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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# IMAGINATION AND DEPICTION OF AUSPICIOUS WOMEN IN ANCIENT INDIA IN SPECIAL REFERENCE TO KUSHANA ERA

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### ABSTRACT

If we consider on cultural aspect of ancient Indian history, we can say that Kushana period is very relevant for its marvelous women sculptures. We found many types of women sculptures in this period, auspicious women figure is major part of this catalogue. With flow of time in Indian History there came numerous variations and developments in art forms and tradition, enriching Indian culture and aesthetics. In Kushana period of early ancient Indian history such enrichments in art and sculptures can be witnessed by a close look on women sculptures of the period. In each dynasty women's representation through sculptures is remarkable and appreciable. It is a well known fact that in Shunga-Satavahana period art forms were based on pre determined parameters leaving limited scope for any deviation. With the beginning of Kushana period specially in northern India sculptures began to be created with new flow of thoughts. Thus like other forms of art, in sculptures also far reaching revolutionary changes took place that took art of that time out of strict discipline of well defined parameters giving it a relatively more open and liberal perspective and integument. Since Kanishka, the most revered king of Kushana dynasty, played decisive role in establishment and spread of Mahayana sect of Buddhist religion, the first depiction of Mahatma Buddha sculpture emerged under his patronage. His regime provided favorable environment for such sculptures. These factors encouraged Indian artisans to develop their creativity without any restraint, because of this there is an advent of a golden age of sculpture which was pioneered by Mathura school of art. With extremely beautiful and refined pieces of sculptures it filled entire north India with marvelous artifacts.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the reference of ancient Indian history, the first three centuries of A.D., during Glorious Period of Kushana Dynasty, Mathura School of Art flourished dynamically and multi dimensionally. It is acknowledged from various Kushana inscriptions that during the referred period Mathura attained glory of Kushana's second capital. In addition to this since even before Kushana period Mathura had been a famous pilgrimage of Brahmin, Buddha and Jain religions and also a situated at centre of various busy trade-routes of that time. Hence these conditions were favorable for enabling it to gradually develop into a cultural centre. It was centre of trade and commerce so sculptures carved here, were carried to other parts of territory via export.

In this context it is worth mentioning that from a village called Sanghol, commonly known as Uncha-Pinda among villagers, in Fatehgarh Sahib district of Punjab, various women sculptures have been found along with a big 'Stupa' and various small Stupas. These sculptures are preserved in a museum near Sanghol itself. Thus, as per the demands of this paper women sculptures of Kushana period, would be studied and interpreted specifically in reference of two archeological sites – Mathura and Sanghol. It is doubtless that carving of Sanghol sculptures is done by artisans belonging to Mathura School of Art.<sup>1</sup> Hence, description and analysis of women sculptures, carved under Mathura Art tradition of Kushana Period shall be focused on sculptures found at Mathura and Sanghol. Almost Entire women sculptures under Mathura school of art of Kushana period can be classified into two categories – general women, auspicious women.

Under general sculpture women are depicted as young lady, a beloved, Ramani, Natee, Mugdha, Mother, Maid, Prostitute or as being involved in various amusing activities. With "auspiciousness" here means those women sculptures, which had religious significance and which symbolized happiness, celebration, vigor, creativity, ceremony etc. associated with religion. Drawing a clear line of demarcation between general and auspicious women sculptures is a difficult task. Hence while doing so, art of sculpturing and contemporary literary descriptions should be studied simultaneously and used with caution.

In this context a unique sculpture Goddess Parvati and God Shiva is shown as one body symbolic of unification of Man (Purush) and Nature (Parvati) and creation that takes place due to this unification or coming together. Thus we see Kushana-artisans carving our auspicious-women sculptures in such forms that remain alive as a tradition, even after hundreds of years. Led by Mathura school of art 'Shalabhanjika' or 'Shalabhanjika-Dohad' can be considered the most important auspicious artifact. Term 'Shalabhanjika' refers to women who bows or breaks branch of Shala tree. In-fact, Shalabhanjika was a women garden play of Eastern India in ancient period. It's first reference is found in Panini's 'Astadhyayi' as 'Prachya-Kridayam'.<sup>2</sup> In ancient period Shala trees were found in plenty in Eastern India, perhaps this is the reason why 'Shalabhanjika krida' was so popular in the region. In this play young women gathered in forest of shala tree in spring season and used to play, hitting one-another with broken soft branches of the tree and used to leave for their homes happily. But in 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. unique incident happened during 'Shalabhanjika Krida' which suddenly made this 'garden play' an auspicious and holy symbol. There are numerous references of 'Shalabhanjika' in Indian classical literature viz. Mahaumagg Jataka, Bharatamuni's Natyashastra, Kalidasa's Raghuvanshama, Jayantimala Tika of Kamsutra, Banabhatta's Harshacharita and Kadambanri, Rajshekharas's Viddhashalabhanjika, Naishadhiyacharitam, Kathasaritsagar, Paumichariu etc.<sup>3</sup>

Kushana artificer of Mathura school, as sculptures of Shalabhanjika, have carved a beautiful young woman seeking delight beneath Shala tree in 'tribhanga' posture. The woman is shown lowering a branch of Shala tree and holding flowers or leaves. For instance a beautiful Shalabhanjika artifact is conserved in Lucknow State Museum. In this the woman's hair are decorated with garland and she is shown happily seated in 'tiryaka' posture on back of a dwarf, who has both of his legs and hands on ground. Another Shalabhanjika found at Sonkh, in Mathura is carved on wall. This is a 'Torana Shalabhanjika' who has kept her left hand on waist, while lowering branch of Shala tree from her right hand.

Shalabhanjika of Vrindavana is sitting on 'Vamana Yaksha' in 'tribhanga posture'. From Kota another Shalabhanjika carved on Mathura pattern has been found. She is shown delightful in 'tribhanga posture' on stomach and legs of a keechaka, lying with his back on ground. All sculptures found at Sanghol are generally carved on Mathura Art pattern. Thus, Shalabhanjika sculptures found here are also noteworthy. In an example of this Shalabhanjika on Vamana (Yaksha) is shown lowering flower-laden branch.<sup>4</sup> It is noticeable, that various such Shalabhanjika sculptures have been found from Sanghol, where symbolic depiction of Ashoka tree is there in background or women are shown lowering branches of Ashoka

tree in place of Shala tree. At some places women are shown hitting Ashoka tree with their feet. Hence these sculptures are termed as 'Ashoka-Dohad Shalabhanjika'. Under Kushana Period's Mathura school of Art, other auspicious women figures are of 'Yakshinis'. In India earliest evidences of Yaksha-Yakshini tradition are found in Vedic literature. As far as sculpture is concerned numerous Yaksha-Yakshini sculptures are found from cultural layer of later Maurya Period. Yaksha-Yakshini tradition is deeply attached to religion of rural masses of India. 'According to Grammar, whoever is worshiped is Yaksha'.<sup>5</sup> In Indian society Yakshini are considered symbolic of auspiciousness and welfare for masses. Artisans of Mathura School of Art showed special interest in carving women sculptures. This is the reason why not only artifacts of goddesses, but also sculptures of women involved in daily chores are found in good numbers. In-fact apart from artisans interest these sculptures indicate artistic inclination of traders and aesthetic taste of common urban people of the time. Youth and beauty of women are portrayed with expertise in these sculptures, which gives vividness to these deaf-dumb figures carved on lifeless stones. Multidimensional portrayals of women's beauty through these sculptures and efforts to present artifacts tri-laterally by artisans have been completely successful.<sup>6</sup> Sculpture of woman plucking flowers from garden, kept at Lucknow Museum is another artifact of perfect feminine beauty.

In general women artifacts, artisans of Mathura of Kushana period, by women involved in many 'Uddyan Krida' seems to have been favorite subject, A woman is shown as plucking flowers from one hand and collecting it in her other hand. While plucking flowers stretches on portions of her body have been impressively shown, which make the sculpture vivid and beautiful. In another sculpture found from Mathura, a woman in 'Pushpa Paricharika' posture is carved as bent on her knees. In this woman is shown as taking a flower between both hands and admiring it. Repeated portrayal of women involved in 'Pushpa Pracharika Krida' in sculptures of Kushana period indicates that this was probably a common and favorite entertainment<sup>7</sup> for women. In numerous sculptures women are shown involved in make-up or toiletries. In an artifact found at Sanghol a maid carrying toilet articles for her mistress is carved. Hair-decoration and make up of the maid is quite noteworthy. In this context sculptures of women admiring themselves in mirrors are also worth mentioning. Mirror-holding woman's sculpture from Sanghol has been carved in posture of looking at her hair-decoration. In heights, these women figures are comparatively short. Holding-stands of oval mirror attracts more for its aesthetic subtleness than the mirrors. In other such artifacts from Mathura a woman is depicted sitting on a dwarf and looking at herself in mirror with surprise.

Under Mathura School of Art only-in Kushana period, we find sculptures of women participating actively in 'Aapangosthi'. Though in Jataka stories, description of women consuming liquor can be easily found. For example, at one place there is a mention that Mahamaya had not consumed liquor when she conceived pregnancy.<sup>8</sup> But in context of art of sculpturing such depiction was entirely new subject. Infact, taking liquor was a common tradition in company of prostitutes but otherwise it was rare. This topic also could not abstain from notice of Kushana period artisans due to their specific interest in carving women figures in various postures. In 'Aapangosthi sculpture' found at Sanghol and exhibited at National Museum women

are carved swaying in effect of liquor consumption. A woman in complete hangover is shown taking support of shoulders of a short heighted man and her lover is trying to lift her. This portrayal reminds of sculpture found from Mohali, Mathura, where woman in complete hang-over is shown taking support of her lover.<sup>9</sup> In another sculpture woman is walking, while holding container of liquor in one hand and flute in other hand. This woman going in jolly mood informs of scheduled programs of concert and consumption of liquor. A sculpture found at Mathura, which 'Sura Sundari' is shown riding on 'Vamana' (dwarf), with 'sura kalash' in one hand and bunch of grapes in other seems extremely vivid piece of artifact. Another sculpture shows woman in hang-over while gloss in hand showing irresistible urge to drink more. Apart from this, a unique sculpture of 'Madhupana' has come to light where a woman completely curving her body and keeping her legs one on other, is trying to drink, wine to the lease, so that not even a drop is left in the container (Chashaka). Artisans of Mathura have also carved sculptures of women involved in love-making (Pranaya Krida). In a sculpture found in Mathura a woman is shown admiring her beauty sitting in front of mirror with her lover beside, appreciating her beauty. Shy of hearing her lover's praise woman is shown shrinking and keeping one of her leg on other. In other sculpture couple is shown involved in love-making. On a stone-block in Lucknow State Museum a love-making couple is depicted, in which man is holding his beloved's back with hands and pulling her close to him in passion and woman is co-operating him with silent approval. In another instance lover is trying to convince his beloved with soft touch of her chin.<sup>10</sup>

Amongst depictions of love-making, portrayal of 'Paribhoga-Darshini' is extremely relevant. In an artifact found from Sanghol women is shown as seeing marks of nails of her lover after love making in a mirror completely mesmerized. Sadyahsnata postured women sculptures are similarly attractive. In a sculpture a bathing woman is depicted beautifully. In this, a thin stream of fountain is running down, wetting hairs of woman sitting beneath and rubbing her arms. She has wore ornaments in her neck, hands, waist and legs even while taking bath. This indicates towards women's fondness for ornaments in the referred period. In a sculpture woman is shown drying her hairs after bath. In order to dry hairs quickly she is squeezing the hairs with her fist while a swan is collecting drops trickling down from it in its beak considering the drops to be rare rain drops of 'Swati Nakshatra'. A similar sculpture has been found from sanghol where woman has not wore clothes below her waist. General study of all these women sculptures naturally make one inquisitive about reasons of artisans great emphasis on amorosness, openness and nudity? For example in the referred women sculptures Kushana artisans of Mathura school of art have preferred depiction of body construction, complexion, vagina, waist, curves of female body, which even seemed to have reached to nudity. Humble, hesitant beauty of traditional Indian women covered with clothes and ornaments seems missing. In the name of clothing extremely thin or completely transparent clothes envelop women's body in these sculptures. Thus, what was artisans motif behind that, is a subject of analysis. In this aspect following reasons can be suggested as important points - Kushanas were inhabitants of cold central Asian region with them some of their fundamental cultural traits also entered into India. For example, in these places liquor consumption of was a common exercise for both men and women. Thus, on its basis in Mathura tradition.

'Aapanagosthi' or sculptures depicting group of people taking liquor are found. Besides, since Kushanas passed a long time, after they abandoned their homeland, in Western Central Asia and North-Western frontiers, which were centre of Greek and Roman Cultural Values, we see sculpture focusing on balanced portrayal of body shapes and curves in Kushanas artifacts.

If we try to dig in for Indian factors, it can be seen that tradition of depicting women sculptress in transparent clothes or nudity was there in first urban civilization of Indian sub-continent i.e. Harrappa civilization. Bronze-sculpture of dancing woman from Harrappa culture which had no clothes on her body but few ornaments or various nude women sculptures found at coins of the period can be cited as evidence. Thus such nude or semi-nude portrayal of woman's body should not be a matter of surprise. If we throw a brief look on Indian ideological tradition in our socio-religious tradition there is a concept of 'Purushartha' which provides for 'Dharma', 'Artha', 'Kama' and 'Moksha' as four important phases in life of every individual. 'Kama' i.e. 'Indriyabhoga' is not considered as reprobratory in our tradition. This is the point where Indian 'Sanatana Dharma' is poles apart from Christian religious beliefs. Because in Christianity 'Kama' or 'Bhoga' is kept in category of sin. Thus in Mathura tradition when we find depiction of such themes it is completely in accordance with Indian ideological tenets and heritage. Since later in Gupta and Rajputa Art also we see carving of reductive and amorous sculptures.

Since Kushana period is known for wide-ranging cultural-social unification and harmony in Indian history. Thus artisans of this period were able to free themselves from rightist and superstitions based restrictions propounded by 'Dharmasutras' and 'Smritis' and followed their own line of open thought with full efficacy and expertise. Well-known quote that 'art cannot be bound in shackles' seems to be perfectly practiced by artisans of Kushana period. In-fact, to perfectly depict temporal beauty and attraction of women's body these artisans have preferred to carved women clothless or clothed with transparent attire. In this process, artisans have also been greatly successful in depicting body parts attached to mothering in youthful body of women. Thus after inspection and analysis of both category of women sculptures (auspicious and general) from Sanghol and Mathura, it is clear that these sculptures have special place in tradition of Indian sculpture by virtue of their originality, creative singularity, aesthetic refinement and diversity of technique, subject material etc. Artisans of Mathura School of Art studied diverse parameters of Indian sculpturing tradition and with their creative zeal and talent carved out new angles postures and dimensions of beauty giving a fresh insight and form to this stream of art. In fact, these women sculptures are very useful for a historian seeking to understand economies condition or cultural behavior of that time. For example women engaged in their favorite play, or those showing interest in music and dancing also explain level of freedom given to women in their society.<sup>11</sup> Thus in these women sculptures related to common life of the times artistic beauty of women sculptures, tastes, intention and instincts of artisans and their artistic talent has been wonderfully manifested. Famous art-scholar Vasudeva Sharan Agrawal's observation in this context is quite appropriate- "Such creative quality of Indian art has not been seen in any other period."<sup>12</sup> A question is generally asked in context of Mathura Art of Kushana period, that what was the aim behind depiction of all women sculptures of that time?

Whether women sculptures carved on 'Vedika pillars' intended to deliver artisans message about social life filled with evils of women or they are standing as propounders of 'jubilate' available in heaven? This is a thought provoking and burning question, Since some historian have terms these sculptures of women as 'erotic women'. Since these sculptures are found on railing pillars of monuments of Buddhist religion as decorative pieces, this becomes point fo natural curiosity that what inspired Buddhists to construct their moments with such sculptures and worship those? Does presence of these sculptures not indicate towards a new dimension in Buddhist ideology and idealism? Rational answers to all these question are expected. Art Historian Vasudeva Sharan Agrawal has considered these sculptures carved on 'Vedika' as embodiment of contemporary social cultural life. He has reached to a conclusion that great artisans of India perceived life with balanced approach and laid foundation of such artistic tradition where there was no contradiction between temporal-aesthetic part of life and its conscientious – religious aspects.<sup>13</sup>

According to another scholar Devangna Desai, Mathura Art demonstrates royal glory of Kushana palace, in which temporal processes have been enriched with lofty imaginations. According to her erotic contents in sculptures of religious theme are infused since they were considered auspicious to some extent. In-fact most of the women sculptures found in Mathura are symbolic of women's fertility and auspicious creative power. These impressive artifacts according to Desai are full of emotions like fairies of Greek mythology and inevitable for mortal human beings. It is noteworthy here that Devangana Desai's claim that these portrayals are related to auspiciousness and welfare of people, seems be quite convincing, but comparing these women sculptures with Greek fairies is not that logical. In-fact if its reason is searched in Indian context in place of Greek context, results will be better and more convincing. In India primitiveness of auspicious women figures is related to first chapter of Indian culture i.e. Harrappa Culture. Here from various sites auspicious women sculptures based on fertility of women have been found, for example idol sculptures of 'Matridevi' (Mother Goddess) are commonly found from its cultural layers. In another instance on a sealing found at Harrappa, a women is depicted with her head on ground and a twig of tree is shown sprouting out of her vaginal part. This depiction makes it clear that woman in depicted as auspicious fruitful lady or 'Matridevi', who is clearly associated with fertility and creation of life.

Later this tradition seems to continue when we see women sculptures carved on stone-rings (vagina) in Mahajanapada Period, terra-cottas of Mother Goddesses in Maurya Period, Yashinis, Shalabhanjika, Dohad etc. sculptures carved on 'Toran Vedicas' of Sanchi, Amravati, Bharhut and Kushana women sculptures; there seems an unflinching tradition of associating fertility and reproductive power of women with auspiciousness. Thus, these women sculptures of Mathura art have been depicted both in auspicious sense and in terms of day-today life of people, which has in its background a long tradition that began with Harrappa culture and continued to flourish and develop afterwards.

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