Representing South Asian Art (4th Century CE and Beyond): Some Critical Perspectives

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Introduction

The period between 4th-7th centuries CE was an important one in the history of South Asian cultural expressions, as during this time many idioms in various cultural fields were evolved that were emulated by subsequent generations. Specifically in the field of South Asian art, certain norms evolved in the delineation of the human figure that remained very influential for several centuries and have captured the attention of the modern scholars for almost a century. For example, in architecture, the Hindu temple evolved its specific features in stone for the first time during this period and it was this form of the temple that was to form the model for the subsequent temples, though elaborations and modifications were made in the basic structure of the temple across the time and space of the Indian subcontinent. This is not to say that this period was perfect or 'golden' in all respects, but in the field of art and architecture it marks an important epoch. Hence, to anyone interested in South Asian art history, studying the ways in which the scholarly writings have represented the evolution of art during 4th-7th centuries CE in the Indian subcontinent is of great relevance, since the study of ancient South Asian art of periods beyond 7th century CE are also influenced by the way people have studied the art of this period. This paper makes an attempt to critically view the various scholarly representations of the art of 4th to 7th century CE and also the way this has influenced the readings of the art of post 7th century CE, that have existed in the historiography of South Asian art for quite some time. Since the writings on this theme are numerous, only some major works have been discussed in this paper.

A number of authors who have studied the South Asian art of 4th-6th centuries CE have used the designation 'Gupta art' for this art form, following the name of the major dynasty that ruled in the subcontinent at this time and controlled a large geographical area in the northern part of the subcontinent, while having marital alliances with the Vakatakas, the rulers of the Western India. Often the art of this period has been regarded as the cultural achievement of the Gupta rulers. While the contribution of the royal patronage in the making of this art and its geographical dispersal cannot be denied, every single specimen of South Asian art that is datable to this period may not have been a product of the royal patronage; local elites, merchants and their family members, Brahmanas holding large pieces of land and having rights to be the officiating priests at temples and various other social groups such as the artisans' guilds that became wealthy may have played a role in the art making process as well. Hence, the term 'Gupta art' should be seen as a general term for the art form that belongs to this period and region controlled by the Guptas and not as a specific allusion to the art directly produced by the Gupta rulers, unless such direct patronage can be proved by corroborative historical evidences.

Style as a Reflection of the Evolution of Spirituality

This paper is by no means the first attempt of its kind to critically review the scholarship of South Asian art of 4th-7th centuries CE and beyond. One of the notable attempts of this kind has been

made by Donald Stadtner in recent times (Stadtner 1990). Stadtner views the Western scholars' interest in South Asia as a continuing interest begun by travellers from Europe at the time of Alexander's conquest of the north-western part of the subcontinent. His appraisal of the scholarship on South Asian art is, however, restricted to only two scholars viz. A. K Coomaraswamy and Stella Kramrisch, both of whom belonged to a common tradition of scholarly approach to South Asian art, which perceived this art as a reflection of spiritual evolution.

After discussing these scholars, Stadtner discusses some of the features of the South Asian art, perhaps by way of illustrating what directions further research in this field can take. Some of these approaches, however, have been explored by other scholars, who do not figure in Stadtner's writing. Stadtner rightly observes that Coomaraswamy interpreted this art form in spiritual terms, thus defining South Asian culture itself as spiritual rather than materialistic as Western civilisation was perceived to be. He also traces this thought to the late 19th century European writings that tended to perceive South Asia as spiritual rather than materialistic in order to show the superiority of the Oriental cultures over Western ones. One aspect that Stadtner has not discussed is that Coomaraswamy was also writing with a nationalistic perspective, with a view to counter the imperialistic colonial discourses on South Asia that were aimed at creating a European hegemony over the region. Stadtner cites Coomaraswamy's work *Transformation of Nature in Art* (Coomaraswamy 1934) as the most representative example of his thought. While this is largely true, an equally significant writing of Coomaraswamy is an article titled *An Approach to Indian Art*, in which he draws perhaps one of the earliest outlines of the evolution of art styles in South Asia that were based on the inner enlightenment of the maker. Thus, early Buddhist art of Sanchi and Bharhut datable to 3rd-2nd centuries BCE are 'primitive in a laudable manner since they are imbued with sensuality and thematic intellectualism' and the 'classical Gupta style' served as the guiding factor for the Hindu and Buddhist art forms of Central and South-East Asia, to which these regions added their own indigenous elements. Because of this, these art forms of Central and South-East Asia cannot be called examples of 'Indian colonialism' (Coomaraswamy 1935: 19). In these passages, he not only outlines the evolution of South Asian art as he sees it but also represents this subcontinent as a region that did not attempt to colonise other cultures even though it may have had the potential to do so. This is an important element in Coomaraswamy's thought that does not reflect in Stadtner's otherwise very insightful writing. There is another major aspect in Coomaraswamy's treatment of spirituality in ancient South Asian art – he considers the element of spirituality to be omnipresent and unchanging. In comparison, the others who followed his idea, used it to argue that Gupta Art was 'more spiritual' than the art that preceded it and the art that followed it. This is of course about iconography, since architecture could not have been studied in this manner to a large extent.[1]

Coomaraswamy's treatment of the art of 3rd-2nd Centuries BCE as primitive in technique and style and a gradual maturing of perspective, technique and style through the early centuries of the Common Era till this art acquires the 'classical' spiritual animation in the Gupta period remained very influential till recent decades. Indeed, there are still a few adherents to this tradition of South Asian art historiography. Stadtner has rightly observed this in his writing, citing Stella Kramrisch as the most important descendant of Coomaraswamy's thought in his own times. Her *Hindu Temple* is a significant example of her treatment of the temple as a spiritual form in architecture (Kramrisch 1976)

However, between the perspectives of Stella Kramrisch and Coomaraswamy – even though they belong to the same school of thought – there is a point of difference not noted by Stadtner. Kramrisch and others, following Alfred Foucher, believed that the Hellenistic influences on South Asian art helped in the emergence of a perfect human figure, to which the Gupta age added its spirituality and classicism to make it an ideal image (Leeuw 1979: 377-400). On the other hand, Coomaraswamy emphatically discounts the influence of an external agency on the indigenous South Asian art. In his famous writing *'The Origin of the Buddha Image'* he lays down differences between the Gandhara Buddha and the Mathura Buddha in their stylistic content. He also argues that images are produced by knowledge and inspiration in South Asian context and not merely by observation (Coomaraswamy 1927: 1-43). This is an especially important aspect for those interested in Buddhist iconography and the divinisation of the Buddha in the early centuries of the Common Era. This is so because recent research shows that actual divinisation of the Buddha seems to have followed a gradual process of a complex symbolic interchange between the meanings of the *stupa* and the image (Verma 2007: 1-14). Moreover, it is hard to accept that the artists of a particular age were less conscious than the artists of a subsequent period. Moreover, one has to ask how the consciousness of an artist stands vis-a-vis the taste of the patron and the demands of the society.

Stadtner perceives the writings of Coomaraswamy and Kramrisch as representing all South Asian art as spiritual, timeless and dissociated from the changing social context of the subcontinent down the centuries – a contention that is well justified. He goes on to cite issues such as political patronage, glorification of royalty through art patronage, community-based art production and the religious context of pre-modern South Asian art as some of the important approaches that should be taken up while studying this art form. He also mentions that in recent years art historians have challenged earlier historiography and have evolved different approaches to study South Asian art (Stadtner Winter 1990: 360). However, though he has made this statement in his writing he has not appraised these new approaches the way he has done Coomaraswamy's approach. In the later passages, the present paper studies some of these different approaches to study South Asian art forms.

Writings on the art of 4th-7th centuries CE have been largely influenced by the debate on the nature of South Asian art itself. These writings have tried to situate the art of 4th-7th centuries CE within the framework of this debate. Some of the common contentions in this trend are, that this period experienced a stable politico-economic climate and hence was suitable for a speeding up of artistic activity, that this society was characterised by a blissful realisation, spiritual harmony and a heightened aesthetic consciousness that are reflected in the art of this period. Another belief is that since this art reflects a culmination of the art tradition's quest for spirituality in South Asia and prescribes the norm of art tradition for subsequent periods, it corresponds to the classical age of the Western world. They have regarded this art form as a high watermark in the evolutionary trend of South Asian art, since it was seen to combine the culminating development in technique with a sense of emotionality and spirituality.

This trend again begins with Stella Kramrisch, who in her writing on the figural sculptures of the Gupta period discusses ways in which the ethereal qualities of the dominant schools of Mathura and Sarnath are reflected in other local schools – of Gandhara, Udaygiri, and Sultanganj for example

(Miller 1983: 181-203). Doris Meth Srinivasan regarded all writings of Kramrisch as pioneering which led scholars of subsequent decades to explore these themes in greater detail (Srinivasan Oct-Dec 1986). While Kramrisch's writing was – and has remained – significant, reading this approach from today's perspective makes it essential to explore such questions as how an artistic expression emanating from two places could have succeeded in creating a homogenised trend of art and what agencies could be responsible for the sustenance of these trends in regions so widely dispersed and situated in such varied socio-cultural context.

This paradigm of Gupta idiom influencing the art activity in the rest of the subcontinent and even to other parts of Asia for several centuries was very popular with scholars studying this art form for many decades. An early example of this is a survey of sculptures in the Metropolitan Museum of Art by Aschwin Lippe (Lippe 1960). He titles his writing *'The Sculpture of Greater India'* but specifically says that by India he does not mean simply the modern nation of India but the geographical expanse from Afghanistan to Vietnam and from Nepal to Cambodia. He asserts that this region was culturally and commercially linked in the pre-modern period and hence the art of the regions surrounding the modern nation of India has received its influences from India and hence this nomenclature has been given in this work that describes many beautiful examples from Gandhara, Afghanistan, Vietnam and Cambodia. This kind of nomenclature has of course been abandoned now, but it shows how important a period was 4th-6th centuries in transmitting the artistic idiom from South Asia to various regions of Asia.

In another example, S.K. Saraswati in *A Survey of Indian Sculpture* makes Sarnath and Mathura the reference indices for all art of this period and has judged all specimens he has studied on the parameters of these two idioms, thus implying that these idioms pervaded everywhere to a greater or lesser degree (Saraswati 1975). Pratapaditya Pal studies the art of 4th-7th centuries as an aesthetic ideal which was the product of a sophisticated urbane culture and which had far and wide influences down the centuries (Pal 1978) – an idea that is echoed in a more recent volume of *Marg* edited by Karl Khandalvala (Khandalvala 1991). Pratapaditya Pal reinforced his writing by another lecture at the Art Institute of Chicago, in which he stressed the excellence in poetic idiom of Kalidasa composed during this period, which he asserted is reflected in the art of this period (Pal 1983). This exercise had been attempted much earlier than him by C. Sivaramamurti (Sivaramamurti 1970). Perhaps the last two works may be seen to assert that artistic activity reflects the socio-cultural expressions of the society. However, there is further scope to explore the underlying social currents which caused these expressions to be simultaneously manifested in art as well as literary forms. So influential was Pratapaditya Pal in his approach that he was invited to curate an exhibition of the art of this period at Asia House Gallery, New York, Art Institute of Chicago and Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth in 1979 (Sewell Mar-Apr 1979). Titled *The Ideal Image: The Gupta Sculptural Tradition and its Influence*, the scope of this exhibition is self-evident.

Studying the art of 4th-7th centuries as constituting a particular style that was evolved and transmitted across the subcontinent and to other parts of Asia is the theme of another work by J. C. Harle (1974). As Joanna Williams points out in her review of this work, here the style of this period and region is the singular distinguishing mark of this art form, since the political patronage during 4th-7th centuries across the subcontinent was diverse (Williams 1977). She also contests Harle's

argument of Western influences over this art form (Williams 1977: 120-121), thus showing that Harle's preoccupation with the foreign influence over the art of this sub continent (apart from the Gandhara region) is uncalled for. In another review, Douglas Mc Dougall points out Harle's inability to correctly interpret Buddha's webbed fingers as marks of a great being in South Asian iconography; rather Harle considers the web as a device to support the fingers from breaking away (Mc Dougall 1976:188). One expects a figure of Harle's stature to have taken the care to relate an iconographic feature to its related religious ideal while writing a work of this nature. His preoccupation with the Western influence over this art also shows a tendency to reproduce the arguments already forwarded by various other scholars, and perhaps also a belief in the superiority of the Western art over South Asian art forms.

J. C. Harle's work does not throw much light on the art objects from eastern part of the subcontinent that may be datable to 4th-7th centuries CE. This lacuna is filled by Frederick Asher's work on the art of Eastern India (Asher 1980), in which he begins with the Kushana period and ends by studying the Pala sculptures. He takes into account the region covered by modern Bihar, Bengal and Bangladesh. His approach differs from the scholars studying all art forms of the subcontinent as influences of the Gupta style in that he is concerned with exploring the transition from the Gupta phase to the Pala phase in the making of sculpture. Susan Huntington has said that his subdivision of his chapters according to major sites or regions has given prominence to the regional patterns of artistic production (Huntington 1983: 693). While this may be true to a large extent, the fact that Frederick Asher has titled two of his chapters as *Gupta Age* and *Growth of the Style* shows that he does consider pre-Pala art as an evolution out of the art of the Gupta period. Perhaps this is the reason he does not organise his chapters based on the provenance of the images studied. Hence, a localised artistic production in Asher's work cannot be over emphasised.

Studying the same region and period, Sheila Weiner makes style the basis for assessing the quality of the sculptures from eastern India that may be dated from the Gupta to the Pala period and on this basis she has also revised the chronology of quite a few of these sculptures (Weiner 1962). Characteristic of the ideas prevalent at this time, she regards the experiments done in the first few centuries of the Common Era as stabilising in the Gupta period from the 5th to the 7th centuries. On the other hand, she feels that the Pala sculpture of 8th-11th centuries has the same attitude towards the human body, but its figures are more attenuated and 'adulterated' since the limbs are slimmer and longer and the body is 'stiffer.' She attempts to show this change taking place in her stylistic study of the sculpture from Sarnath, Sanchi, Deogarh, Nalanda and Paharpur. Writing of this nature classifies an art object according to the subjective perceptions of the viewer and attributes to it characteristics that are liable to vary from one viewer to another. Besides, it would be perhaps illuminating to relate these images to their corresponding epigraphical and textual details to show what kind of practices and meanings were associated with these images.

Style as a Reflection of the Evolution of Art

Study of style to ascertain the chronology and place of an art object in the evolutionary timeline of art making process is an approach that has been dominant within the stylistic paradigm. This trend has continued to contemporary times, even though it does not always strongly emphasise the 'spiritual content' in visual form. An early paper of this kind is by Douglas Barrett on three

Gandhara bronzes discovered from Sahri Bahlol in Pakistan. These images are stylistically dated by various authors to 4th-6th centuries and even 8th century for one, as cited by Barrett. He, however, compares them with the Buddha paintings and terracotta heads found at Bamiyan and other images at Hadda, Akhnur, Fondukistan and Ukhnur and revises their dating to 7th-8th centuries on the basis of stylistic comparison (Barrett 1960). He also similarly studies the style of a specimen from Kashmir and another from Manikyala, both of which he dates to 6th-7th centuries CE on stylistic grounds. One can see that many of the undated images have been placed on the chronological line using this approach, which also places these images on the stylistic evolutionary trend in the region.

The most recent example of this approach is the very detailed writing of Ibrahim Shah on some *lingas* carved with Shiva-faces on them, found from Pakistan, especially present Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Shah 2009). His painstaking work must be appreciated considering the difficulties in across-the-border communications and exchanges existing for a scholar who works on such a topic. In the beginning of his writing he has cited certain references from the religious canons like the *Agamas*, but this does not carry through his entire analysis, which is more stylistic-formalistic in nature. Moreover, *Agamas* are quite late developments and more often than not have a regional influence. For the early sculptures he has studied, texts like the *Brihatsamhita*, the epics, the major *Puranas* and the *Vishnudharmottaram* are more appropriate as religious or iconographic sources. All the same, Shah's work makes an important addition to Srinivasan's research discussed below and shows promise of further evolution. While this stylistic-formalistic approach helps the reader to understand the trajectories that the iconography took in its evolution, it still leaves out the possibilities to contextualise the images in their socio-cultural history and to discuss what kind of meanings were imparted to these images and if the meanings changed across a time-span and why.

P. K. Agrawala is another scholar who uses the perspective of temple style to study the Gupta temple architecture, though he has stressed the significance of *Bhakti* in the evolution of iconography and architecture. He discusses the wide royal patronage and the attempt to propagate the influence of the dominant *Madhyadesha* over the local styles – e.g. in placement of the Ganga-Yamuna figures on the door jambs. Thus, he sees architecture as the vehicle that carried Gupta cultural idioms (Agrawala 1968).

Perhaps the most influential work in the field of stylistic and formal study of the Hindu temple architecture is the multi-volume *Encyclopaedia of Indian Temple Architecture* from the American Institute of Indian Studies, under the editorship of Michael Meister, M. A. Dhaky and Krishna Deva. Its Volume II-Part I deals with the period being studied in this paper, focusing on North India, especially in the second chapter. Like the other volumes, the stylistic and formal study of the temples in the region is preceded by a description of political and religious history as it evolved under the dynasties that ruled in various parts of north India during this period. A discussion of the integration of styles patronised by these dynasties is also provided by the volume. The central focus of the study is on the minute details of the temple styles, going into each and every component of the temple and the way these styles spread and synthesise geographically, supported by maps, line drawings and photographs and appended by a glossary of architectural

Sanskrit terms. In effect, it achieves a detailed formal analysis of the *Nagara* i.e. the north Indian temple style and its regional disseminations in the upper half of the subcontinent. Especially for the students of architecture, this painstaking morphological work is of extreme importance.

In the subsequent years, it has generated quite a few researches on the Hindu temples in different parts of India, which more or less follow the pattern of writing in this encyclopaedia and earlier journal articles published by Michael Meister. Klaus Imig working on the Deogarh Temple datable to the 6th century has followed this style, while revising earlier works by Alexander Cunningham and M. S. Vats (Imig 2003; Cunningam 1880/2003; Vats 1952/1999). One interesting example of this approach is a study by Laxman S. Thakur, who integrates this method with a study of the concept of the *Vastupurushamandala* in the Himachal temples – combining the methods of Stella Kramrisch and Michael Meister (Thakur 1990: Notes 1 and 9), the 8th century Shiva temple at Jagatsukh in Kullu district being the earliest in this study (Thakur 1990: 264). This study is especially interesting as Himachal enjoys the special characteristic of having many wooden temples, which have a specific regional character in terms of style, religion and deities and these are not well-known to the people outside Himachal because they are located in the high reaches of the Himalayas. But Thakur chooses to study the temples that fall in line with the *Nagara* temples covered in the encyclopaedia mentioned above. The fact that an 8th century temple is the earliest in this class, shows that the typical *Nagara* style was a late entrant in this region, its earlier temples being in their own local style. But so influential is Meister's method that Thakur's work does not attempt to study this local idiom or even a transition from this idiom to the *Nagara* style or an interaction between the two.

Meister extended his study to the temples in the Salt Range in Pakistan, since he rightfully felt that the partition of the sub continent has cut these temples off from the mainstream scholarship on the Hindu temple, which has mainly focused on India. Following his close stylistic and formalistic method, he argues that contrary to the writings of early scholars like Coomaraswamy, these temples, datable to 6th-11th centuries, do not represent a local variation of the Kashmir temples, but have their own *Nagara* style which he calls as *Gandhara-Nagara* (Meister 1996). His minute analysis of the architectural form and its evolution brings these temples within the mainstream stylistic study of the Hindu temple.

While a stylistic-formalistic approach to the study of temple is useful to understand how a temple-plan and structure are formulated and what kind of influences they have had in their making, these studies could become more meaningful if they were located in their historical context, to understand what kind of ritualistic, social and ideological factors functioned to make the temple meaningful to the society. It is important to remember that a temple is not just a form in stone; it carries a whole range of meanings to the society, which are constructed by their specific historical evolution. Besides, the temple-plan is not just a diagram; the temple fulfils certain socio-religious functions through these plans. A temple becomes 'alive' to the student of art history only if the writings elucidate on these aspects. Especially in the encyclopaedia mentioned above, including chapters on dynastic succession and a religious overview is not enough to help the readers to understand specifically what kind of roles these political and religious developments played in the

building and the use of the temple. There is a need to draw linkages between the polity, religion and social aspects to understand the making and the use of the temple in a more meaningful manner.

Method of an Architect

An important approach evolved by Adam Hardy[2], who combines his skills of an architect with his understanding of the way the Hindu temple was – and is – looked at by the devout population. He combines the devotional, spiritual and architectural approaches together to appreciate the ways in which these temple forms have developed in different periods of South Asian history. His study of the *Karnata* forms of Indian Temple Architecture minutely studies the stylistic evolution of these temples; his usual approach being to study the temples from top to bottom in a vertical fashion, as opposed to the horizontal studies done by many scholars (Hardy 1995). In a later article on the temples of the same region, which he stresses should not be called the usual *Vesara* but rather as *Karnata Dravida*, he says that certain architectural features of these temples may have been borrowed from the Gandhara region in the north-western part of the sub continent (Hardy June 2001). Ajay Sinha who has reviewed Hardy's work feels that Hardy has been able to integrate Stella Kramrisch's spiritual approach with the stylistic-formalistic approach current in his own days (Sinha 1999).

Adam Hardy does say in the beginning and end of his article that it is important to understand a temple the way it was understood by the people who built it and that it carries philosophical, religious and mythological meanings in its form (Hardy June 2001). In some ways, his method, apart from coming from architectural, religious and spiritual currents, also seems to be influenced by that of Krishna Deva in Michael Meister's Encyclopaedia. His recent book titled the *Temple Architecture of India* (Hardy 2007) is really the last word in Indian temple studies, in the field of architectural-spiritual method that Hardy follows.

Image and Text

Within the paradigm of studying iconographic features as the main concern of art history, there has been another trend that attempts to relate these features to the descriptions given in the Sanskrit texts and iconographic treatises, often called the *Pratimalakshana* that forms part of a much larger text. An example of the former approach mentioned here is Doris Srinivasan's work on Para Shiva, Sada Shiva and Mahesha, in which she elucidates religious concepts from the texts about these three forms of Shiva and makes an extensive survey of especially Mahesha *murtis* from different parts of the subcontinent (Srinivasan 1990). Srinivasan's approach throws significant light on the concept of Sada Shiva and Mahesha as it evolved across the subcontinent. The latter of these two approaches may be represented by the survey of ancient and early mediaeval sculptures from Eastern part of the subcontinent, including Bangladesh by Enamul Haque.

In this study, Haque's main concern is to study these images in relation to the iconographic descriptions given in texts like the *Vishnudharmottaram* and the *Brihatsamhita* (Haque 1992). In this process he also categorises these images on their sectarian basis and has separated the rare images from the more common ones, giving an account of how many of each there are. As George Michell, the reviewer of this work has remarked, this is an invaluable work, bringing to light many images not usually accessible to public and some of them now lost (Michell 1993). The difference between the two kinds of writing is that a work like that of Doris Srinivasan's places more emphasis on the

religious concept and attempts to show how this concept is expressed in the visual form. On the other hand, Haque's work places more emphasis on stylistic and formal evolution but relies substantially on the canonical reference to understand this evolution. While this approach throws significant light on the kind of images that were being made in a particular period and their comparison with the injunctions given in the iconographic treatises, it must be borne in mind that image making does not always follow the textual injunctions to the letter. Rather, it is a two-way process – often the textual injunctions reflect an image-making practice in vogue that the text accommodates within its canonical fold. Moreover, even if the sculptor follows a description from a text, he is always free to introduce changes in the images that are not described in the text (Verma 2008).

While retaining this stylistic evolutionary model for the study of the Hindu temple, scholars have perceived the architectural form of the temple in relation to the sculptures that are carved on its walls. Stella Kramrisch has explored the comparative significance of sculpture and architecture against each other. She gives more credence to the architecture as it retains its identity by virtue of its plan and structure, which a sculpture situated in a temple does not. Thus, the temple signifies the emergence of a more powerful form in stone (Kramrisch 1955). In another article, she draws the relation between the wall and the image. She argues that the images in the niches on the outer wall of the temple represent outer manifestation of the deity housed in the sanctum inside. The wall moulding is also called the *ratha* or 'the chariot.' Hence, it is as if the deity is 'coming out' of the shrine to show himself to the devotee going around the temple to do his *pradakshina* (Kramrisch June 17, 1958). She compares the ground plans of some temples with the descriptions given in the architectural treatises. This approach of Kramrisch was followed by scholars later. Alexander Lubotsky in a way reverses this method and attempts to show that the *Sarvatobhadra* iconographic temple-plan as discussed in *Vishnudharmottaram* follows the plan of the 6th century temple at Deogarh, regarded by many scholars as belonging to the later part of the Gupta period (Lubotsky 1996).

Another scholar who has been influential in this field is Devangana Desai, especially because of the study she carried out on Khajuraho. In her religious Imagery of Khajuraho, she makes linkages between religiosity, iconography and texts associated with iconography and religion to show the meanings associated with these images (Desai 1996). Desai is responsible for bringing Khajuraho out of the stereotyping of its significance only as an erotic site. Rather, she shows that this site is an important link in the evolution of Hindu religious imagery in South Asian art.

Paintings

As regards the paintings, three main regions have been considered by the authors – Ajanta, Bagh and Badami. They have tried to study these paintings from different perspectives, though focus on style as a reflection of the overarching 'Gupta classicism' is retained in these writings. Douglas Barrett and Basil Grey in *Indian Painting* have studied these regions as expressions of regional individuality within the context of the classical tradition of art being followed in South Asia (Barret and Grey 1978). Here the term 'classical', according to them, denotes the character of the art of the period till the coming of Islamic rulers. They consider the artistic activity before the coming of Islamic rulers as the autonomous expression of a society – even the borrowing as they say, was by choice as against the one instituted by an alien group in the post classical i.e., the Islamic phase, according

to these authors. There is also a tendency in their writing to draw comparisons between the Indian painting and the European style. This definition of classicism is problematic, since it excludes a large population of South Asia from its historical heritage only on the basis of religion. Islam may have come from elsewhere into South Asia, but a significant population of this region considers it as its own and hence, South Asian art cannot be circumscribed as exclusive and disjuncted from the rich influence that this interaction produced in the region. Though written with the best of intentions, such an approach has created a lot of avoidable conflict in the region. Moreover, to see the reflections of mediaeval European artistic trends in Indian art is perhaps an endeavour to dissociate South Asian art from the influences of classical West as was the earliest practice. However, this takes away from South Asian art its own value and ascribes it value only for the purpose of comparing it with the West. This makes this a value-based cross cultural study that followed a European yardstick.

Two major concepts emerge from Moti Chandra's *Studies in Early Indian Painting*. He traces the evolution of technique from Ajanta to Badami and thinks that plasticity in painting evolves only at Badami and in the Vakataka-period Ajanta. Earlier paintings, according to him, do not use this feature of plasticity. Hence, we can see his argument supporting a 'simple' to 'complex' evolution of painting in the region. His other concept deals with the classical notion of painting. His analogy runs like this – 1) painting technique followed the shift from the colour modelling to linear depiction; 2) *Vishnudharmottaram* is a classical text and is critical of the linear technique; 3) therefore linear technique, which developed in the last phase of Gupta-Vakataka period, shows a rejection of the classical norms of the earlier period (Chandra 1970).

Even if we accept the basic stand of Moti Chandra, we are still left without an explanation about the underlying social needs or values that might have encouraged this rejection, since he does not deal with this aspect. Apart from this, he also considers Ajanta and Bagh as reflecting the art tradition practised in centres like Pataliputra, Ujjayini, Vidisha and so forth. However, he does not give any evidence of the paintings executed in these centres, nor any references to the sources that talk about paintings in these centres, although a general assumption may be made on the basis of sculptural data that the Deccan may be following the Gupta idiom in painting as well.

Unlike Moti Chandra, Krishna Chaitanya in *Mural Tradition* has traced a parabolic evolution of painting at Ajanta and divides Ajanta painting into growth, maturity and fall, coinciding with Satavahanas, Gupta-Vakataka and post-Gupta periods (Chaitanya 1976). This is said to take place in both technique and style. He attributes significance to the Gupta idiom only in terms of its assimilation in Deccan, rather than it being a dictating factor on Deccan art. This is where the contradiction in Krishna Chaitanya's writing comes out. If his contention about the assimilative nature (not influential) is true, then it tends to conflict with the parabolic tracing of the evolution of art, which was supposed to have started with simplicity during Satavahanas, risen to a climax of maturity taking the urbane factor from the Guptas, and started a downslide with the early mediaeval. This obviously relates the mature phase with the Gupta-Vakataka period, thus making this period a 'causative' factor in the maturity of this art, and not just an 'assimilative' one. Since this urbanity is said to come from the Gupta idiom, then it makes this idiom a 'regulating' one and not just an 'assimilative' factor in Deccan art. Moreover, one has to ask the question, why this urbanity factor gained impetus only

during a certain period? A question not answered by Krishna Chaitanya, but explored by many other scholars, who regard this period as a stable one as a result of political unification; which, added to patronage and communication across the empire, facilitated the transmission of cultural ideas across a wide region. Later scholarship however, does not consider this period as politically unified as it is regarded by earlier scholars.

Evidence of painting has been found in other parts of South Asia as well but this has been largely overshadowed in scholarly writings by the 4th-6th century phases of Ajanta. Katherine Caldwell says in her review of W. G. Archer and Paranavitana's *Ceylon: Paintings from Temple, Shrine and Rock* that paintings of Ceylon have mostly been treated as provincial extensions of Indian paintings (Caldwell 1959). Benjamin Rowland's *Paintings of India, Central Asia and Ceylon* treats the Ceylonese painting as evidence of the expansion of the Indian tradition (Rowland 1938). In contrast to this, W. G. Archer and S. Paranavitana acknowledge the influence of the Indian subcontinent on Ceylonese painting but at the same time treat them as invaluable art in their own right, thus departing from the general tendency of treating all South and Central Asian art as extensions of Indian art (Caldwell 1959).

Geo-Cultural and Historical Perspectives

There has emerged a trend of moving away from the historiography detailed above and attempting to contextualise the study of art within its historical context. This shift is significant, since many scholars who have been studying art through the above paradigm, look at it in terms of 'how' it develops. On the other hand, the geo-cultural perspective takes the audience's gaze more towards the society that constructs, uses and assigns meanings to it and explores 'why' this art develops the way it does. In other words, it is a shift from analogy to causality. An example of this is Sheila Weiner's work on Ajanta (Weiner 1977). In this she tried to reassess the chronology of the cave temples and to locate the art and architecture of the site within the stylistic evolutionary graph of the specifically Buddhist art in the Indian region, especially sites like Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda and Hadda in Afghanistan. She also studied the patronage aspect of the site and asserted the interesting proposition that Ajanta's Mahayanist phase emerged despite the Hindu royal patronage of the Vakatakas, not because of it. Though insightful in its vision, Weiner's work made certain controversial assertions, because of which it was criticised by its reviewers. For example, Michael Meister points out that her stylistic descriptions are too short while discussing Krishna Valley's influence on Ajanta and she quickly proceeds to describe changing iconographic forms and to changing Buddhist concepts (Meister Oct-Dec 1978). Perhaps a more detailed discussion on changing iconography in relation to the changing Buddhist concepts would have made this discussion more comprehensive.

However, looking back at Weiner's approach which emerged in a time when stylistic studies were the norm, it does come across as an attempt to redefine Indian art of 4th-7th centuries from a historical perspective. Her work however, was critically reviewed by scholars, who found several of her arguments problematic. Joanna Williams reviewing her work rightfully points out the flaw in drawing the direction of stylistic transmission from Ajanta to Sarnath, which she says should be the other way round. She also disagrees with Weiner's one-to-one correlation between the evolution of Buddhism and the iconography at Ajanta, since as Williams says the interaction between religion and

art is a complex phenomenon and cannot be oversimplified in this manner (Williams March 1980). Doris Srinivasan expresses similar concerns about correlating Buddhism and art of Ajanta the way Weiner has done. Srinivasan shows in a scholarly manner the fluidity in the cultural expressions of various religions of South Asia, which borrow their idioms from each other at this early stage (Srinivasan 1981). Sheila Weiner's work and her reviews show that while she attempted clearly innovative approaches for studying Ajanta, these approaches needed to be further refined on order to appear convincingly academic.

Walter Spink laid a great stress on the political patronage and its influence on the different stages of the making of Ajanta caves (1992). In this process, he also attempted to completely revise the chronology of Ajanta paintings – placing them in a much smaller time-bracket than other scholars had done. His Ajanta chronology has led to a lot of debate in this field, with scholars divided over the chronology he suggested. Although Spink's approach is quite interesting, it leaves little room for the study of paintings themselves – which are visual narratives enfolded in history and society. Spink's method does not tell us what different interpretations of these visual narratives we may arrive at by distinguishing these varied patrons of Ajanta and what possible relationships or differences they may have with similar narratives in other places – in painting or in stone.

The Vakatakas who patronised the Ajanta were called the Vatsagulma branch and there was a collateral branch of this family ruling from Nandivardhana in the Vidarbha region. Because of the prominence of Ajanta, there have not been many significant writings on the art of the region ruled by the Nandivardhana Vakatakas. Hans Bakker's work on the Hindu art of this region is an important step in this direction, especially as it locates this art in its socio-religious and political context (Bakker 1997). As Robert Brown who has reviewed his book shows, Bakker also attempts a conceptual understanding of these images such as interpreting the materialistic, *yogi* and the *Brahmachari* forms of Shiva from the way the heads of an image are depicted (Brown 2001) even though his readers may differ with him in his interpretations. Hans Bakker's study raises some important issues such as the relation of this region with that of the Vatsagulma branch, the issues discussed by scholars about Ajanta and so on.

Apart from Ajanta in Western India, Bagh in Central India was another prominent Buddhist monastery having some fine specimens of art and architecture. It was first studied in the early decades of 20th century by the European scholars (Marshall et al 1927). In this study, this site was considered to be datable to the 6th-7th centuries CE. These scholars made a minute stylistic observation of the art and architecture of Bagh and attempted to place these works within the historical evolution of Buddhism in the subcontinent. For a long time, this work edited by John Marshall remained current for Bagh. In early 1990s, the Archaeological Survey of India excavated a hoard of copper-plate inscriptions at Bagh that threw new light on the geo-cultural, socio-political and religious history of the region in which this monastery is located. A close study of the epigraphs also has brought into fore the possibility that this monastery was in fact coeval with the 4th-5th centuries phase at Ajanta, thus revising John Marshall's dating of the monastery. Besides, the architectural plan of the monastery throws light on the rituals and the form of the organisation of the monastic community that stayed here. The theme of the murals in Cave 4 that was not identified till recently has also been identified

now (Verma 2007). A study of this kind could be made only by attempting to locate this monument in its socio-historical context in the light of new epigraphic findings in the region.

The ill-fated caves of Bamiyan, where the great Buddha images were destroyed by the Taliban in March 2001, also contained significant paintings. Scholars had studied the great Buddha images prior to their destruction as well as the paintings existing in their caves. In contrast to the writings on the sculpture and paintings of other sites in South Asia, researches on Bamiyan did not show an influence of the idea of the spiritual content of the Gupta art. Rather, these studies made a historically balanced analysis of Bamiyan and fortunately so, since it is no longer possible to study this site. One very important feature that emerges from these writings is that the paintings of Bamiyan showed three strands of influences – those in the niche of the 53 metre colossal Buddha image had a South Asian influence, while the paintings in the niche of the 35 metre colossal Buddha had Persian as well as Central Asian influences (Diez 1930). Besides, there was also an evidence of a Sasanid representation on a rock of the Mazdean Hvarnah or the splendour of the Avesta, a Magian attribute of the Persian rulers. This was studied by the French team of scholars led by M. Foucher, along with other images and paintings at Bamiyan, but Ernst Diez who reviewed their work said that they had not understood that this was the first archaeological finding of this concept that was discussed earlier, but no direct evidence had been found till this discovery at Bamiyan (Diez 1930). Diez also felt that the French archaeologists had got the chronology of the colossal Buddhas reversed – the larger one of 53 metres should have been placed earlier, contemporary to Kanishka and the smaller one of 35 metres should have been datable to 4th or 5th century. However, he agrees that the close study of the art of Bamiyan made by the French was valuable and threw significant light on the history, influences and the making of these works of art. Another extensive study of this site was carried out by a Kyoto University Archaeological Mission between 1970 and 1978. They aimed at making a general photogrammatic map of the whole area, attributing numbers to all the caves and documenting their murals. Their study attempted a minute charting out of the entire site and categorises different types of caves, images and paintings made at this vast site (Higuchi 1995).

The most comprehensive study of Bamiyan was made by Deborah Klimburg-Salter in her celebrated work *The Kingdom of Bamiyan*, in which she carefully traced the political, socio-cultural and religious interaction that Bamiyan had with South Asia as well as Central Asia and the nature of iconography and architecture that this interaction produced at the site (Klimburg-Salter 1989). Her work is – and perhaps will remain - the most authoritative work on Bamiyan, as Alexander Bell remarked in his work on the *Jataka* representations in China (Bell 2000). Incidentally, Bell's work was published a year before the Bamiyan Buddhas were destroyed by the Taliban in March 2001, thus his words proving prophetic. Though Alexander Bell's work is about the depictions of the *Jatakas* in China, particularly at Tun Huang, he traces the influences of this art form from South Asia to China, Central Asia and Gandhara (Bell 2000). In this matter, both Bell and Deborah Klimburg-Salter rightfully study the significance of the ancient communication network known as the Silk Route that encompassed these regions before proceeding towards the Mediterranean. Here, it needs to be stressed that this approach of tracing a cultural influence from South Asia to another region with historical evidences is different from the approach studied earlier, which traced this influence with the intention of establishing the superiority of one culture over another. Hence, scholars like Deborah Klimburg-Salter, Alexander

Bell, Ernst Diez and Takayasu Higuchi have moved away from the earlier paradigm to study cultural objects in their historical context.

This approach of studying cultural objects in their historical context rather than within the paradigm of a parabolic evolution of art has also been used by Omachanda Handa, Deborah Klimburg-Salter and Laxman S. Thakur in their respective works on the Tabo monastery in the Spiti region of Himachal in India. Situated at a high altitude in the Middle Himalayas close to Indo-Tibet border, Tabo – known as 'Ajanta of the Himalayas' because of its wall paintings - lies in the Spiti region which falls in the rainshadow area and hence, is an arid snow desert. Spiti River, a tributary of the Sutlej, flows through it but for most parts is inaccessible because of almost vertical gradient of the Himalayan peaks standing on its both sides and its waters are freezing cold. Travelling through Spiti, for miles one sees no sign of life — not even a blade of grass grows there. At great distances, there are seen only small patches of thorny shrubs. The topography that is at once bewitching and intimidating, is uninhabitable for most parts, except on some flat surfaces that exist on top of the mountains. These flat areas have tiny village settlements of Tibetan Buddhists – a village may often contain less than a dozen houses. Snow is their source of water and foraging is their means of sustenance. They store food underground for the long, harsh winters. On my personal visit to Tabo in October 2007, I found the journey from Shimla arduous and full of dangers even in today's circumstances. The hardships faced by travellers approaching this monastery from Tibet, Central Asia or India in pre-modern times are unfathomable for the modern people. Tabo lies on a flat surface at a great height. As one approaches the site, one comes across red grass on the slopes, while emerald green Spiti River flows below. The area around Tabo is cultivated with apple orchards today and poplar trees are grown there for firewood.

The influences of geographical forces on this monastery can be fully comprehended only when one makes this perilous journey to Tabo. Omachanda Handa has fully comprehended this and has justifiably used geo-cultural factors to study this site in his work, apart from situating this monastery within its historical context (Handa 1994). He has traced two routes that criss-cross Spiti along the courses of rivers that flow through it and shown that Tabo is situated within the network of these routes. One of them follows the courses of the Chandrabhaga, Spiti and Sutlej Rivers, while the other follows the courses of the Sutlej and Spiti rivers and goes up to the Indus River in Ladakh, via Rohtang La (La is Tibetan for a mountain Pass). Indeed, even today the roads to Tabo follow these river networks and these routes have also influenced the history of Spiti region as shown by Handa. While studying Tabo, he mentions that though it was established in 996 CE, there was Indian presence in Spiti region in 7th century, as Sena *Mahasamantas* are mentioned in the inscriptions. Ladakhi Buddhist dominance began in Spiti in 8th century when Chetsena was defeated by the Ladakhis on the Rohtang La. Thus, Handa makes the significant point that even though the monastery was established in the 10th century, the cultural idioms in Spiti were drawn from Tibetan, Central Asian as well as from the Indian sub-continent from much earlier times.

Handa's arguments are somewhat different from those of Deborah Klimburg-Salter, who does not mention the existence of the Sena *Mahasamantas* in pre-Buddhist Spiti and regards this monastery as following an Indo-Tibetan Mahayanism under Western Tibetan patronage (Klimburg-Salter 1997; 2005). She argues for the existence of local religious idioms in the pre-Buddhist Spiti that were incorporated into the Buddhism here and are reflected along with the Buddhist paintings at Tabo, such

as in the figures of the Protector Goddess (Klimburg-Salter 2005). She has also shown a later Kashmiri phase at the site, during which many of the cells were repainted. She has made an in-depth study of this site, studying its art in detail and placing it in the context of history, patronage and religious evolution of the site. As compared to these works, Laxman S. Thakur's work on Tabo takes into account the entire temple-complex and minutely studies the architecture, sculpture, painting, history, religion and ecology of the place (Thakur 2001). However, Geri H. Malandra who has reviewed his work remarks that his account of all these aspects is disjointed from each other (Malandra 2002). There is a need for a greater attempt to study these aspects in a holistic and integrated manner, showing the inter-linkages between them. This kind of approach leads to a greater understanding of the evolution of a monastery as a cultural site, as shown by Klimburg-Salter's work.

One of the most extensive studies on the art of 4th-7th centuries was done by Joanna Williams in her *Art of Gupta India* (Williams 1982). She places her work on the grid of time, space and society and considers the 'Gupta' art as not produced under the direct patronage of Gupta dynasty, but as representative of a style pervading beyond the Gupta rule in time and geographical spread. She traces the source of this style singularly to Mathura, which Gary Michael Tartakov who reviewed her work, reasonably found to be problematic (Tartakov December 1983). He rightly argues that 'Gupta art' was not a discreetly distinct phenomenon with impermeable borders, but a temporally and regionally focused phenomenon sharing features and blending in various ways with comparable work surrounding it. While Joanna Williams' work discusses many issues of the art she has studied in close detail, it's not very convincing to first define an art form by one's own yardstick – in this case as reflective of only Mathura idiom and then assign identification and style to all art works from this period by that yardstick. Besides, a lot of debate over this art-form has generated because of the appellation 'Gupta' to it and the attempt to define it in a certain way by each author. Perhaps a more comprehensive work can be done by removing the term 'Gupta' from the art form of 4th-7th centuries and recognising that while certain features may be similar over a wide geographical expanse of the subcontinent and may continue for several centuries, there may be many features that may differ from this group of common features across time and space.

Several decades ago, Frederick Asher had suggested a political allegory in the Varaha and the Trivikrama images from several sites, the Udayagiri Varaha being one of them. He argued in this essay that these images created a symbolic parallel between Vishnu and the Gupta rulers, who professed to be devotees of Vishnu (Asher 1983). This became a popular approach to study South Asian art in periods and regions other than that ruled by the Guptas. Prominent examples of this are the reading of political allegory in the Narasimha image at Badami, the descent of Ganga at Mahabalipuram for Pallavas, Gangadhara image at the Trichy Cave for Mahendravarman Pallava and in the Tripurantaka images at Tanjavur for Rajaraja Chola I (Hirsh 1987; Champakalakshmi 1996; Verma January-June 2006). Now, Udayagiri has come into prominence again with the recent work by Michael Willis called *The Archaeology of Hindu Ritual*. Located in Udayagiri, a royal centre of the Guptas, this is a multi-dimensional work that uses landscape archaeology and archaeo-astronomy, apart from the study of iconography and architecture. Willis relates the seasonal calendar and the astronomical knowledge available to the Guptas to show how they integrated it into political patronage and royal ceremonies such as the consecration. He too uses the idea of the symbolic parallel between the royal and the

divine images, thus extending this historiography in South Asian art further. In this work, Michael Willis has also moved away from the approach used in his earlier *Temples of the Gopakshetra*, which followed the method of Michael Miester's encyclopaedia closely, only rather than giving prominence to dynastic affiliations, he gave more prominence to the geo-cultural provenance while studying these temples (Willis 1997).

This overview of the historiography of South Asian art of 4th-7th centuries and beyond shows the various trajectories these writings have been taking for about a century or so. It is important to remember here that often these different trends have existed together – one does not necessarily follow the other in chronological sequence. Moreover, authors have often shifted and modified their approaches. In recent years, research has shifted to other regions and periods of South Asian art, thus bringing to light materials and their interpretations that were not available to readers earlier. For future research, it would be worthwhile to integrate the study of the evolution of the way an art object looks and what could be the underlying socio-religious practices for the making of this art with what it means to the society it creates and if these meanings change across a period of time. At the same time, it is important to remember that all of these approaches are equally valid and must be given equal prominence by any scholar of South Asian art, without a bias towards one or the other of them. This paper has been only a modest attempt to understand the ways in which scholarly writings take different trajectories.

Notes

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