that through the constant effort to express the divine origin of all earthly beauty the human mind will take in more and more of the perfect beauty of divinity.*" He says that the divine ideal of Indian art is really the creation of the Yoga school of philosophy. When Indian artists began to represent the person of Buddha, which was apparently not much before the first century of the Christian era, they regarded him as the Great Yogi.

As per the artistic canons of Hinduism as well as Buddhism, the forms of gods, who also, like human beings, acquired divine powers by ascetic practices, were not to be represented like the human ascetic with bodies emaciated by hunger and thirst, bones protruding and swollen veins; but with smooth skin, rounded limbs, the veins and bones always concealed, the neck and shoulders broad and strong and the waist narrow, like the body of a lion. It was by Yoga and spiritual insight or intuition, rather than by observation and analysis of physical forms and facts, that the sculptor or painter was to attain to the highest power of artistic expression.

The Hindu sage, Sukracharya, explains the whole philosophy of Indian art when he says that '*the artist should attain to the images of the gods by spiritual contemplation only*'. According to the *silpa* text of the Vishnudarmottar purana, which in Sanskrit reads as "*Rupa bheda pramami, bhava*

lavanya yojanam sadrishya varnika bhangam”, there are six limbs (the ones mentioned) or ‘Shadang’ to Indian art and to understand Indian art one must view it from the perspective of this reasoning.

The British scholar Anand K. Coomaraswamy further explains that as per the *silpa shastra*, which lay down the canons for ideal proportions of the images, “*only an image made in accordance with the canons can be called beautiful; some may think that beautiful which corresponds to their own fancy, but that not in accordance with the canon is unlovely to the discerning eye. Even the misshapen image of an angel is to be preferred to that of a man, however attractive the latter might be.*” This is because the representation of angels is means to spiritual ends.

A significant passage in the *Aitareya Brahmana*, which seems to be the earliest Indian attempt at a definition of art, postulates two conditions for a work of art, namely that (a) it must be a work of skill (b) it must be *chhandomaya*, that is, endowed with *chhanda* which is the over-all Indian term for rhythm, balance, proportion, harmony, etc.

Plasticity in Indian Art

According to Stella Kramrisch in the art of the Indus valley there pervades a linear rhythm, inherent in classical art, in all its forms-be it animal, human or foliage. Every part of every figure is permeated by the same vitality that is carried for to form by an inner rhythm that constitutes together with the bodies through which it passes the plasticity of Indian sculpture. An inner pliability bends and moulds the forms.

“The paradox of the solid material and the fluid aspect of its transformation make the high tension and complexity of Indian sculpture. This may be called plastic.”

Talking about the sculptures of Amravati and Sanchi she says that the neatly carved borders seem to, at times, being encroached upon and over-sected by a superabundance of figures, which will not acknowledge limits. The taming of this superabundance by limits and lines is one of the tasks of this phase of classical sculpture. An essential feature of the classical phase is the elimination of time. The main events of a story are synthesised and depicted in one visual unit.

The task of the Indian craftsman is record what is visible but the visible consists of many things within their limit. This compels him to eliminate that which is personal. To safeguard the process of artistic creation from individual influence, conventions were elaborated as to how to tackle the extensiveness of the objects and their relation.

The most noticeable ones are:

- a. Putting figures in the distance one on top of the other (as they appear) instead one on behind the other (as they should be).
- b. The figures neither decrease nor increase in height according to their distance as they are not thought of this light.
- c. Just as the size of the figures is determined by functional importance so is the visibility of objects.

These functional formulae created a pictorial playground that was flat with figures served upon it as if it were a tray.

Early Phase

During the first and the second century A.D Mathura gained importance. This period has given us a pantheon of Buddhist and Jain imagery. According to Stella Kramrisch in spite of its contribution, this period fails to experience or create spirituality. The innate tendency of the Indian craftsman towards giving shape in the likeness of living things, asserted in the Mathura period unreservedly. The Buddha image of this period is given the appearance of a *yaksha*, who is a *chakravartin* (ruler of four worlds). In this powerful and worldly form, the craftsmen of Mathura fashioned their Buddha image. **The Mathura School** saw the production of large, boldly curved figures and isolated objects that are definitely more foreshortened than before. Compared to earlier reliefs, the figures were now actually grown up, in some cases, they were almost as tall as the pane itself. By the first century A.D, the heaviness of the Mathura sculptures melts into a more relaxed flesh, covered in robes as per the Sunga idiom. The Naturalism of Mathura in the 1st and 2nd A.D has physical mass for its substance and sensual appeal for its aim.

The Buddha image of Mathura is a robust one. In sharp contrast to this were the Buddha images of Gandhara, which was a resourceful adaptation of Indian notions by syncretistic craftsmen. A weary eclecticism distinguishes it. The Gandhara school images were about localised Hellenism, with slight concession for Indian sensibilities there is an incoherent use of Indian aesthetics like standards of proportion, modelling and poise which as a result render the images lifeless. Yet, the **Gandhara School**, in spite of these incongruencies, has give Indian sculpture “certain amplitude of facial feature, of drapery and demeanour” that has become a “local symptom of Indian heritage”.

Amravati, the centre of artistic development at **Vengi School** was according to Kramrisch the beginning of classicism in Indian sculpture. With precursors like *Jaggyapeta* and contemporaries like *Nagarjunakonda* and stupa at *Goli* as, the Vengi School contributed greatly towards the development of the ‘Classic’ in Indian sculpture. The delicacy of modelling and elongated forms from the last 2 centuries B.C gave way to a heavy and plastic form.

“So far did early classical sculpture go. So utterly steeped in the body, that the mastery of its modelling seems to come from within.”

The Vengi School reached its peak in the latter half of the 2nd century A.D. Linear composition had not only become more flexible but had grown in the same direction and same degree as the movement of the single figures.

We can better understand this development from in the words of Stella Kramrisch who says *“From the days of Bharhut onwards, an ever increasing use of the joints of the body was made in their pliability: as in the fettered shyness of the Bharhut postures, in the slow sway of bodhgaya figurines, in the vivacious experimenting with new movements and angles of posture in Sanchi. These by the first century A.D are rounded off into a sweeping boldness that bends head against shoulders, shoulder against waist, supported by legs reciprocal in their crossed attitude towards the body and surmounted by arms that continue the pattern of the body rhythm.”* We can understand from this statement that what is being referred to hear is the classic “Tribhanga” (Tri-body break) pose, a hallmark of Indian sculpture.

Mature Phase

On entering the Gupta period, sculpture entered the zenith of the classical phase. The efforts of the centuries, techniques of art were culminating and there was an evolution of definite 'types' or 'models'. The notion of Ideal beauty had been concretely and precisely formulated by this period. A thorough grasp of the true aims and essential principles of art, a highly developed aesthetic sense and masterly execution produced remarkable images which were to become the ideal for Indian artists of consequent ages.

Gupta sculpture is the logical outcome of Bharhut, Amravati, Sanchi and Mathura. The styles came closer and closer, almost melting into one. The Gupta artist seems to have been working for a higher ideal. In the composition, it was now the female figure that had become the focus of attraction and vegetative forms had started to recede into the background but in doing so it left behind its unending and undulating rhythm in the human form. This quality in the sculpture has been termed by Stella Kramrisch as **Transubstantiation**, Which literally means transcending substance or matter, which in this case was the sculpture, to a spiritual level that has always been the true aim of Indian Aesthetics.

The Gupta period saw the development of new canons of beauty based upon an explicit understanding of the human body in its inherent softness and suppleness. The soft and pliant body of the Gupta sculptures with their smooth and shining surface allow for a movement that is free. Even figures seemingly at rest seem to be infused with an inherent energy. This was true not only of the images of deities but also of ordinary men and women.

In order to capture the sensitiveness of the plastic surface the artists did away with all outward elements like excessive drapery and ornamentation. All that concealed the body was treated as superfluous. This led to the development of the 'wet or transparent' clinging drapery of these sculptures. There was a conscious censorship on the sensuous effect that these draperies had, especially in the case of female figures.

Some exemplary works of the Gupta classicism are seen in the sculptures from the Sarnath and Mathura schools during this period. Compared to the Kusana period sculptures of Mathura school, the sculptures from Gupta period have more contours that are fluid and the body is slenderer. The developed style of Sarnath developed around the third quarter of the 5th century. The Buddha of Sarnath exemplifies the Gupta ideals of aesthetics which are executed to perfection in the elongated earlobes, slender, graceful body and refined execution of the details of the halos, robes and faces.

Transubstantiation in her explanation of this concept, Stella Kramrisch, who came is responsible for this theory, says that *"the vegetative rhythm of this recurrent and undulating movement has no longer plants for its carrier. While these [plants] have disappeared from the composition they leave their movement in them...."*

According to Stella Kramrisch it is the impression the free rhythmic quality of these vegetative forms that permeates the human forms and lends a lyrical beauty to them. What was earlier on the exterior now seems to have become a part of the form, rising from within. This intrinsic quality achieved so skilfully by the artists of this period brings about a new level of plasticity in the sculptural form, plasticity, which propels it into the realm of the 'spiritual'. According to Stella

kramrisch, the achievement of the 'spiritual' is what makes Indian sculpture classical and that is what we see in the sculpture of this period.

She of course mentions that this did not come by all of a sudden and that the ground for its preparation has been happening ever since the Indus valley civilization. By the 6th century A.D, there is an attempt to free the body from the relief ground. As a result the sculpture seems to be free of the law of gravitation lending it once again a 'spiritual' quality.

Of this Stella Kramrsich says *"what is heavy and yet appears weightless is the charming puzzle, and the sculptors of this age never get tired of repeating it..."*

Conclusion

A *Murti*, according to Indian notion, is not a copy of the external shape and appearance of the objects of the external perceptual world; nevertheless it must have a reference to *verisimilitude* or 'Sadrishya' with such objects, and more significantly it must conform to the law or laws of nature, in other words, to 'Chhandas', which is the essence of life itself. A *Murti* is not just a logical construct of symbols, which an icon is, but a powerful, unified and coherent structure of form, an entity by itself which is vital, potent and dynamic, being impregnated with *Prana* and *Rupa*, the breath and sap of life respectively. These are the ideals of aesthetics on which Indian stands. It does not aim at naturalism in accordance with western sensibilities.

Therefore, to view it from the classical point of view of western art would be a folly. In the words of Anand K. Coomarswamy *"those who wish to study the "development" of Indian art must emancipate themselves entirely from the innate European tendency to use a supposedly greater or less degree of observation of nature as a measuring rod by which to trace stylistic sequences or recognise aesthetic merit."*

While the nationalist sentiments of Scholars like Coomarswamy and Indophiles like Kramrisch have placed Indian art on the global platform, it maybe a prudent to re-examine certain issues like broad classification of an entire period as 'classical'.

'Classical' in its truest sense is that which is exemplary or sets a standard and is a prototype for future generations to come. But that this element should be present in every aspect of a culture is not necessarily true. According to Historian Romilla Thapar *"Civilizations were said to have a golden or age when virtually every manifestation of life reached a peak of excellence. The Gupta period was selected largely because of impressive literary works in Sanskrit and the high quality of art, which coincided with what was viewed as a Brahmanical 'renaissance'."* She further says that the classicism of the Gupta period is not an innovation emanating from Gupta rule alone. This has been voiced by Stella Kramrisch as well.

According to Thapar, it has been found that new artistic forms were initiated during the Pre-Gupta period in north India, those associated with Buddhism and those found parallel in other religious sects, with the writing of texts on technical subjects and creative literature of various kinds. However, much of the articulation is in Sanskrit and the spread of Sanskrit culture assumes certain kinds of social and cultural exclusivity and demarcates social groups. Therefore, the description of the Gupta period as one of classicism is relatively correct regarding the upper

classes, who lived according to descriptions in their literature and representation in their art. The more accurate, literal evidence that come from archaeology suggests a less glowing life style for the majority.

