UNIT 4  SCULPTURES – GUPTA PERIOD

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4.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit we have studied the early Buddhist phase of Indian sculpture during the Kushan and Shatavahana Periods. This period made a great beginning in introducing different styles of sculpture in Indian art. In this unit we will study the development of sculptural art in the Gupta period. It was the age of classical art in India. Architecture, sculpture, painting, music, dance, literature flourished with perfection in the Gupta Empire. We will study the salient features of the sculptures in this period along with few masterpieces of art.

4.2 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you will be able to

• discuss a brief background of Gupta period which made the beginning of classical phase in Indian sculpture.
• know the reason why the Gupta age was known as Golden period.
• know the fine techniques and style adopted in stone carving in Hindu and Buddhist iconography.

4.3 GUPTA PERIOD - BACKGROUND

The artistic activity continued after the Kushana and Satavahana rule in north India. The age of the Guptas followed. The Gupta period saw the mighty upsurge of national art. This period is popularly known as the Golden Age in the history of India. The famous Gupta emperors were Samudra Gupta who ruled in 325-375 CE, Chandragupta Vikramaditya 376 -413 CE, and Kumara Gupta 413 – 455 CE. Indian literature, religion, art and literature attained the great height of their glory. The Gupta art and
culture not only spread to every nook and corner of India but also reached the Himalayan region and Central Asia. This cultural phase extended towards the south-east across the ocean into the islands of Indonesia or what was known at that time as Dvipantara. This cultural development was due to economic prosperity. This had a direct relation on the spirituality, which India had not seen before. The 4th to 6th century CE was an age of all-round perfection in domestic, administrative and cultural life in India. In literature, this period has produced the great poet Kalidasa. Art creation had a great influence of religion. The Bhagavata movement, faith in Krishna as a child and god was widespread and supported a cult of beauty and aesthetics. It promoted the building of temples, creating images in clay, stone and metal. Buddhism was equally patronised as we can see in the artistic activities in Ajanta.

4.4 SCULPTURAL ART

The renowned Gupta sculptural style appears to have grown out of the Kushan style. In Mathura, art had already flourished in Indian style, which was touched with refinement in all aspects under the patronage of the illustrious Gupta rulers. The Gupta period (4th – 6th Century CE) marks the bright period of art in India. Gupta art is marked by a high aesthetic sense and discipline. The main centres of Buddhist art during this period were Mathura, Sarnath and Nalanda in the north.

The Buddhist images of Mathura and Sarnath are some of the best specimens of Indian art, never equalled by any art creations of later period. The other places where we get to see Gupta sculptures are the Vishnu sculptures in Udayagiri rock-cut Caves, Dhamek stupa at Sarnath, Bhitargaon, Buddhist caves in Ajanta, Ahichchhatra, and Dasavatara Temple in Deogarh. A geographical survey of Gupta art reveals that almost every centre received the flow of the essence of golden age. It was a special temperament to create anything good and perfect in quality and content. Art in Gupta period achieved classical status. Many texts were return and used as module for creating art works. The dynasties which ruled after the Gupta age in north and south India imbided the artistic elements of Gupta age and continued the tradition of idealistic beauty.

Relief sculptures: We find many sculptures done in high relief. In Ajanta, the rock surface was sophisticatedly treated with the Buddhist theme and motifs in high relief. The relief were executed with utmost skills. The halo of Buddha, the decorative elements on the large size sculptures and stupas show the mastery of artists over the stone carving.

Bas-Relief: Since the sculptures at Ajanta were carved in impressive size, the sculptors followed the bas-relief technique. The Buddha images and stupa decorations are carved in live rock with three fourths of the image emerging out.

Rounded Sculpture: For the first time the Hindu gods and subjects were carved in rounded shapes during Gupta period. In the Udayagiri Rock-cut architecture, a monolithic Varaha image with all details are carved. In the Dasavatara temple, full length sculptures of Vishnu are carved in round. The tree dimensional effect is achieved in all rounded sculptures of Gupta age. For making rounded sculptures the Gupta artists used stone, clay, wood and bronze. These sculptures are highly expressive and charming.

4.5 STYLISTIC FEATURES

- The delicate folds of the transparent garment adorning the Gupta figures were done in a beautiful style.
The profusely decorated halo is another special feature of the art of the Gupta figure. The relief work reaches perfection here.

The delicate modelling of forms with meditative repose rendered the Buddha and Bodhisattva figures of the Gupta period most attractive.

The Gupta figures are carved with elaborately carved ornamental details which make the divine figures very special in appearance.

The art of terracotta and casting figures in stucco reached its zenith in this period. The artist tried clay figurines on a small scale whereas the stucco figurines are in large dimensions. The terracotta figurines were used in the brick temples. These figurines were of great variety and beauty.

Gupta art is beautiful in both outer form and inner inspiration. Beauty and virtue served as ideals of the age. Refinement was the order of the day.

Decoration was the necessary feature of the Gupta sculpture. But they never over-decorated their figures or images. They maintained harmony of decoration, form and content which is the best quality of a good art.

The Gupta figures are large in proportion but extremely light in visual perception. They appear to be floating in air. They are marked by the sense of weightlessness.

The eyes of Gupta sculptures are beautifully shaped half closed, in yogic posture.

The face is generally oval shaped with sharp features.

The overall treatment of the figures is highly idealised, evoking serenity. The drapery is light and clings to the body, exposing the softness of the body.

The Gupta artists showed an equal ingenuity in the carving of metal images also. The bronze Buddha image from Sultanganj and also one from Dhanesar Khera together with a number of specimens found in north-western part of India are excellent specimens testifying to the skill and ability of the Gupta metal carvers.

### 4.6 REPRESENTATIONAL EXAMPLES

**Standing Buddha from Sarnath:** This is an exclusive figure and a masterpiece of Gupta art. It is in the collection of National Museum, Delhi. The large size halo gives a great visual impact. A number of lesser size images of similar features are found in Sarnath and have been categorised as 'wet Buddhas'. The appearance of these figures are such as they have just come out from water. The modelling of the body beneath the thin garment is highly sophisticated. The hair is neatly combed in tuft and the face is serene. It is made of brown sand stone from Sikri.

**Buddha in preaching mode:** This seated Buddha made in Chunar sand stone is in the collection of the Sarnath museum. Buddha is in a preaching attitude known as Dharmachakra mudra. His clothing is only suggested through hemlines. The halo has special carving which is repeated on the throne beautifully. Two Gandharvas in flying mode on the sides of the halo suggest the heavenly status of Buddha. This is the masterpiece of Gupta art.

**The river Goddess Ganga:** This is an exclusive female figure of Gupta period (Later the images of Ganga and Yamuna flanking the door way of the temples become common feature all over India). She stands on the crocodile to show her presence in water. The figure is more realistic and stands in tribhanga. The two small figures next to her are in
action. The tree is shown bearing plenty of fruits. The entire panel is a good example of an artistic composition.

**Vishnu reclining – as anantashayi:** Dasavatara Temple Deogarh. In this sculpture the Buddhist narrative feature is adopted for the first time in all its detail. Lord Vishnu, one of the Trimurtis is portrayed as reclining on a giant serpent with several hoods. He is the Preserver of the world order and plans for its execution. The world around him is in action. Brahma rising from umbilical cord of Vishnu is associated with the celestials; Lakshmi seated on the extreme corner and below a group of celestials are guarding the abode of Vishnu. This is an iconographic presentation of the Vishnu theme. The artist has composed all the figures in upper, middle and lower registers. It stands as the first and best example for the Hindu theme in sculpture.

### 4.7 SUMMARY

We have seen how the Gupta golden age period contributed much to the world. Apart from their strong political power they established sound administrative and economic system; They also contributed greatly to the field of literature, science, art and architecture. Vedic religion was revived and Buddhist art flourished in Ajanta. A firm foundation was laid for all arts by writing texts in this period. Indian classical arts like dance, music, sculpture, painting, architecture find their roots in Gupta art.

### 4.8 SELF ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

**Self Assessment Questions 1**

**Match the Following:**

a) Udayagiri
b) Deogarh
c) Sarnath
d) Bas-relief
e) Kalidasa

- i) Dhamek stupa
- ii) Varaha sculpture
- iii) Literature
- iv) Dashavatara Temple
- v) Ajanta

**Self Assessment Questions 2**

**Pick up the right answer**

1. Gupta period is dated
   - i. 2nd to 6th Century BC, ii. 4th to 6th century CE, iii. 1st to 3rd century CE

2. The master piece of Gupta art, the standing Buddha, is from
   - i. Bhitargaon, ii. Ajanta, iii. Sarnath

3. The Bronze Buddha figure is from
   - i. Sultan Ganj, ii. Murshidabad, iii. Pataliputra

**Self Assessment Questions 3**

**State whether true or false:**

a) The halo of Buddha, does not show the mastery of artists over the stone carving [F]
b) The Gupta sculptures are highly expressive and charming. [T]
c) The Gupta sculptures show classical charm. [F]
d) The art in Gupta age lacks perfection.
e) Gupta art displays love for decorations.

4.9 ANSWERS TO SELF-ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

Self Assessment Questions 1

a) – ii, b) – iv, c) – i, d) – v, e) - iii

Self Assessment Questions 2

1. - ii, 2 – iii, 3 – i

Self Assessment Questions 3

a) – F, b) – T, c) – T, d) – F, e) – T

4.10 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

1. State the significance of Gupta art in knowing Indian culture.

2. Explain the stylistic features of Gupta sculptures.

3. Write a note on two sculptures of Gupta period.

4.11 ANSWERS TO TERMINAL QUESTIONS

1. Gupta period had witnessed all round development. The cultural development was due to the economic prosperity. This had a direct relation to spirituality, which India had not seen before. It was an age of all-round perfection in domestic, administrative and cultural life in India. In literature, this period has produced the great poet Kalidasa. Art creation had a great influence of religion. The Bhagavata movement, faith in Krishna as a child and god was wide spread and supported a cult of beauty and aesthetics. It promoted the building of temples, creating images in clay, stone and metal. Buddhism was equally patronised as we see in the artistic activities in Ajanta.

2. The profusely decorated halo is another special feature of the art of the Gupta figure. The relief work reaches highest perfection here. The delicate modelling of forms with meditative repose rendered the Buddha and Bodhisattva figures of the Gupta period most attractively. The Gupta figures are carved with elaborately carved ornamental details which make the divine figures very special in appearance. Gupta art is beautiful in both outer form and inner inspiration. Beauty and virtue served as ideals of the age. Refinement was the order of the day. Decoration was the necessary feature of the Gupta sculpture. But they never over-decorated their figures or images. They maintained harmony of decoration, form and content which is the best quality of good art.

3. **Short Notes 1. Standing Buddha from Saranath:** This is an exclusive figure and a master piece of Gupta art. It is in the collection of National Museum Delhi. The large size halo gives a great visual impact. A number of lesser size images of similar features are found in Sarnath and have been categorised as ‘wet Buddhas’. The appearance of these figures are as if they have just come out from water. The modelling of the body beneath the thin garment is highly sophisticated. The hair is neatly combed in tuft and the face is serene. It is made of brown sandstone from Sikri.
Vishnu reclining – as Anantashayi: Dasavatara Temple Deogarh. In this sculpture the Buddhist narrative feature is adopted for the first time in all its detail. Lord Vishnu, one of the Trimurtis is portrayed as reclining on a giant serpent with several hoods. He is the Preserver of the world order and plans for the execution. The world around him is in action. Brahma rising from umbilical cord of Vishnu is associated with the celestials; Lakshmi is seated on the extreme corner and below a group of celestials are guarding the abode of Vishnu. This is an iconographic presentation of the Vishnu theme. The artist has composed all the figures in upper, middle and lower registers. It stands as the first and best example for the Hindu theme in sculpture.

Gupta Sculptures

1. Standing Buddha – stone, National museum Collection, Gupta
2. Seated Buddha – stone, Sarnath Museum Museum Collection, Gupta

3. Standing Buddha – Bronze, Sultanganj Gupta
4. Vishnu as Anantashayi – stone, Deogarh Temple, Gupta

5. A plaque showing Ganga – stone Gupta