UNIT 2 SCULPTURES – MAURYAN SCHOOL

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2.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit we have studied the early phase of Indian sculpture during Indus valley period. The striking feature was the astonishing varieties in the subjects of depiction and techniques followed by Indus sculptors. In this unit we will see how the sculptural art in India for the first time takes a new proportion. The use of stone in Mauryan period opens up gates of imagination of stone carvers in India. We will study the salient features of the sculptures in this period along with few masterpieces of art.

2.2 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you will be able to:

- understand a brief background of Mauryan period which made the beginning of Indian recorded history;
- information about the early Buddhist art and the subjects chosen for sculptures;
- know the fine techniques adopted in stone carving; and
- will know how Asoka promoted Buddhism through art.

2.3 MAURYAN PERIOD – BACKGROUND

In 321 BC, exiled general Chandragupta Maurya under guidance of the genius of Chanakya founded the Maurya dynasty after overthrowing the reigning king Dhana Nanda. Most of the Indian subcontinent was united under a single government for the first time under the Maurya rule. The Mauryan empire under Chandragupta spread its boundaries into Central Asia and Persia. Chandragupta Maurya is credited for the spread of Jainism it the southern region of India.

Chandragupta was succeeded by his son Bindusara who expanded the kingdom over most of present day India, except Kalinga. Bindusara's kingdom was inherited by his
son Asoka the Great. During the invasion of Kalinga he renounced bloodshed and adopted the policy of *ahimsa* and taken to Buddhism. He inscribed the messages of Buddhism on the rock faces and pillars. These are known as rock and pillar edicts (Royal inscriptions). These Edicts are the oldest preserved historical documents of India, and from his time, approximate dating of dynasties becomes possible. Emperor Asoka (269-232 BC) was the first major patron of Buddhist art.

### 2.4 SCULPTURAL ART

This period has marked an imaginative and impressive step in Indian sculpting. The literature of the period mentions the guild (registered group) of artisans who worked in the projects of Asoka. The emperor made his own efforts to articulate Buddhism in stone. He declared himself as the protector of Dharma. He used Pali and Brahmi languages for issuing the edicts. To know about the Mauryan sculptural art we have to study:

- a) capital decorations of the Mauryan capitals
- b) rock-cut caves and sculptures
- c) rounded sculptures and images
- d) ring stones and disc stones. Apart from these, wood was also used to create art objects and structures.

**Relief:** The relief technique has achieved the high watermark in the motifs and designs used in the carvings of the pillars. The entrance of the caves has fine animal motifs beautifully positioned. The ring-stones and disc-stones too have fine carvings in relief. This relief technique in stone becomes the major contribution of Mauryan artists to Indian artistic heritage.

**Rounded Sculpture:** The pillars, owing to their free-standing nature and elaborately carved animal capitals are considered examples of sculpture. Similarly, the huge images of yaksha and yakshi are the masterpieces of Mauryan art. There are a variety of art objects created in this period include pillars, railings, parasols (stone umbrellas), capitals of the pillars, monolithic columns, animal and human sculptures and many more motifs and pieces of jewellery.

### 2.5 STYLISTIC FEATURES

A Mauryan pillar is carved out of pinkish buff fine grained sandstone which is found in plenty in the Ganga Valley a place called Chunar in UP. There are many pillars and some of them are remarkable as standing examples. The size of the pillars is massive and highly polished. The capitals of these pillars are usually made of animals, like bull, elephant or deer. Dharmachakra stands as the symbol of Buddhism and Mauryan art.

The Mauryan art is considered as court art, evolved with the majesty and dignity of a royal court. It exhibits great vitality and technical skill. The rounded sculptures are excellent in quality and form.

One of the important features of Mauryan art is the bright polish imparted to stone surface. The mirror like polish makes the ordinary stone a superior material.

The images are carved in round, frontal posture making them massive. Since they are dominating in size, they appear powerful and divine. The roar of the lion can be felt because of the size and expression of the capitals of the pillars.

Asoka’s imperial status was effectively brought out by the sculptors. Thus the works of art portray the attitude of Asoka towards Buddhism and his kingdom. The forms of sculptures are typical and the content was most suitable to the material they used.

On the whole, the sculptors of Mauryan times are highly skillful in carving relief on the face of stone and also carving the fine figurines with elements of beauty. The symbolism
of Indian art attained highest merit in the expression of Asokan pillars and capitals and also of the sculptures like the Didargang Yakshi.

### 2.6 REPRESENTATIONAL EXAMPLES

**Pillars:** The pillars were carved in fine buff coloured sandstone. They were given a fine polish characteristic of Mauryan sculpture. They were inscribed with edicts of Asoka on Dhamma or righteousness. The animal capital has a finely carved lifelike representation. Noteworthy are the lion capital of Sarnath, the bull capital of Rampurva and the lion capital of Laurya Nandangarh.

**Sarnath Capital:** The finest and most famous of all the capitals is the Sarnath capital. It is 17 meter in height and executed with great precision. It has a unique glossy surface known as the ‘Mauryan polish’. This consists of four parts, namely, an inverted lotus covered with long sweeping petals, surmounted by a circular drum showing four chakras facing the four directions. Besides these chakras, a horse, a lion, a bull and an elephant are carved beautifully. On top of this round abacus are four alert roaring lions facing the four directions, the majestic look and realistic presentations, symbolises the strength of Buddhism. This capital served as a pedestal for a huge dharma or dharma, but now the chakra is in bits and pieces. It preserved in the Sarnath museum. This lion capital is the emblem of Republic of India.

**Didarganj Yakshi:** The Didarganj Yakshi is an exquisite example of Mauryan sculpture. This image was found at Didarganj in Patna district. It is a rare specimen of figure showing beauty in excellence. It exhibits happiness and bounty. The Yakshi image is life-size holding a chauri (a fly whisk) in her hand, thus earning the name as chauri bearer. The sculpture is of superior quality and highly artistic in treatment. Her clothing is beautifully carved and adorned with fine jewellery.

**Ring stones and Disc stones:** Along with these monumental works of art and architecture produced under royal patronage, there were some works of art depicting the folk deities and beliefs like mother goddess and flower worship, carved very minutely on ring stones, which are round polished stones less than three inches in diameter having a central hole. Some of them do not have holes these are recognised as disc stones. On their surface the motifs of lotus, palm tree, birds and other animals are carved.

### 2.7 SUMMARY

In this unit we have covered one of the very interesting phases of Indian sculptural art of early period. We have also seen the way art carried the communication of Dharma throughout the Mauryan empire.

We have also seen that for the first time in India Chunar stone was applied to carve the relief and rounded sculptures. Some of the master pieces of this period are outstanding examples of Indian art.

It was interesting to note the wood was gradually replaced by stone in building structures and creating art works. The Asokan capitals are a class by themselves. They are found in Sarnath Museum and other places. The Mauryan art opened a floodgate of imagination which became an essential part of Indian art history.
2.8 SELF ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

Self Assessment Questions 1

State whether the following is true or false:

a) Chandragupta Maurya is credited for the spread of Buddhism in southern India.
b) During the invasion of Pataliputra, Asoka renounced adopted the policy of *ahimsa*. 
c) The pillars are considered as the examples of sculpture in Mauryan art.
d) The animal capital has a finely carved lifelike representation.
e) The Didarganj Yakshi is not an exquisite example of Mauryan sculpture.

Self Assessment Questions 2

Fill in the blanks by choosing the right word given in the list:

i) the messages of Buddhism, ii) Rampurva, iii) Buddhism, iv) of royal court, 
v) Indian recorded history.

a) Mauryan period which made the beginning of  
b) Asoka promoted through art  
c) He inscribed  on the rock face and pillars. 
d) The bull capital of  is very artistic. 
e) The Mauryan art evolved with the majesty and dignity

Self Assessment Questions 3

The beginning of the statement is given, write the concluding part

a) The finest and most famous of all the capitals  
b) Grained sandstone which is found in plenty in the  
c) The lion capital from Sarnath is  
d) The folk deities and beliefs like mother goddess 

2.9 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

1. Give a short account of the Mauryan background.
2. Write note on the salient features of Mauryan sculpture.
3. Write note on Sarnath Pillar and Didarganj Yakshi.

2.10 ANSWERS

Self Assessment Questions 1

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

Self Assessment Questions 2

i) Indian recorded history. ii) Buddhism iii) the messages of Buddhism, iv) Rampurva 
v) of royal court.
Self Assessment Questions 3

a) is the Sarnath capital. b) Ganga Valley a place called Chunar c) the emblem of Republic India. d) and flower worship carved on ringstones

Terminal Questions

1. In 321 BC, Chandragupta Maurya under guidance of the genius of Chanakya founded the Maurya dynasty BY overthrowing the king Dhana Nanda. The subcontinent was united under a single government for the first time under the Maurya rule. The Mauryan empire under Chandragupta spread its boundaries into Central Asia and Persia.

Chandragupta was succeeded by his son Bindusara who expanded the kingdom over most of present day India. Bindusara’s kingdom was inherited by his son Asoka the Great. During the invasion of Kalinga he renounced bloodshed and adopted the policy of *ahimsa* and taken to Buddhism. He inscribed the messages of Buddhism on rock faces and pillars. These are known as rock and pillar edicts (Royal inscriptions) to propagate Buddhism. These edicts are the oldest preserved historical documents of India, and from his time, approximate dating of dynasties becomes possible. Emperor Asoka (269-232 BC) was the first major patron of Buddhist art.

2. Salient features of Mauryan sculptural art: The pillars are remarkable as standing examples of Mauryan art. The size of the pillars is massive and they highly polished. The capitals of these pillars are usually made of animals, like bull, elephant or deer. *Dharmachakra* stands as the symbol of Buddhism and Mauryan art.

Mauryan art is considered as court art and has evolved with dignity of royal court. It exhibits great vitality and technical skill. One of the important features of Mauryan art is the bright polish imparted to stone surface. The mirror like polish makes the ordinary stone a superior material. The images are carved in round, frontal posture which makes them massive. Since they are dominating in size, they appear powerful and divine. Asoka’s imperial status was effectively brought out by the sculptors. Thus the works of art portray the attitude of Asoka towards Buddhism and his kingdom. The forms of sculptures are typical and the content was most suitable to the material they used.

On the whole, the sculptors of Mauryan times are highly skillful in carving relief on the face of stone and also carving the fine figurines with elements of beauty. The symbolism of Indian art attained highest merit in the expression of Asokan pillars and capitals and also of the sculptures like Didargang Yakshi.

3. Note on the Sarnath Pillar – the Lion Capital:

The finest and most famous of all the capitals is the Sarnath capital. It is 17 meter in height and executed with great precision. It has unique glossy surface known as the ‘Mauryan polish’. This consists of four parts, namely, an inverted lotus covered with long sweeping petals, surmounted by a circular drum showing four *chakras* facing the four directions. Besides these *chakras* a, horse, a lion, a bull and an elephant are carved beautifully. On top of this round abacus are four alert roaring lions facing the four directions, they look majestic and are carved in a realistic manner, symbolising the strength of Buddhism. This capital served as a pedestal for a huge *dharmachakra*, but now the *chakra* is in bits and pieces which are preserved in the Sarnath museum. This lion capital is the emblem of the Republic of India.
Note on Didarganj Yakshi:

Sculptures like the Didarganj Yakshi are an exquisite example of Mauryan sculpture. This image was found at Didarganj in Patna district. It is a rare specimen of a figure showing beauty in excellence. It exhibits happiness and bounty. The Yakshi image is of life size holding a chauri (a fly whisk) in her hand thus earning the name of chauri bearer. The sculpture is of superior quality and highly artistic in treatment. Her clothing is beautifully covered and adorned with fine jewellery.

Mauryan Sculptures – Photo caption

01. Asokan Lion Capital – stone, Sarnath Museum, Mauryan

02. Asoka’s Pillar Inscription – stone, Maurya
03. Didarganj Yakshi – stone, Mauryan