



The Development of Hindu Iconography

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Abstract: *Whether it is the fear of the unknown, or the mystery of death, especially of one's parents and ancestors, or, an admiration for the great heroes who had sacrificed their lives for a cause dear to their heart, worshipping some sort of symbols and icons in their honour, is an established fact in the history of human civilization. Devastating diseases or the furies of nature too might have contributed to the concept of some controlling forces being defied and appeased. Such 'gods' could have been represented originally by heaps of stones or pillars or even some crude figures. Thus might have originated the science of iconography, called 'Murtisilpa-sastra' in*
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I. Introduction

Indian civilization in all its stages of progress had its start in the Rgvedic period. The influence which this literature has exerted on the progress of mankind through the ages is tremendous. Since it touches a last period which covers its history. All the puranas, all the dharma sastras, the various systems of philosophy grammar music, physics, art and architecture trace their origin in the vedic period.

II. Main features of Indian Iconography

The subject of India Iconography is one of the most fascinating branches of indology which found its origin in the womb of remote post."¹ It is as old as the Rgveda itself. The Vedic Lare is the basic source from which all the currents of different arts have come out. Religion played an important role in the development of the cultural art of any country and so also religious origin of Indian Iconography is well established. From the very beginning the art of man has been mainly religious in character. Religion played an important role in all the phases of life and the term iconography interprets the religious art of the country and helps to understand, the nature of religious practices which were going on at a particular time in the history of mankind of any country."²

In India art found its home in temple which was not only the physical care, but the soul of community. The significance of deities, the powers beyond the reach of men was felt in all ages and so was the importance felt of their shines which persisted from age to age, though its materials have changed from bamboo to wood, from wood to stone, brick, marble etc."³ All gods of Hinduism today are the gods of the Rgaeda having changed their forms to meet the demand of people from time to time. Thus the art of iconography when separated from spiritual life and religious aspirations, becomes a dead art. Religion had been the fundamental background from which Indian iconography gets its base.

The origin of image making can be founds in the imagery of the ancient Rguedic poet of India."⁴ The divine of image of the Rgveda which were composed for the purpose of prayers, addressed to different divinities and were natural and spontaneous outburst of their highly spiritual mental aptitude, contained in them the seeds of Indian iconography. These mantras contributed the fertile field for the images to grow which were in their abstract form in that period, become substantial in due course of time. The representations of the gods and goddesses as conceived in the Rgveda, in due course of time, assumed such a definite well marked and solid form that it become unavailable to port ray or to reflect them in to stone and metals, for the artist's urge and for the satisfaction of the common demand of the common man to worship his god in solid form. Indian art like every manifestations of oriental expressions, is the product of certain religious and material circumstances which rather than any vague force, like 'Space-Composition', or significant form,' transcending time and place, determines its form in all periods."⁵ The origin of art can be seen in the primitive, culture of people. Primitive art is the womb of the higher, and is the source from which more advanced forms are derived. The vedic culture of India precedes the material for the study of the first efforts at building construction."⁶ The origin of sculpture in the same way can be inferred there.

III. The Development of Hindu Iconography

Iconography presupposes icons in the same manner as the grammar presupposes a language. As technical formulae of the sastras are formed, or the standardization of any production is done only when the production

has asserted itself, in regular use, similarly, the art of iconography which seems to have been originated in the time of the Rgveda leads to an assumption that there might have been the practices of making icons, may be of deities or of kinds of that time, Regular practices of making icons of deities was although not prevalent since rsis at that time were able to see them through particular mantra."⁷ The conception is also held that the rsis with their powers could call the deities whenever they prayed for and some of the mantras even assert of the deities, even assert of the deities, even coming to the sacrifice in person."⁸ Hence it can be established that the Rgveda was the base of Indian iconography which developed later on in due course of time to meet the general demand of the common people to worship their god in the iconic form, Rgvedic period was the progenitor of icons in one way on the other.

IV. The Base of Indian Iconography

A. Literature

All cultural religious and philosophical tradition of India germinate from the Vedic Lore. Iconography is the outcome of the vedic sacrifices."⁹ Throughout these vedic rites as described in the Brahmanas, one can trace the same structural element though in the primitive form and the same symbolism as is found in the silpas astras, the canonical books of Hindu crafts man. The temples of today are divertly from the sacrificial rites of the ancient Aryans in India."¹⁰

The direct reference to the word which has the sense of image is found in the Rgveda, tenth mandala."¹¹ Hence the rst asks about the measure and the image of the sacrifice. Further he answers his own question in the next verse:

"The symbol of sacrifice was the sacrificial fire itself."

That symbol of sacrifice or the image which is used for sacrificial purpose is taken as the visible fire itself. In symbol and in an image proper, the sense of likeness. Symbol represents only one prominent part or an aspect of the figure which is unique in that whole figure. An image proper is the full figure which gives details of every part each to each measured correctly. Symbalis one unique part, which represents the whole. Now in the figure of Agni, its flames are more prominent. From the flames, the image of Agni can be inferred, Linga represents the image of siva and soon.

Distinct reference to the image makes it more probable that icons were known to Indians vedic age. Though different views are held on the topic. The references is made that men decorate Indra and Agni. At many a place indra has been described as susipra, i.e., having beautiful cheeks and jaws. Rudra is said to be kapardin, i.e., wearing braided coild of hair etc."¹²

V. The circumstancis in which the Indian Iconography developed

A. Religion

Indian iconography is the outcome of the religious life itself. The religious view of life in India is the main pivot around which all the cultural aspects rotate. Religion is the soul of all embodiments of cultures. Art of Iconography also developed out of religious view of life the India mind. Now the earliest form under which the Hindu religion appears is that taught in the vedas. The primary character of the rituals of Vedas is the worship of the personified elements of Agni, for: Indra, firmament; Vayu, the air; varuna the water; Aditya, the sun; som, the moon; and other elementary and planetary personages. It is true that the worship of the Vedas is for the most part domestic worship consisting of prayers and ablations offered in their own houses for individuals good, to the deities in their abstract form of their imagination. Now we can not draw a line of demacation as to when this more simple and primitive form of adoration was succeeded by the worship of images representing Brahma, Visnu, Siva and other imaginary beings constituting a mythological pantheon. But the soul mantras or the hymns of the Vedas wher in prayers have been made for the personal benefit of the devotee to the desired deity and the different rituals which they performed as a way of worship, were the sufficient circumstances to evaluate the art of Indian iconography."¹³

VI. Sources

Iconography is governed by rigid rules and regulations with regard to the formation of an Iconic form. The attributes and measurements of a theme are clearly defined in canons. A Hindu icon is not the casual reproduction of a form, as done in modern abstract art, that an artist could conceive, design and bring forth as led by his fantasy. Unless warranted by religious and philosophical needs, the theoretical frame work of an iconographical form could not be altered by the artist."¹⁴

It is a sastra, silpasastra science of sculpture, as for as the Hindu or Buddhist and Jain view of iconography is concerned. In south India not less than a dozen silpasastras, compact as well as comprehensive, were in usage since the medieval period. Popular among them are kasyapasilpasastra, Mayamata, silparatna of Sri Kumara, Agastyas akaladhikara, Brahmiyacitrakaramasastra, sarasvatiyacitrakarmasastra, Sritattvanidhi of krasnaraja and so on. The Manasara is another text, followed mostly in North India. Tha Kasyapasilpasastra or Kasyapiya is a text followed in Tamilnadu. These are basically liturgical works, dealing with puja, utsava festival, yoga and nana of which the second deals with iconography."¹⁵ There is a good many number of agamas; Vaisnava, Siva, Sakta, Kaumara and Jain, all of which as a role do not deal with iconography.

A scholar working on early medieval iconography has to be very careful in handling the data furnished in silpasastras and gamas. Because most of these works did not exist during the period under investigation. Being later day composition, it amounts to an anachronism to take them in to account. The silpasastras as a codified body of literature came in to being only in the later medieval period."¹⁶ The pancaratra as a system gained currency after the 9th century A.D."¹⁷ Its farer unner, the Vaihanasagama, and few of the pancaratra texts like the abirbhudnyasamhita and the Jayakhyasamhita are supported to have existed as early as the 5th – 6th centuries A.D."¹⁸

A. Sanskrit Sources

The pan Indian literary heritage in sanskrit is the mainstay of a student of art history. The lore embodied in the puranas and other canonical works constitute the primary source of information. The puranas are broadly divided in to mahapuranas and upapuranas, the former consisting of eighteen in total: all composed during a vastspan of time from the early centuries of the Christian era to the 15th – 16th centuries A.D. The mahapuranas are brought under three heads: Brahma (rajasa), Vishnu (Sattva) and Siva (tamara) with reference to the principal god whose glories the relevant puranas extol."¹⁹ The puranas of the Brahma denomination are Brahmanda, Brahmavirta, Markandeya, Bhavisiya, Vamana and Brahma. The puranas of the visnu denomination are visnu, naradiya, bhagavata, garuda, padma and varaha. The puranas of the siva denomination are matsya, kurama, linga, vayu, siva, skanda and agni the puranas in totality constitute an invaluable source for iconographical studies in as far as they present a detailed description of the activities of the gods. Again, some of the puranas like matsya, padma, agni and visnudharmottara specifically deal with pratimalaksana iconography.

VII. Vedic Religion and Deities

A. The Rgveda: The main sources of later deities

Vedas are held in great esteem by Hindus and they consider them to be the revelation god and vedism was the religion of the Indian branch of the great Aryan family. This was the form of religion which was represented in the songs and players, which were collectively called veda. The Vedas were attributed to the rsis who were supposed to be the leaders of religious thought and life in india. Vedic religion was the worship of the deified forces or phenoma from of nature. Such as fire, sun wind and rain etc.; which were sometimes given individual forms and were thought of as separate divine powers? While sometimes they were termed under one general conception and were personified as one god."²⁰ Amongst all the four Vedas the Rgveda in undoubtedly the oldest literary movement of the Indo Ayan worship. Ved means knowledge (from vid to know); Veda means the works whose authority is not to be questioned and which are the last tribunal or court of justice in matters of dispute whether in religion or philosophy or social customs. Vedas were supposed to be produced by such living beings as Agni, Vayu, Aditya. The Rgveda was formed from Agni, Yajurveda from vayu and samaveda from aditya.

Regarding the antiquity of the Rgveda many theories have been propounded by foreign and indigenous scholars. Aryan family of Languages also called indo-European, Indo-Germanic, Included in itself Persian, Greek, Latin, Celtic, Sanskrit, Zend, Teutonic slauonic etc. Now the language of the Rgveda is Sanskrit on the basis of comparative philosophy we find a close relation between Indians, Itarians, Greeks, Germans, Slavis."²¹ In course of our studies we can't ignore their mutual impressions over each other.

The time when the Rgveda come in to being is still a point of conflate among the scholars. But the date generally accepted for the Rgveda is approximately 1500 BC."²² The most popular view on the subject is that given by Maximuller. He has assigned the date of the Rgveda approximately 1200 BC."²³ Whitney takes the period of the Rgveda from 2000 BC to 1500 BC."²⁴ The linguistic or literary theories fail to fix with certainty, the date of the Rgveda.

VIII. Reflections on social life and Aesthetic trends

Sculpture is the mirror of sociological values and social life of on age. The Indian view of art. Whether Buddhist or jain or Hindu, sculpture or painting, is not just "art for art's sake." In shaping a work of art. the artist; and in accepting an artistic creation, the society, were strongly inhibited by religious nations, which were deep rooted in sociological values. An artistic production has to tell about sectarian ideologies and their interactions and social intercourse and way of life. The predominant element in Hindu iconography is the image of gods and goddesses whose attributes mostly reflect the sociological trends of byegone ages. A reviewer of the arts of a particular period in India may happen to observe that the life at lower rangs of society fails to receive an adequate treatment. Yet the certain circles such as the Govardhanadhari and Bhagiratha's Penance at Mamallapuram, a panoramic view of the society's cross-section is represent and there by glimpses of social life at various rangs in the pyramidal order of a society both vertical and horizontal is obtained. The sculptures of time past provide an opportunity to study the social process, values and lives of a people."²⁵

Casually it may be noted that schools of modern western art such as impressionism, Expressionism, cubism and surrealism are products of artistic impulses."²⁶ Where in Indian art there is an underlining eidos, artmetaphysica."²⁷ That gives shape to a piece of sculpture or painting, provided it is conventional or traditional. Before answering the above question, it may be added that the spirit of Indian art was never akin to a poetic

composition, chiefly moulded and produced by the instincts of an artist. No doubt without instinct or a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings the traditional artist may call it the stage of meditation."²⁸ A work of art could not have attained a classical flavor.

A. Feminine Influence

An important trend discernible in Vaishnava imagery and set in operation through their theological lore is the influence that the feminine power could exercise in respect of their male power. As earlier stated an ideological point of view in Srivaisnava philosophy is the influential role played by the consort of Vishnu, called tayar mother or piratti mistress. According to this notion the lord is not to be approached directly but through tayar.

The classification of Hindu worshippers into Vaishnavas and Saivas on the one hand and saktas on the other is not, however, exclusively rigid or inviolable, in as much as Vaishnavas and Saivas also worship the devi in the form of Lakshmi and Parvati, although the supreme place of honour is reserved for the male Deva, that is, for Vishnu or Siva as the case may be that without the co-operation of this goddess the absolute Brahman of itself can achieve nothing."²⁹

IX. Conclusion

The Iconography of different aspects of the Hindu pattern evolved over the later after puranas (Gupta period) were used to formulate ritualistic religious practices prescribed to general masses. The evaluation of temple culture during the formation of feudal society with many things and landlords competing to establish their importance by building temples gave a big fillup to the development of iconography. It also encouraged development of many creative arts in sculpture, architecture, jewellery making, decorative art, temple music and there connected vocations. In such development of Iconography the puranic ideas were incorporated symbolically thus giving a meaning to the forms and practices of rituals and poojas.

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