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TOPIC : MAURYAN ART AND ARCHITECTURE

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Mauryan Art and Architecture:

The origin of monumental stone sculpture and architecture in the Indian subcontinent goes back to the Harappan civilization. However, after the decline of Harappan civilization, there is a long gap and it is only in the Mauryan period that monumental stone sculpture and architecture appeared on the scene again.

Court Art:

- **Royal Buildings:**

The Greek historian Megasthenes described the palaces of the Mauryan empire as one of the greatest creations of mankind and Chinese travelers Fa-Hien called Mauryan palaces as god-gifted monuments or the monuments built by god not by humans. About Patliputra Megasthenes mentions that towns were surrounded by a wooden wall where a number of holes were created to let the arrow pass by. A ditch was dug with the size of 60 feet and 600 feet wide along with the wall. The town had 64 entrances and 570 towns.

The royal assembly building situated in Kumhrars was a hall with 80 pillars. Its roof and floor were made of woods and its size was 140 feet long and 120 feet wide. Patanjali also mentioned Chandragupta's Rajsabha in his Mahabhashya. Arian/Eriyan compared Chandragupta's palace with the buildings of Susa and Ekbatan.

- **Pillars:**

The majestic free standing Ashokan pillars symbolize the axis of the world that separated heaven and earth. Ashoka mainly used these pillars for the propagation of Dhamma. Ashokan pillars are quite similar to each other in form and dimension. They are made of Red Sand Stone at Chunar(Mirzapur). They are considered to be monolithic with a height 12 to 14 meters. Ashoka's first pillar was found from Vaishali known as Koluha pillar. In terms of art and architecture Sarnath pillar of Ashoka is the best example of it. The smallest pillar is Rummendei pillar and the safest pillar till now is Lauriya Nandangarh pillar.

There are two types of pillars:

- i. Inscribed pillars.
- ii. Non-inscribed pillars.

There are 10 pillars which have inscriptions written on them. Kaushambi pillar, Vaishali pillar, Rampurva pillar and Sankisha pillars are non-inscribed pillars. Basically Ashokan pillars are divided in four categories:

- i. Shaft
- ii. Capital/bell
- iii. Platform/ Abacus

A cylindrical bolt joins the top of the shaft to the capital – a stone carved in the shape of an inverted lotus(bell capital). On top of this is abacus(platform) which supports the crowning animal or animals. The abacus is square and plain in earlier pillars and circular and curved in later ones. The motifs associated with the Ashokan pillars have a rich and varied symbolism.

Motifs associated with pillars:

- a. One Lion- It appears on the pillars of Vaishali, Lauriya Nandangarh and Rampurva pillars.
- b. Elephant – An elephant capital was found at Sankisha.
- c. Bull- It was found on the Rampurva pillars.
- d. Four Lions- On Sarnath and Sanchi pillars.

- **Caves :**

The Mauryan period saw the beginning of rock cut cave architecture. The Barabar and Nagarjuni hills contain several caves which are built by Ashoka and Dasharatha. The caves are simple but have highly polished interiors. The only sculpture ornamentation is a relief carving on the doorway of a cave known as Lomas Rishi Cave. The doorway is modeled after the wooden ones. Over the entrance are two bands of relief carvings. The upper one has a lattice work design, the lower one

has a lattice work design showing elephants approaching stupas. These caves were dedicated by Ashoka and Dashratha to the Ajivakas.

- **Stupas :**

Stupas were burial mounds prevalent in India from Vedic period. The word stupa comes two times in Rig veda. It is a symbol of Mahaparinirvana of Buddha and is also considered as axis of universe. Stupas consist of a cylindrical drum with a circular dome and a Harmika and a Chhatra on the top. A circular terrace (medhi) enclosed by a railing, surrounds the dome, on which the faithful are to circumbulate in a clockwise direction and this gallery is known as Pradakshinapath. The entire structure is enclosed by a low wall called Vedika, which is punctuated at the four cardinal points by Toranas (gateways).

The core of stupa was built using unburnt bricks while the outer surface was made by using burnt bricks. The toranas were decorated with wooden sculptures. In stupas mainly death remains were kept. Sanchi stupa in Madhya Pradesh is the most famous of the Ashokan stupas. Piprahwa stupa in Uttar Pradesh is the oldest one. There are several important stupas which are built by Ashoka for example: Bharhut stupa, Sanchi stupa, Dharmarajika stupa at Sarnath and Taxila, Bodhgaya stupa and Bairat stupa. Ashoka's reign marked an important stage in the history of Buddhist stupa architecture.

- **Viharas:**

The Viharas in India were originally constructed to shelter the monks during the rainy season, when it became difficult for them to lead the wanderer's life. In Patliputra Ashoka built Ashokaram vihara and Kakuttaram Vihara.

Folk Art:

- **Stone Sculpture:**

Several large stone sculptures have been found at various sites in and around Patna, Mathura, Madhya Pradesh and other places. Many of them represent Yaksha and Yakshi. Other important examples of stone sculptures include the statue of a nude male figure found at Lohanipur at Patna. It is carved out of Chunar sandstone and has a polished surface. Didarganj Yakshi was found at Didarganj village at Patna. The earliest mention of Yakshi can be found in Silpaddikaram, a Tamil text.

- **Terracotta:**

They flourished with the expansion of the urban centers. They include male and female figurines, animals and carts. They are made of mud and are mostly found from Ayodhya. Pottery of the

Mauryan period is generally referred to as Northern Black Polished Ware(NBPW). Kosambi and Patliputra were the centres of NBPW pottery.

Foreign influence on Mauryan Art:

Is there any foreign influence on Mauryan Art or not? Is a matter of controversy. Several historians like Spooner, John Marshall and Niharranjan Ray accept the influence of foreigners on the Mauryan art by giving following points:

- i. It has been suggested that Ashoka got the idea of inscribing his proclamations on the pillars from Persians.
- ii. The foreign influence has been identified in the polished surface of the Ashokan pillars and the animal motifs.
- iii. It has been pointed out that the word dipi and lipi occur in the inscriptions of Darius as well as Ashoka.

But the above facts cannot be accepted completely. Historians have also drawn attention to the many differences between the Mauryan and the Persian arts:

- i. The pillars of Persian art are built of separate segments of stone whereas, the Mauryan pillar is monolithic.
- ii. Mauryan pillars does not have any base whereas, Persian pillars do have base.
- iii. The Mauryan type abacus and independent animals carved in the pillars are absent in the Persian art.

While there may be some similarities in specific features, the effect of the whole is completely different. Moreover, while having pillars inscribed with his messages on Dhamma, Ashoka transformed them into epigraphic monument of unique cultural meaning.

IMPORTANT QUESTIONS

- Q. 1) Give a brief account on the Folk Art of Mauryas.
- Q. 2) Write a short note on foreign influence on Mauryan Art.
- Q. 3) Throw light on the Mauryan Art and Architecture.
- Q. 4) Describe the importance of Pillars during Mauryan Age.