

Role of Buddhist Art in Developing Humanistic Concern

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Abstract

A glance at the international scenario today exposes an alarming view where the world peace, fraternity and humanistic concern seems to be at stake, perhaps as never before. With the rapid developments during the last few decades specially - fast industrialization, expanding urbanization, intensive commercialization all over the world, man has tended to become some what mechanical and materialistic in his attitudes and behaviour. The changes seem to have virtually detached him from his roots - the essence of being human. This has led to the weakening of his sensitivity and intensity of his emotional responses like compassion and love towards the other members of the society. It will not be exaggeration of the facts to say that man has, more or less, become like a robot who is programmed with the sole attention focused on the physical targets of achieving the material aims and gains, irrespective of their implications being constructive or destructive. His concern for the genuine human welfare and happiness has become secondary. It is this sad state of today's world which is responsible for disturbing the socio-political equilibrium of the society. Perhaps we all will agree, that now it is high time when serious and concerted efforts need to be made to reestablish those age-old universal values of love, fraternity and compassion amongst the people and to foster concern for the humanity at large without any difference of caste or creed.

Keywords

Humanistic, concern, peace, fraternity, dharma, philosophy, visual medium, symbols, motifs, non-owknee, benevolence, chrity, jatakas.

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Among many possible ways to deal with the problem, I believe, dharma still is relevantly a potential force to help the humanity in dealing with the problem. I may make it clear that I am mentioning dharma in its wider prospective as distinct from the narrow sense of religion or faith - a very misconceived interpretation which restricts it to an individualized practice and belief. Dharma, here is interpreted in its original and wider connotation implying an ideal way-of-life based on universal principles and social perspectives. Human civilizations all over the world bear testimony to the vital role dharma has been playing ever since the ancient past, in providing spiritual strength and force of man whenever he was confronted with natural or man-made calamities, as well as in its vital function of making man more sensitive and responsible towards the problems and miseries of the fellow beings, or to say, that it helped the human beings in imbibing those qualities and principles in their real life which helped make him more humane and socially ideal and desirable. It is in this context that, I think, it is relevant to mention that Buddhism essentially and basically evolved around this philosophy and practice which in character and spirit was essentially in the line with the Vedic tradition.¹ It was inspired by the universal concepts and value-system encompassing not only the whole humanity but all beings - human and animal both, as well as nature.

Art has always sub-served the function of dharma in communication of its deep and mysterious meanings to the masses through translation of its mystic concept into visual vocabulary of symbols and motifs. Though, this phenomenon has not been uncommon in the other important religions of the world in the past, however, in Indian context, "It does not seem possible to completely separate Buddhism as religion and as an art from the main current of religion and art..."² Many surprising similarities between the Medieval Christian theological and mystic texts and the anionic Vedic Literature may lead one to think that they are almost literal translation of Sanskrit sentences...."³

Buddhism aroused great significance in India and abroad as it is not a religion only concerned with its own rituals or practices, prayers or study and recitals of its scriptures. On the contrary, Buddhism is a philosophy and a code of conduct encompassing the whole humanity and our attitudes towards it. It will be relevant to quote Mahatma Gandhi's view, "Gautam taught the world to treat even the lowest creatures equal to himself. He held the life of even the crawling things of earth to be as precious as his own. It is an arrogant assumption to say that human beings are lords and masters of the lower creation. On the contrary, being endowed with greater things in life, they are trustees of the lower animal kingdom. And the great sage lived that truth in his own life."⁴ Buddhist doctrine looked upon women of all

ages with reverence and dignity which also reflected the traditional Hindu concept. As per the Buddhist preachings an old women should be regarded as one's mother, a young one as one's sister and a very young girl as one's child. Rather the doctrine beseeched: Better fall into the fierce tiger's mouth, under the sharp knife of the executioner that dwell with a women and excite in yourself lustful thoughts."⁵

It is pertinent to point out that the Buddhist art has played a significant role in developing and fostering humanistic concerns amongst the people. Rather it served as a handmaid of Buddhism in the latter's endeavour to spread its message within as well as beyond the frontiers of India. In its attempts to make it popular among the masses the Jatakas and Avadanas⁶ were effectively employed by the Buddhist monk-scholars. Actually the latter invented the Jatakas and Avadanas to reach out the common man with faith in virtuous paths.⁷ Art has a great intrinsic quality of conveying many aspects of an event through Jatakas or Advadanas directly to the beholder at one strength without requiring a language in literal sense. Picture itself is a universal language and is easily comprehensible. The visual form (symbols and motifs) has greater and direct communicability. It "deeply stirs the heart... (and) ... has an even greater effect."⁸ It was for this great inherent quality of art, both the two-dimensional as well as the three-dimensional, that art was employed as an instrument of translating the message of Buddhism into a more effective and easily comprehensible visual medium of communication. This functionality of the Buddhist art is at the roots of the great Indian fresco tradition of Ajanta as well as the sculptural art in round and relief of Bharhut and Sanchi, on whose wings it rode to as far off regions as Central Asia, Tibet, Chinwa and South East Asia. The role model played by Buddhism and its depiction in the Buddhist art always carried a message of love, tolerance, benevolence, non-violence, truthfulness, charity, sacrifice and fellowship to the people of India and beyond.

Symbols played a considerably significant part in the manifestation of the Buddhist doctrine, particularly in its early phase (Hinyana School). The terminology and epithets used in advanced Buddhology in Pali Texts indicate that Buddha himself denied the representational status to himself by saying, "I am neither Deva, Gandhaba, Yaksha, nor Man" (Anguttara Nikaya, II, 38).⁹ Rather he wanted to be understood as 'the Principle, Dharma Logos, Words.¹⁰ The early Buddhist art, for example in the story-telling reliefs of Bharhut and Sanchi, symbols like the royal umbrella, foot prints (paduka), chaitya-vrksha or Bodhi-tree, Dhamma-Chakra, have been used to mark the presence of Buddha. this aniconic Buddhist art served its purpose of transmission of the message among the followers an the faithfulls. effectively. However, as substitute for reality the aniconic art was an exception which did not

suit the mentality of the Indian craftsmen. They stand in the way of the creation.¹¹ Yet in the process of transition of Buddhist art from the non-iconic to iconic or anthropomorphic expression, the symbols continued to survive in the form of attributes or vahanas of the divinities.

Whether aniconic or iconic, Buddhist art has always spread the fragrance of love, fraternity, benevolence and concern for humanity at large. In the contemporary Buddhist art we come across such examples where glances of monastic life can be visualized, since the latter was not just a way a monk should live but also because it was means in achieving the ultimate goal of life. Significance of Sangha in the humanistic approach of Buddhism is evident from the fact the Buddha preached to his followers to “stand by together” assist one another, and strengthen one another’s efforts,¹² to ensure that after taking the righteous path of right thought and conduct in one’s life, one might not be tempted to slip back into the old ways of worldly pleasure. Adherence to Sangha helps the follower to reach the ultimate goal - the Nirvana. Mahatma Gandhi aptly explained the term in his remark that, “So far as I understand the central fact of Buddha’s life, Nirvana is utter extinction of all that is base in us. Nirvana is not like the black dead peace of the grave but the living peace, the living happiness of a soul...”¹³

Charity is another humanistic principle underlying the Buddhists philosophy frequently advocated through the parables and their depiction in art forms. Buddha has compared the giver to an able warrior going to the battle, strong and wise in action.¹⁴ Various Jatakas glorifying charity, have been illustrated in the ancient Buddhist wall paintings and reliefs. ‘The Gift of Mango Grove by Amrapali’ (high relief from Gandhara School, 2-4 C.A.D.) illustrates this point.

There are many Jataka illustrating the sacrificial life of Buddha to signify the importance of the path to freedoms from worldly pains. The ‘Ruru Jataka’ and the ‘Mahakapi Jataka’ both carved in high relief, at Borobudur, Java (dtd. to the 8th C. A.D.) demonstrates Buddha’s concern and sacrifice for the well being of his fellow beings. Buddha was gravely grieved by the sufferings of mankind and devised the path of noble truth to get rid of the pain of suffering by hailing his disciples:

“Now this, O monks, is the noble truth of the way that lead to the cessation of pain, this is the noble Enlightened path...”¹⁵

The Shaddanta Jataka painted on the wall of cave 10 (C.200-300 A.D.) of Ajanta brings out this spirit strongly. Not only Buddha, born as elephant in previous birth, offers his tusks to be cut down on the behest of the queen out of malice (his wife in prior birth) but also forgives her. “May no one deceive another, or think ill of him in any way whatever, or in anger or ill-will, desire evil for another”¹⁶ is the

message conveyed loud and clear by the painting. There are a number of Jatakas which project animals as the heroes bestowed with ‘human qualities of generosity, liberality, tolerance compassion and wisdom’¹⁷ which indeed represent former Boddhisattvas. Nilgiri Jataka, Shadanta Jataka, Matripaksha Jataka, Hansa Jataka, Mahakapi Jataka, Mahisha Jataka etc. are few out of many such examples. The Jataka constitute a significant part of the former Ajanta fresco demonstrating their role in the dissemination of the Buddhist humanistic concerns amongst the mankind.

The great technological changes of the modern times have drastically changed the concept and practical applicability of the means of mass communication. The role of art, in the changed conditions, was also bound to change, only in form and technique as per the new requirements of a majorly commercialized society. Yet, quite interestingly, the tradition and traditional art have not lost ground. Buddhist art continued to maintain its traditional identity of style and the functional use in its strong hold of ‘the forbidden land’ (Tibet) and few other traditional pockets like Sikkim, Bhutan Ladakh etc. With the Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1959 under the anti-religious and regime and the persecution of the Lamas and the Laity (the followers of Dalai Lama) that followed, the latter with hordes of his followers fled to India and permanently took shelter here. With their arrival a number of Tibetan monasteries, temples, libraries and other institutions came to be established at various places, particularly in the Himalayan region of India. This is evident from the fact that as against a total of 20 monasteries at Lahul, Spiti and Kinnaur in Himachal Pradesh since 1850, their number rose to 91 in the recent time beside many others which came up at Dharamshala, Mandi, Shimla and Sirmour.¹⁸ At most of these centres we can still witness the use of traditional wall paintings and thankas depicting the Buddha’s life as well as the Jatakas and Avadanas as visual aids for the inmates (Lama-scholars) and the visitors to better understand the humanistic teachings of Buddhism supported by the Buddhist monastic art “The role of monasticism in inculcating the humanistic values of charity and compassion for all the living creatures... has been very important.”¹⁹

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2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
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5. Bandhopadhyay, Pranav. (1988). *The Voice of Buddha - The Eternal Truth* (Punthi Pustak, Calcutta): p. **47**.
6. Avadanas are the tales pertaining to the noble deeds either of the Buddha or any of his disciples. Anecdotes of the Buddhist literature, they consisted more of anecdotes, stories, parables etc. than actual doctrines of Buddhism - N. Dutt, *Aspect of Mahayana Buddhism and its Relation to Hinayana Buddhism*, pp. **10.11**.
To make them appear like real and more interesting the concept of Bodhisattva (previous lives of the Buddha) was invented and these tales were linked to him in this form. Shamistha Sharma, *Buddhist Avadanas* (Eastern Book Linkens, Delhi, 1985): p. **7**.
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