



Art and Architecture of Mauryan Period

Subash Kutum

Assistant Professor, Department of History, Purbanchal College, Silapathar

Corresponding Author – Subash Kutum

DOI- 10.5281/zenodo.11058893

Abstract:

During the Mauryan Empire's flourishing period (322–185 BCE), Indian art and architecture experienced a dramatic change. The paper explores the distinctive features of artistic expression throughout this time. The widespread use of polished sandstone, a material that is more durable than previous techniques, was a paradigm shift. The Achaemenid Empire's influenced the art of Mauryan period, paying special attention to how the famous Mauryan pillars were made and how they worked. In addition to acting as memorials and other sites these oblong buildings, which were frequently topped with spectacular animal sculptures, also provided a fresh means of royal communication in the form of inscriptions. The paper also looks at the other architectural forms that arose in addition to pillars. Buddhist and other religious relics were housed in hemispherical stupas, which rose to prominence in the Mauryan landscape. The period also witnessed the development of viharas, or monastic complexes used by Buddhist monks as residential and educational places. The growth of Mauryan power and the spread of Buddhism across the empire were both greatly aided by Mauryan art and architecture. Through an examination of the creative decisions and architectural advancements, the paper illuminates the intricate interplay among art and society in one of the most important periods of Indian history.

Keyword: Architecture, Sandstone, inscription, Hemispherical, illuminate

Introduction:

Marked by the consolidation of enormous lands under the Mauryan Empire, the Mauryan period, which lasted from around 322 BCE to 185 BCE, is considered a crucial period in ancient India's history. Representing the political, social, and cultural climate of the day, this era saw tremendous advances in both art and architecture. India's cultural environment has been permanently altered by the massive constructions and artistic expressions that originate from the Mauryan period, which is known for its distinctive mix of foreign influences and indigenous traditions.

The creation of massive stone monuments, best represented by the Great Stupa at Sanchi and the well-known Ashoka Pillars, is the architectural signature of the Mauryan period. These architectural wonders, which are distinguished by their enormous dimensions, size, exquisite craftsmanship, and symbolic meaning, stand as permanent reminders of the Mauryan kings' authority, dominance and patronage. The renowned four lions, which are featured in the intricately carved capitals of the Ashoka Pillars, symbolize a unique combination of Buddhist symbolism and imperial ideology that upholds the values of dharma and just rule. In a comparable way, the Great Stupa at Sanchi, one of the oldest and best-preserved stupas in India, represents the Mauryan period's architectural genius and spiritual dedication and is a revered landmark and site of pilgrimage for Buddhists.

The Mauryan era saw noteworthy advancements in sculpture and arts in addition to construction. Renowned for its vitality, realism, and meticulous attention to detail, the Mauryan sculptural tradition created immense stone edicts by Ashoka and the Yaksha and Yakshi sculptures from Didar Ganj. Renowned for their grace and energy, these sculptures capture the creative brilliance and rich cultural legacy of ancient India. They portray a diverse range of subjects, from religious deities to ordinary people.

Buddhism was effectively promoted and developed throughout the Mauryan era thanks to the art and architecture of the time. Huge stupas that once held Buddha relics have been turned into pilgrimage destinations that promote devotion and a sense of togetherness. The public was visually educated about Buddhist teachings through the elaborate carvings on these stupas and the well-known Ashoka pillars, which portrayed events from the Buddha's life. Furthermore, the extensive system of viharas, or monasteries, constructed by Mauryan emperors supplied monks with necessary places to live and disseminate Buddhist teachings. The Mauryan emperors' support of art and architecture greatly strengthened Buddhism's position in India and abroad.

The most common type of Mauryan artifacts are most likely the popular terracotta objects of various sizes that have been discovered at Mauryan sites and other locations. Manufactured by non-specialist locals, such as potters with a sideline,

they are extremely hard to date. It becomes difficult to locate them especially if they aren't identified as belonging to a specific archeological setting. The finding of these objects at Mauryan levels during the excavations at Ahicchatra reveals a continuance of the prehistoric tradition of creating mother-goddesses in clay, even though many are thought to be pre-Mauryan.

Artistic techniques like terracotta, ivory carving, and pottery flourished and evolved throughout the Mauryan period, demonstrating the variety of artistic expressions prevalent at that point in history. The artistic creations of the Mauryan artisans embellished the imperial palaces and religious monuments, but they also added to the cultural well-being of the general populace. This heritage endures to this day, inspiring and fascinating researchers and enthusiasts alike. The varied inspirations and ambitions of ancient Indian civilization are reflected in the vivid tapestry of invention, innovation, and cultural synthesis found in the art and architecture of the Mauryan period. A rich cultural legacy that bears witness to the ongoing legacy of one of India's most distinguished dynasties has been left to posterity by the Mauryan kings and artisans through their massive buildings and artistic achievements.

Literature Review:

In India's history, the Mauryan period (c. 322–185 BCE) is noteworthy because it saw the rise of the Mauryan dynasty, which gave rise to a strong empire. The cultural diversity and vitality of ancient India are reflected in the amazing accomplishments made in a number of sectors throughout this era, including art and architecture. The existing literature review illuminates the salient characteristics, scholarly viewpoints, and contributions to Indian civilization of the Mauryan period's art and architecture.

A thorough analysis of the historical setting and the cultural forces that influenced the evolution of Mauryan art and architecture is necessary to fully comprehend this period's output. The Mauryan Empire, which was founded by Chandragupta Maurya and subsequently extended by his distinguished successor, Ashoka the Great, covered a substantial area of the Indian subcontinent, promoting cultural exchanges and contacts with surrounding areas. Frederick Asher (2011) in 'A companion to Asian art and architecture', discusses about the origins of Mauryan art. According to the text, older Indian visual traditions—particularly those of the Gangetic plains—provided a solid basis for Mauryan art. There is also evidence of influence from nearby civilizations like as the Achaemenids (Persia) in the design of the pillars and the use of specific motifs. On the other hand, Mauryan art evolved a unique style with unique traits.

AK Singh (2004) talks about the realistic, dynamic, and spiritually symbolic sculpture of the Mauryan. A vast variety of subjects, including as religious deities, mythological stories, and secular themes, are shown in Mauryan sculptures, which are primarily composed of stone and clay. The incorporation of animal symbolism and realism in the art exhibits the remarkable advancement in terms of innovation and uniqueness. Exhibiting the superb craftsmanship and naturalistic representation characteristic of Mauryan sculpture, the Yaksha and Yakshi sculptures from Didar Ganj, found close to present-day Patna, are a prime example. Based on analysis, scholars such as Vidya Dehejia (2009) and Stella Kramrisch (2013) have interpreted these sculptures as representations of fertility and prosperity in ancient Indian civilization.

The iconography of Mauryan art is distinguished by an intriguing fusion of technical proficiency and symbolism. The imperial logos on the Ashokan pillars are the most identifiable features. These include the lotus, which stands for purity and spiritual development, and the majestic four-lion capital, which symbolizes strength and dharma (righteousness). Elephants, bulls, and horses are among the animals that are commonly seen; these animals may allude to trade routes, fertility, and power, respectively. It's interesting to note that there are quite a few human individuals, which may indicate that the emphasis is on general ideas rather than specific leaders.

In his research, Kenoyer (2016) highlights the persistence of creative traditions. He may suggest that, despite its innovation, Mauryan art is influenced by older creative traditions such as that of the Indus Valley Civilization. This is evident in the usage of specific animal themes (bulls, elephants), as well as the potential impact of Indus Valley seals on the iconography of Mauryan pillars. This viewpoint would cast doubt on the notion that Mauryan art evolved fully formed and instead imply that it was shaped throughout time by a wider artistic lineage.

Indian creative expression underwent a sea change with the advent of Mauryan architecture and its use of refined stone in constructions. The majority of monumental constructions were made of wood before this time. Nonetheless, the widespread usage of polished sandstone was invented by the Mauryans. This change in material made it possible to build monuments that are much more durable and striking. The perfect monolithic pillars by Ashoka were carved from single chunks of sandstone, some of which reached heights of over forty feet. Utilizing a unique polishing method is one of the hallmarks of Mauryan stonework. The smooth, highly reflective surface that was produced by this method enhanced the sculptures' and pillars' visual majesty. Mandal (2017) talks about the "Mauryan polish" and delves

into its use in famous constructions such as the Barabar Caves and the Ashoka pillars. The studies confirm that the ability to carve and shape stone allowed Mauryans for a wider range of artistic expression and architectural innovation.

The building of stupas, or Buddhist memorial structures, which peaked during this time, is another characteristic of Mauryan architecture. H.P. Ray (2020) investigates the connection between the Buddhist monastic establishments in the Peninsula and the Ashokan edicts. Numerous archeological discoveries have revealed that Buddhism existed here prior to the Satavahan period. The Great Stupa at Sanchi, which was built as a masterpiece of Mauryan architecture and was commissioned by Ashoka and then developed by succeeding monarchs, is distinguished by its hemispherical dome, ornate entrances (toranas), and sculptured ornaments. The Great Stupa's architectural characteristics and religious symbolism have been examined by academics including Marshall (1911) and Susan Huntington, who have highlighted the monument's significance as a hallowed pilgrimage place and a visual representation of Buddhist cosmology.

Mauryan art allows dharma to be equated in too simplistic a manner with religion. Ashoka placed great emphasis on dharmic qualities such as non-violence, sincerity, and reverence for elders in his edicts on the pillars. Chakravarti (2016) examines how these principles are embodied in the pillars. For example, the usage of polished stone might stand for the search for the truth, and the pillars' durability could reflect the long-lasting effects of moral behavior. There is no denying the pillars' majesty and immensity. N Sugandhi (2012) also examines how the pillars functioned as a potent emblem of Ashoka's imperial authority in addition to transmitting moral lessons. This clearly signifies that Mauryan art not only resulted in conveying themes of universality but also served the purpose of enforcing imperial rules and ideas. The lion is one animal symbol that may be used to support this idea of imperial power. The usage of pillars for communication was not unique to the Mauryan Empire among Indian civilizations. Sengupta (2016) explores how the Mauryan pillars added fresh ideas and themes while also drawing from past customs. Mauryan art and architecture hence undoubtedly reflected the society of the times as well as played a huge role in transforming and advancing the culture of the period it represents.

The most common type of Mauryan artifacts are most likely the popular terracotta objects of various sizes that have been discovered at Mauryan sites and other locations (Smith, 2015). From Pataliputra to Taxila, they are more frequently found. Since they have distinct shapes and obvious decoration, many of them have stylized forms and

are technically more proficient. There is minimal repetition, even though some seem to have been created using molds. Deity sculptures, toys, dice, decorations, and beads are among the items found in Taxila Terracotas. The earthy charm is often present in terracotta depictions of folk gods and goddesses. This widespread use of terracotta also represents the reflection of Mauryan architecture in the day to day lives of people of that period in the history.

Local sculptors' creations serve as examples of Mauryan popular art. This was sculpture that the emperor most likely did not commission. This category usually involves sculptures found outside the immediate imperial circle and with a more regional and diverse style. The wealthy subjects and the local governors were the supporters of popular art. Figures like the male Parkham figure, the female Besnagar figure, and the whisk-bearer from Didar Ganj are some examples of its representations. In terms of technique, they are not as well-crafted as the pillar capitals. They convey a strong sense of physical energy and earthiness.

The uniform imperial style of palace art was contrasted with regional sculptures (Gupta, 2018). The wide range of creative styles found throughout the Mauryan Empire is exemplified by the stylistic differences between Yaksha and Yakshi sculptures from various places. These popular sculptures ensure that regional artistic traditions and sensitivities coexist with the grand imperial styles. It is also possible that regional sculptors borrowed ideas from earlier artistic traditions for their creations. Even under a new empire, a sense of cultural continuity was guaranteed by this link to the past. Interestingly, local residents revered popular sculptures such as Yakshas and Yakshis irrespective of their religious differences. These sculptures functioned as a link between the people's actual religious experiences and the imperial project. Further, local sculptures may provide insights into the daily lives and beliefs of the people, in contrast to the vast narratives depicted in court art. It helps us learn more about how people outside of the imperial court viewed and interacted with the Mauryan world by examining these sculptures.

An essential aspect of Mauryan art is the study of Mauryan coins, which were used as symbols of culture and politics in addition to being a means of commerce. Simple punch-mark designs on silver and copper coins characterize the earliest Mauryan coins, which are credited to Chandragupta Maurya. This indicates the early stages of coinage in the Mauryan Empire. The iconography and symbolism seen on Mauryan coinage demonstrate the interaction between art and coinage throughout this time period (Bopparachchi, 2017). Mauryan coinage represents imperial authority and cultural identity visually, just as Mauryan artworks

communicate religious and ideological ideas. The incorporation of religious themes and animal images into Mauryan coinage serves to uphold the rulers' ideological agenda, which advocates for good governance, prosperity, and piety. The socioeconomic background of the era, including trade networks, urbanization, and administrative procedures, is also well-understood by looking at Mauryan coins (Thapar, 2006). Historians can reconstruct patterns of cultural and economic interchange both inside and outside of the empire by examining the distribution and circulation of Mauryan coins.

The varied inspirations and goals of ancient Indian civilization are reflected in the rich tapestry of creativity, spirituality, and cultural synthesis found in the art and architecture of the Mauryan period. Scholars and enthusiasts alike are enthralled by Mauryan art and architecture, which offers priceless insights into the cultural legacy of one of India's most distinguished dynasties. Examples of these works of art and architecture include the towering grandeur of the Ashoka Pillars and the detailed sculptural beauty of the Great Stupa at Sanchi. The intriguing history of this era in Indian history will be better understood with the help of future studies and archaeological finds, which will also highlight the Mauryan art and architecture's ongoing significance in the modern era.

Conclusion:

The Mauryan art and architecture are enduring examples of ancient India's artistic inventiveness, cultural diversity, and architectural prowess. When it comes to architectural achievements, the Mauryan era is best known for its colossal structures, such as the Great Stupa at Sanchi and the Ashoka Pillars. These architectural wonders serve as physical representations of imperial power, religious devotion, and cultural refinement. They are distinguished by their vast scale, elaborate carvings, and symbolic meaning. Similar to this, Mauryan art flourished in a variety of media, including as painting, sculpture, and terracotta, and it reflected a wide range of topics and inspirations. Mauryan sculptures, exemplified by the Yaksha and Yakshi figures from Didar Ganj, exhibit a remarkable realism and vitality, capturing the essence of ancient Indian society and religious beliefs. The stone edicts of Ashoka, adorned with symbolic motifs and inscriptions, serve as visual embodiments of Buddhist teachings and imperial ideology, disseminating moral precepts and administrative decrees throughout the empire.

Overall, the Mauryan period's art and architecture demonstrate the creative dynamism and cultural synthesis of ancient India, serving as the pinnacle of indigenous traditions and cross-cultural contacts. Scholars, artists, and fans are still motivated by Mauryan art and architecture because

of its lasting legacy, which provides insightful information on the artistic accomplishments and cultural legacies of one of India's most distinguished dynasties. Understanding the continuing contributions of Mauryan art and architecture to human creativity and cultural expression help gain a deeper appreciation of the rich fabric of Indian civilization.

References:

1. Asher, F. (2011). On Maurya Art. A Companion to Asian Art and Architecture, 421-443.
2. Bopearachchi, O. (2017). Achaemenids and Mauryans: Emergence of coins and plastic arts in India. In *India and Iran in the Long Durée* (pp. 15-47). Brill.
3. Chakravarti, R. (2016). Mauryan Empire. The encyclopedia of empire, 1-7.
4. Dehejia, V. (2009). The body adorned: sacred and profane in Indian art. Columbia University Press.
5. Kenoyer, J. M. (2016). Iconography of the Indus unicorn: Origins and legacy. In *Connections and Complexity* (pp. 107-126). Routledge.
6. Gupta, K. (2018). The Problem of Dīdargañj Caurī Bearer's Identification—A Response. *History and Historiography: From Ancient to Modern World*, 66.
7. Kramrisch, S. (2013). *Indian Sculpture: Ancient, Classical and Mediaeval*. Motilal Banarsidass.
8. Mandal, R., Yi, Y. X., & Yan, W. M. (2017). Indian Architecture: With the Special Reference of Mughals. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Contemporary Research*, 4(5), 155-160.
9. Marshall, J. H. (1911). VI. Archeological Exploration in India, 1909–10. *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 43(1), 127-158.
10. Ray, H. P. (2020). The Mauryan Empire. *The Oxford World History of Empire: Volume Two: The History of Empires*, 198.
11. Sengupta, S. (2016). Rewinding the Ancient past: Social condition during Mauryan Empire. *International Journal of Humanities & Social Science Studies*, 3, 257-264.
12. Singh, A. K. (2004, January). Indian History Congress Prize Essay: ASHOKA'S PERCEPTION OF NATURE AND MAN: A STUDY IN ART AND ATTITUDE. In *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* (Vol. 65, pp. 131-138). Indian History Congress.
13. Smith, M. L. (2015). The concept of copies: An archaeological view of the terracotta ornaments from Sisupalgarh, India. *West 86th: A Journal of Decorative Arts, Design History, and Material Culture*, 22(1), 23-43.
14. Thapar, R. (2006). The Mauryan empire in early India. *Historical Research*, 79(205), 287-305.