

THE MATHURA SCHOOL OF SCULPTURAL ART

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Mathura occupies a venerable place in the cultural and artistic history of India. Its glory is amply corroborated by thousands of antiquarian remains adorning the galleries of several museums in the globe. The exploration and excavations began in 1836 continue to date in one way or the other either by organisations or the individuals. Colonel L. R. Stacy picked up a bachanalian scene and a railpost in 1836. General A. Cunningham tried a number of times between 1853 and 1882 and sent the finds either to the Indian Museum, Calcutta or the British Museum, London. F.S. Growse discovered a number of items and founded the local museum in 1874. A. Fuhrer excavated Kaṅkāli mound from 1888 to 1991 and despatched hundreds of Jaina sculptures to the Lucknow Musuem. Radha Krishna collected a large number of sculptures through cleaning of wells and royal proturais from the Itokri mound, Māt in the second decade of the 20th century.

M. Venkatramayya and Vallabh Saran of the Archaeological Survey vertically excavated some part of Katra mound in 1953. H. Hertel and his team from Berlin dug the mound of Sonkh for eight seasons from 1966 to 74 and discovered some beautiful sculptures and very early remains of Brahmanical shrines, terracottas and coins. B.K. Thaper and M. C. Joshi of Archaeological Survey excavated at different places in 1974-75 to study the plan of old city and its rampart. R. B. Joshi of Pune and R.C. Sharma of Mathura reported the palaeolith finds from Govardhana hillocks in 1975 and some copper age implements were found near Sadabad. The clearance of the Govindnagar mound in the western outskirts yielded a wealth of early Buddhist sculptures in 1976-77. Subsequently also, remarkable specimens of sculptural art have seen their way to the Mathura Museum and some have gone out from different sites.

The writings of A. Cunningham, F. S. Growse, J. Ph. Vogel, A. K. Coomaraswamy, J. E. Van Lohuizan, V. S. Agrawala, C. Sivaramamurti, K. D. Vajpeyi, R.C. Agrawala, N. P. Joshi, H. Hertel, G.V. Mitterwallner, B.N. Mukherjee, D. Srinivasan, J. William, R. C. Sharma and others have highlighted the Mathura art and culture to a great extent.

Situated on the right bank of the Yamuna at a distance of 58 km to north-west of Agra and 145 km to south-east of Delhi in Lat. 27° 31 N and Long. 77° 41 E, Mathura has served as an excellent mould for casting the religious, spiritual and cultural figure of the country. Artistically also, it shaped the figurines of deities of different sects when it flourished as a school of sculptural art in the first six centuries of the Christian era.

The location of the town on the junction of important land routes, viz. southern highway (*Dakṣiṇapatha*) and northern highway (*Uttarapatha*) and navigation through the Yamuna

led it to flourish as a big trade centre and rise to the eminence of a metropolis of the northern India. Literary traditions (the Rāmāyaṇa and Mahabharata) describe Mathura as a place of hoary antiquity and the discovery of palaeoliths near Govardhan corroborate it. Its association with Kṛṣṇa (as birth place) ensured the everlasting glory and the Hindus have always regarded it a great centre of pilgrimage. The Buddhist texts (Divyāvadāna and Lalitavistara) refer to the visit of the Buddha to the town and his prophecy.

For the Jaina community too the place is held in high esteem as the twenty second Jina, Neminātha is regarded as the cousin of Kṛṣṇa and a great *stūpa* was built in honour of the seventh Jina Supārśva. At the same time, the folk cults representing *Nāgas*, *Yakṣas*, trees were also in vogue. The followers of different creeds erected a good number of temples, *stūpas*, *caityas*, monasteries, assembly halls, portrait gallery, wells, water tanks, gardens, reflectories, etc. This resulted in big demand of images for installation not only in the town and adjoining region but also at distant places. Thus the religious and spiritual background with financial strength of flourishing trade and the earlier convention of *Yakṣa/Yakṣī* icons and later royal patronage, culminated in foundation of Mathura School of Sculptural Art. A good number of ateliers functioned restlessly to meet the growing demand of images for several centuries.

The Mathura Art is known for some distinct characteristics as: use of mottled red sandstone quarried from Sikri, Rupbas, Karoli, etc., transformation of symbols into anthropomorphic forms of deities—a step forward from Bharhut and Sanchi in the Central India, emergence and multiplication of plethora of Brahmanical, Jaina, Buddhist and folk sects, attendants with deities generally lion-seat (*simhāsana*) below the deity, flat narrative relief to bold or high relief, balanced bodies with unified organic entities, gradual transformation from undulating vegetal and animal bodies to human form, *Yakṣa* impact on early deities, depiction of a large number of decorative and auspicious motifs following Bharhut and Sanchi trends such as *svastika* (mystic cross), *maṅgalakalāśa* (auspicious full vase), *phalapātra* (bucket of fruits), *apsarās* or *dikkumārikā* (maidens or nymphs), *gandharvas* (flying celestials), *śrīvatsa* (like Greek caduceus), *dharmacakra* (wheel of law), *śaṅkhanidhi* (conch oozing wealth), *padmanidhi* (lotus oozing wealth), *garuḍa* (divine eagle), *kalpalatā* (wish fulfilling creeper), *kalpavṛkṣa* (wish fulfilling tree), *bodhivṛkṣa* (tree of enlightenment), *triratna* (three jewels), *bhadrāsana* (auspicious seat), *mīnamithuna* (twin fish), *mālāpātra* (basket of wreaths), elephant, lion, bull, deer, snake, goose, peacock, fabulous or composite figure, variety of lotuses, etc. These are not just ornamental devices but most of these convey a deep metaphysical meaning.

The art of Mathura has made remarkable contribution in the origin and development of Jaina and Buddhist icons. From the Jaina *stūpa* of Kaṅkālī were unearthed hundreds of

architectural components and Tīrthaṅkara images. These belong from about 2nd century B. C. to the 12th century A. D. and most of the remains are to be seen in the State Museum, Lucknow. The beginning is made by the square or rectangular stone tablets (*āyāgapāṭa*) carved with several auspicious motifs (*maṅgalacihṇas*). In a few the central symbol is replaced by a tiny figure of seated Jina bearing *Yakṣa* impact. From these votive slabs which should be assigned a period from the middle of the 1st century B. C. to the mid 1st century A. D. evolved independent icons of Jinas or Tīrthaṅkaras. The separate cognizances to identify all the twenty four Jinas had not developed in the Mathura School but we can recognise the first Jina Ādinātha or Ṛṣabhanātha through his hair falling on shoulders, Supārśvanātha (seventh) and Pārśvanātha (twenty third) by snake hoods on head and sometimes Neminātha (twenty second) through the presence of Balarāma and Kṛṣṇa on his two sides. A mark of Śrīvatsa jewel like motif on the centre of chest remains an invariable feature with all Jinas. Quadruple images (*sarvatobhadrikās*) conceived at Mathura in the Kuṣāṇa age later developed into *mānastambhas*. The Kaṅkālī sculptures present a good glimpse of the contemporary society, particularly of the Kuṣāṇa and Gupta periods (from late 1st century A. D. to the 6th century A. D.). A good number of these images being inscribed in the Brāhmī script and hybrid Sanskrit furnish valuable information. The earliest Sarasvatī (goddess of learning) image belonging to early 2nd century A. D., hails from Jaina *stūpa* from Mathura.

One of the greatest contributions of the art of Mathura is the evolution of the Buddha image. The credit of this great event is equally shared by the Gandhara School (now in Pakistan and Afghanistan), flourishing simultaneously under the patronage of the Kuṣāṇa dynasty. But the environment of Mathura seems to be more commensurate with its earliest art traditions combined with religious fervour, philosophy, peace and prosperity. Like Jaina icons the Buddha image also developed from symbols. Earlier we have either the Jātaka narration or symbols conveying the presence of the Buddha. These are Bodhi tree, *stūpa* wheel, alms-bowl, halo, relic casket, horse, lion, elephant, deer, foot prints, etc. All these were associated with the Buddha in one way or the other. Due to the statement of the Master (Dīghanikāya) disavowing his representation in human form after the extinction of body, reluctance prevailed for some time.

It was, however, overcome when an architrave (Mathura Museum No. M.3) belonging to the late first century B. C. showed a rudimentary small figure along with symbols and motifs. The other citation is the part of pillar (Mathura Museum No. H. 12) carved with the figure of the Buddha seated on a multi-tiered pedestal cum *simhāsana*. Both these examples bear *Yakṣa* impact. Soon the independent seated and standing images were carved. For seated image the Bodhisattva from Katra (Mathura Museum No. A. 1) and for standing icons Bodhisattva installed at Sarnath (B. 1) served as model for long. Although carved as

Buddha both have been captioned in the inscription as Bodhisattva probably to avoid conflict with those (*hīnayānīs*) who opposed image worship of the Master due to canonical restrictions.

The early Buddha/Bodhisattva statues assignable to the last quarter of the 1st century A. D. are noted for resemblance with *Yakṣa* as indicated by volume or dwarfish body, swelling chest, broad shoulders firmly planted legs with feet apart and enormous energy for the *Yakṣa* were known. The other features are the drapery covering only the left shoulder (*ekāṃśika saṅghāṭi*), shaven head with shell type protuberance (*kaparda*), circular point between the eyebrows (*Ūrṇā*), almond shaped open eyes, small ear lobes, somewhat smiling expression, right arm raised in protection (*abhaya*) left arm clenched on the waist in case of standing images and resting on the left thigh or knee in seated figures, stiff and commanding posture befitting a *yogī* or universal king (*cakravartin*) and a lion throne (*siṃhāsana*) with seated icons.

The distinction between the early Jina and Buddha images at Mathura is that the former are sky-clad and have no protuberance on head while the latter are clad and have a bump of hair as top knot. Similarly, the Jinas are seen in the penance and mediation and the Buddha is represented in protection with right hand raised up and later in other postures also like meditation earth touching, preaching and boon bestowing. The confusion between the Buddha and Bodhisattva was also in displaying the former in monk's attire and devoid of ornaments and the latter dressed and decorated as a prince. The future Buddha/Bodhisattva Maitreya is generally depicted with a water vessel but wears ornaments.

There is a good deal of interaction between the Mathura and Gandhara school of sculptures, wavy hair drapery covering both shoulders, thick and shutter like pleats, moustache, shoes and sandals, acanthus leaf decoration, Corinthian capital, Pañcikā and Hārīti, Vajrapāṇi, Atlantas, acolytes with wreath, cornical cap, drinking scenes travelled from Gandhara to Mathura. On the other hand garment covering only left shoulder, thin muslin, wheel on palm, lion throne, lotus seat, lotus creeper, railing motif, woman and tree, half or full lion as support, elephants, peacock, Garuda etc. are some of the motifs which went from Mathura to Gandhara.

The gallery of royal portraits (*Devakula*) at Māt, north of Mathura, was a unique feature of Mathura art in the Kuṣāṇa period. Whether the images of Vema Kadphises, Kanīṣka, Huviṣka and Caṣṭana were shaped by the Mathura sculptors or a group of alien artist had settled in or nearby the city is a matter of academic dispute.

Brahmanic (Hindu) pantheon which had commenced with the earlier *Yakṣa-Yakṣī* image continued to develop in the Kuṣāṇa period too with new deities and different forms. Viṣṇu, Kṛṣṇa, Balarāma, Lākṣmi, Śiva, female deities, Ardhanārīśvara composite form of Śiva and

Śakti, Sūrya, Kārttikeya, Kubera, Nāgas, Nāgīs, etc. Some other deities like Viṣṇu and Durgā are seen in different forms with multiple arms weapons and attributes. Cosmic representation of a deity also starts now. One sculpture in Mathura Museum (No.13.392 -95) shows this aspect (*caturvyūha*) where several figures emerge from Vāsudeva Viṣṇu. A rare feature is that the image is carved in round and a squirrel on the tree behind, enhances the aesthetic appeal. The garland round the neck is *vanamālā* made of leaves, flowers and fruits plucked from the forest. The same becomes *vaijayantīmālā* (garland of victory) in Gupta period.

The rail posts of stupas from Mathura (Kaṅkālī Bhūteśvara and Sanghol) deserve special attention. Numerous varieties of lotuses are carved on railing pillars and the rail was rightly called as *padmavaravedikā*. The Jātaka stories (related to the previous lives of the Buddha), life events, and other social themes are illustrated. Yet the real significance lies in rendering of female beauty in charming and inviting gestures. Mathura opened a new horizon of feminine exposition as earlier the woman's role was rather confined either as a deity or devotee. The cupid makes his presence felt in the art of Mathura even on the religious edifices. Aesthetically, the Kuṣāṇa idiom of Mathura art appears to be in its best form in the damsels of rail posts. These are variously termed as *yakṣīs*, *śālabhaṅjikās*, *ratis*, *apsarās*, etc.

Gupta Acme : After the disintegration of the Kuṣāṇa rule and long period of disruption the Gupta dynasty came to power in the 1st quarter of the 4th century A. D. and the political dominance of Mathura went in favour of Magadha. In absence of royal patronage the artistic activities slowed down considerably and the demand of the Buddhist images also fell with the Bhāgavata (Gupta) rulers in power. This somewhat unlucrative situation proved to be boon in disguise as artists of Mathura studios had enough time to concentrate on refinement. Consequently, the quantity of products descended but quality ascended considerably. Actually, the Mathura art reached its zenith in the golden Gupta age. The firm grip over administration and dynamism of the Gupta rulers restored peace and better atmosphere for the growth of artistic activities through the northern India and the well established school of Mathura made best use in giving better finish to the products.

The Gupta art of Mathura reflects handsome and youthful body with slim, relaxed, tender and elegant treatment harmonious combination of beauty and spirit, large ear-rings, curly and spiral locks, lotus bud shaped half open eyes with inward vision, serene and contemplative expression on face suggesting a divine bliss, elaborate halo round head with several concentric bands, graceful transparent drapery with rippling folds, insignificant role of vegetal and animal world in comparison to human representation etc. Swelling energy of body has been happily blended with the tranquility on face and this symbolises the classical dictum of the Gupta age.

The quest of divinity through art is shared by all sectarian icons. The earlier mission of installation of images as recorded on the Buddha/Bodhisattva images was welfare of all beings but now it was the attainment of Supreme Knowledge. It was the journey from mortality to divinity. The Buddha from Jamalpur (Mathura Museum No. A. 5), another from Govindnagar (76.27), one in Rashtrapati Bhavan, New Delhi are some of the superb creations of Indian art. Same is the case with some Jina images now in the State Museum, Lucknow. Viṣṇu in the National Museum, two heads of Ardhanārīśvara in the Mathura Museum are wonderful specimens.

It is interesting to find several names of artists through the inscriptions recorded on the images. The colossal Yakṣa from Parkham belonging to late Maurya or early Śuṅga period informs that it was carved by Gomitaka who was disciple of Kuṇika. This suggests that the sculptural art was practised in Mathura by the generation of master craftsmen and their taughts. Dinna was a famous sculptor of the Gupta age. In between we have several other names like Śivamitra, Rāma, Dharma, Saṅghadeva, Joṭisa, Viṣṇu Jayākula etc.

The Mathura School of art fell prey to the invasion of Hūṇas towards the close of the 6th century A. D. and most of the monuments and beautiful specimens were mercilessly destroyed. The art, however, left indelible print on the development of Indian plastic art and contemporay schools like Gandhara and Sarnath were much influenced by the art traditions of Mathura. It served as a great manufactory of icons and the products were exported to distant quarters.