

Depiction of A Spectacular Journey Intended to Attain Nirvana: A Study into the Portrayal of Great Departure on the Eastern Torana of Sanchi

Dr. O. P. Parameswaran

Associate Professor,

P. G. Govt. College for Girls, Chandigarh

Email: parameswaranop@gmail.com

Reference to this paper
should be made as follows:

Dr. O. P. Parameswaran

*Depiction of A
Spectacular Journey
Intended to Attain
Nirvana: A Study into the
Portrayal of Great.....*

Artistic Narration 2021,
Vol. XII, No. I,
Article No. 01 pp. 001-006

[https://anubooks.com/
artistic-narration-no-xii-no-
1-jan.-june-2021/](https://anubooks.com/artistic-narration-no-xii-no-1-jan.-june-2021/)

Abstract

The act of sacrificing the entire personal belongings and physical comforts to embrace the spiritual world as part of an attempt to attain nirvana should definitely be considered as an act of heroism and consequently, it becomes historic. The story of Siddharth for his heroic departure for spiritual salvation by leaving behind all the material possessions seems to have gained much admiration in Buddhism and appears repeatedly in various Buddhist centers including Sanchi. Being vehemently against all kinds of ideal worship, the Hinayana Buddhists display the presence of Buddha through various signs and symbols. The heroic act of sacrificing the palace, near and dear ones came to be known as the great departure of Siddhartha towards attaining spiritual salvation. The composition displays a warm send-off being given to Siddhartha with tears by the entire community of manhood living near the palace. The scene exhibits the supremacy of mind over the physicality. Even though the composition exhibits individual clarity of all the figures, it is also to be taken into consideration that there is a lack of breathing space noticeable in the composition as the entire space is filled with figures. The present paper is attempting to study the historical, aesthetic, and the spiritual aspects of the Great Departure depicted over the eastern Torana of the Sanchi Stupa.

Introduction

The art and architecture of Sanchi occupy a significant position not only in India but in the cultural history of human civilization. Being located in the state of Madhya Pradesh, the artistic monuments of Sanchi seem to have been surfaced through centuries. As in the case of any art forms, Indian art too had been developed through centuries. The artistic monuments at Sanchi developed probably from the 1st century to the 3rd Century A.D. under the Satavahana dynasty. The experiments in forms of artistic expression started at Bharhut and Bodhgaya seem to have reached their final form at Sanchi. The whole space on Torana of the great Stupa no1 and the single Torana of Stupa no 3 provides numerous sculptures which are believed to have taken place during the time of Satakarni I. It hardly provides any name of the artists but it provides an inscription stating that the southern gateway was gifted by Ananda as given on the top of the architrave. During the period of Satakarni I, Ananda was identified as the foreman of artisans. The chronological order of the toranas shows that the first Torana was carried out in the south and later on the north, east and west sides respectively. All these toranas are believed to have been made within a span of about 50 years... Like most of the earliest art of India, the artistic monuments produced at Sanchi are related to Buddhism. The production of art based on the Buddhist ideals deserved to be considered as one of the best examples of art ever attempted by the history of mankind. Indian art provides the best artworks related to Buddhism through ages. As the Buddhist art is based on the ideals of Buddhism, understanding the Buddhist philosophy would definitely enable the spectators to appreciate the Buddhist art on a deep level.

Any attempt to understand life would make people realize one thing that the form of life appears to be in a wavy kind of form as it is filled with lots of ups and downs in life. What is happiness in life and how can one achieve happiness in life is an age-old question probably mankind has started asking from the beginning itself. Attempting to find out the reason for human suffering probably seems to be a continuous process. One of the important aspects of Buddhism is that Buddha as a social reformer attempted to address the issue of human sufferings in life. He says that life is suffering. Life can be made more meaningful by the identification and removal of the root cause of suffering. The Buddhist philosophy provides a very conceptual framework that reveals four noble truths which are very pertinent in Buddhism.

The first is the truth of 'dukkha' that occurs due to suffering, anxiety, and dissatisfaction. Some of the reasons for human suffering can be due to the facts like the death, becoming old, physiological and psychological illness. Tension derives from the fact of attempting to keep the present as being static from the continuously changing life patterns. Suffering accumulates from the realization of the impermanent nature of things in the

world and the inability to reach one's own expectations in life. The second truth of the origin of 'dukkha' (is from ignorance). The third truth is the cessation of 'dukkha'. The fourth truth is the path leading to the cessation of dukkha. (wiki) Buddha says that the reason for 'dukkha' can be found out. 'Dukkha' occurs due to human desires and it is due to the ignorance of the true nature of things. He says that 'dukkha' can be stopped or removed. For the same cause, he preached the 'noble eightfold path, and these are also known as the path for liberation. The 'noble eightfold path has been visualized in the form of 'Dharma eight-fold' the 'eight-fold path is a combination of eight interconnected factors or conditions. Following strictly all the factors together of the 'eightfold path' would only result in the cessation of 'dukkha'. The factors are as follows

1. Right View (or Right Understanding), Viewing reality as it is, not just as it appears to be.
2. Right Intention (or Right Thought), Intention of renunciation, freedom, and harmlessness.
3. Right Speech, Speaking in a truthful and non-hurtful way.
4. Right Action, Acting in a non-harmful way.
5. Right Livelihood, A non-harmful livelihood.
6. Right Effort, Making an effort to improve.
7. Right Mindfulness, Awareness to see things for what they are with clear consciousness; being aware of the present reality within oneself, without any craving or aversion
8. Right Concentration. Correct meditation or concentration, explained as the first four jhānas. While attempting to analyze any work of art, besides the knowledge in terms of the analysis of style, date, and place of the art works, knowledge about what is represented over there and also what are the ideals of that philosophy is also equally important for a deeper level of understanding. Sanchi

The stupa appears to be in the form of a huge hemispherical burial mound and is supposed to carry sacred relics connected with the Buddha or other saintly persons. It is generally made up of stones and on the top of that, a harmonica and an umbrella would be kept. There is a surrounding railing around the stupa and four opening gates are placed at four sides of the stupa. There is also an upper pathway surrounded by railings on the stupa. The jambs, capitals, and crossbars of the toranas are covered with great carvings. The arrangement of sculptures shows that no empty space is left over the torments as one can feel a crowd on it. One can really feel a contrast that exists in treatment as far as torments and the stupa is concerned as the former are covered with sculptures and the form of stupa stands very simple and plain. At first glance, one would find the background of these

sculptures as dark. It happens due to the overcrowding, the shadow of figures covers each other and figures stand out clearly in bright sun.

The images that appear on the toranas are the visual manifestation of the jataka stories that basically talk about the various previous births of Buddha. These appear on the columns of the Torana that provide rectangular partitions and also appear on the upper crossbars. The artists could get long rectangular spaces over these toranans and they could make ambitious compositions based on continuous narration. The facility for long space was not available for Bharhut sculptors and they were given only a round medallion. If we make an analysis of these sculptures we would find that by stressing on minute details of the material world, these stories were told in a chill and joyful manner. These sculptures provide ideas regarding the simplicity of ancient life of people, military drill in palaces, cheered cities, etc.

The Sanchi figures have achieved a remarkable size of progress in relation to the Bharhut sculptures. They followed a method that provides a more natural way and exhibits a sense of harmony among the different parts of the human body. Any attempt in comparing Sanchi human figures with human figures of other places would naturally create an impression that the former appears to be short and strong and the contours have become more unstiffened as it provides a harmonious curve after the heads to the ankles. At some point in time, these sculptures show a lack of sensuousness of Bodh Gaya though these sculptures exhibit enough strength. When one turns towards the depiction of animals, the artists of Sanchi could exhibit a close observation of nature as well as create a feeling of sympathy towards the entire animals. Another reason for the inclusion of Sanchi sculptures in the category of extraordinary is that the artists had made excellent compositions by depicting various animals and flowers in great variety and with a feeling for themselves.

Among the various attempts to promote nonviolence and thereby establish peace in individuals as well as in society, the Buddhist ideals are relevant even today, in the contemporary life of the people. Buddha suggested the AshtangaMarga or the 8 fold path to be practiced by each individual to get rid of sufferings from life and also to fulfill the purpose of life. In order to speak of such realities, the Buddhist monks employed artists who in turn made visual interpretations of the noble thoughts of Buddhism. India provides the best examples of Buddhist art. This is an attempt to study the aesthetical aspects of the Buddhist art of India in the context of medium, historical periods, dynasties, and styles. The great departure from Sanchi stands separate from the many other sculptures produced in India as it really carries a great message and produces spiritual expression.

The Great Departure The front face of the eastern Torana of Sanchi provides a magnificent composition depicting the most heroic act of Siddhartha Gautama who decided to renounce all the material pleasures in search of attaining truth i.e. the highest form of

spirituality. The composition depicts the departure of Siddhartha Gautama from his place at Kapilavastu while a large crowd looks on. The native people give a warm send-off to their future spiritual leader. They are proceeding through the city and the ground and the balconies are filled with a huge crowd. Here the image of Gautama is not shown in human form as these were carried out at the early period i.e. at the Hinayana period. Being the earliest phase of Buddhism, the Buddha was not represented in human form. He was depicted in various signs and symbols as they never believed in idol worship. So here in this composition, we can see the horse Kantaka gradually departing from the palace. The horse Kantaka has been shown with an umbrella held by Gautama's faithful servant Chandaka. To suggest the earliest form of depiction as narration, the Kantaka was shown in five different places as it would suggest the movement of the horse. Even though the composition does not show the image of Buddha, it is implied that as if he is being seated on the Karnataka. Through this composition, one of the most important ideals of Buddhism is narrated here. It intends to talk about the real happiness in life that can be attained through spirituality not through acquiring material pleasures. An image of hermitage has been attempted on the right side of the composition where two footprints with the dharmachakra motif were shown. The image of footprints symbolically suggests the presence of the prince Gautama and Chandaka kneels before the footprints. It means the prince has got down from the horse Kantaka. In another part, Kantaka was shown returning while there was no image of an umbrella placed over Karnataka. It means the prince has left Kapilavastu for in search of acquiring spiritual salvation. The composition has been very magnificently carved with all its perfection. On the western part of the Torana, it was written that ivory carvers were employed by the Buddhists as artists to carry out these sculptures and these carvers were from a nearby town called Bhilsa.

Conclusion

Buddhism played an important role in Indian art. The numerous sculptures, paintings, and architecture made under the leadership of Buddhist scholars in India during many centuries stand as a testimony for these great cultural traditions. Buddha curtailed all the ritualism and idol worship during his time. The same principles continued for many centuries. The Hinayana period of Buddhist art provides examples of the worship of Buddha through various signs and symbols. Worship of Stupa emerged as one of the characteristics of the Hinayana period. It is this background that Sanchi Stupa is to be considered as an important example for the greatness of sculptural and architectural monuments in India. Among the four toranas, the front face of eastern Torana provides an example for illumination of Buddhist ideals as the renunciation of material pleasures is considered to be an ideal path in search of spiritual salvation. Here the great story of Buddha as his great departure from Kapilavastu has very beautifully been depicted in the form of relief. The treatment of Sanchi

figures shows that they have developed a lot in comparison with the Bharhut sculptures. There is a continuous narration of the subject on these torrents. As part of the great tradition of narration, the same subject appears in other parts of the composition. Kanthaka, the great horse of the Prince, was shown in about five areas. On the horseback, Buddha cannot be seen. Instead of that a big umbrella was shown over the horse as if it suggested the presence of Buddha. At one point in time, the horse returns without an umbrella suggesting that Buddha has already left Kapilavastu. On the right side of the composition, near a hermitage, two footprints are shown with an image of dharmachakra over it suggesting the presence of Buddha. The great departure of Gautama from Kapilavastu is to be considered as the most heroic act till then Buddha had attempted. The prince Gautama could have enjoyed the material pleasures in palace life. But he renounced everything to travel through spirituality and to achieve spiritual salvation. Leaving all and near and dear and all assistance and material pleasures available in court to proceed towards uncertainty to achieve spiritual salvation should be considered as the most heroic act.

References

1. Edith Tomory, A History of Fine Arts in India and the West, Orient Longman, 2002, ISBN 81 250 0702 4.
2. Glimpses of World Religions, Jaico Publishing House, Mumbai, 2001, ISBN 81-7224-156-9.
3. The Art And Architecture of the Indian Subcontinent, J.C. Harle, Yale University Press, Pelican History of Art, 1994, ISBN 0300062176.
4. Indian Art A Concise History, Roy C. Craven, Thames, and Hudson 1987, Great Britain. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddhism>
5. Joseph Campbell (Completed and Edited) Heinrich Zimmer, The Art of Indian Asia, Its Mythology and Transformation, 1st Volume, Published for Bollingen Foundation, Patheon Books, New York, 1960.
6. Calambur Sivaramamurti, The Art of India, India book house, Bombay, ISBN 0-8109-0630-9, 1977.
7. Vincent A. Smith, History of Fine arts in India & Ceylon, third edition revised by Karlkhandalawala, D.B. Tavaporevala sons & co. pvt.ltd. Bombay.
8. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sanchi>