

Glimpses Of Ashokas Period Through Culture

Dr. Arati B. Nadgouda

Dept. of History, Devchand college, Arjunnagar.

Introduction:

Ashokas reign was marked a new epoch in cultural history of India. He gave a new tone to Indian life- a tone that persists still today. The world owes a huge debt to one of the Mauryan kings, Ashoka. He not only gave to the world the lesson of religious toleration but placed before the world the model of an ideal king. His contribution to Indian culture has been unique. The Mauryan stupas, pillars, edicts etc gave to the country a visible unity if culture. In brief, his rule witnessed a growth of art and culture which entitled India to rank among the greatest countries of the time.

Development of the art of writing

The conditions under the Mauryas were very favourable to the development of art and literature.

Along with Upagupta and others, Emperor Asoka was himself a most celebrated author. He wrote his autobiography in his edicts on the white quartz and granite rocks in distant provinces and monoliths of sandstone along the well-known tracks in the heart of his empire. These inscriptions the earliest records in India of non-pictographic writing are not in Sanskrit. They are in three distinct local dialects. i) Prakrit or Aryan speech of the north-west, as in the edicts at Mansehra and Shahbazgarhi . ii) There is a Prakrit of the east, found in eastern inscriptions of Ashok and elsewhere, which was the language of the Asoka's court at Patliputra. iii) The Rock edicts of Girnar in the west represent a slightly modified form of Midland dialect, though even in that part of country the eastern official language was used in inscriptions.

Different Prakrits, that of Magadha being the most usual. For centuries after Asoka's death, official decrees and documents were written in that dialect only. Asoka used two characters in the inscriptions namely Kharoshthi and Brahmi. It must be remembered that in spite of the use of these Prakrits, Sanskrit remained the language of culture.

Although there is no evidence in Indian literature to show that the art of writing existed in India earlier than the 4th century B.C. there is still evidence to prove that the art of writing at that time was no recent innovation in India. During Asoka's times writing must have been in common use in public business in law courts, in book-keeping and in the secretariat. Moreover, the elaboration of the full Brahmi alphabet of forty six letters that was in use in Asoka's time, must have taken considerable time to evolve. It is also difficult to imagine that Chandragupta's vast bureaucracy could have carried on its daily administration without written records. The Brahmi alphabets may have been influenced by Semitic symbols it is also possible that the letters originated from some older Indian script possibly from the still undeciphered Mohenjo – Daro script. No definite connection however has been established between the two.

The Kharosthi script written from right to left was probably a variant of Aramaic Script used by Persian government in the 5th century. Kharosthi script however neither is nor found in India later than the 5th century A.D. The Brahmi from which all later Indian scripts

and alphabets are derived was also first written in the reverse fashion. But later it came to be written from left to right and that came to be accepted as the common practices in respect of all other scripts.

The earliest known writing materials were birch barks and palm leaves, ink and reed pens.

Architecture

In art and architecture, the Mauryan age constituted a landmark.

There is evidence for believing that buildings of exceptional magnificence were constructed under Chandragupta. Splendid architecture necessarily involves the successful cultivation of sculpture, painting and other decorative arts. We have the Greek testimony that the palace of Chandragupta surpassed in splendour the royal abodes in Persia. But the entire construction has vanished. There is little reason to expect that excavations at Taxila and Pataliputra begun in 1913 will reveal any work of art of the time of early Mauryan emperors. The reason is that great edifices built by Asoka's predecessors were constructed mainly of perishable wood.

During the time of Chandragupta and Bindusara brick and stone seem to have been used chiefly for foundations and plinths, but not for super-structures. Similarly all decorative arts were executed on materials equally perishable. The general use of decoration dates from the reign of Asoka. It cannot however be asserted that the art of building in stone was absolutely unknown in India before Asoka. Addition to our knowledge may disprove the above statement and may throw much light on the subject. But so far our present knowledge goes, "that definite history of Indian art still begins with Asoka".

Sculpture

No building of Asokan age is standing unless some of the stupas near Bhilsa were built by him. But an early stupa, being merely a domical mound of masonry, does not offer much scope for architectural design. Asoka erected a number of stupas to enshrine the relics of Buddha and Buddhist saints. Among them the most famous is the Great Stupa at Sanchi near the ancient city of Vidisa or Bhilsa in Bhopal state. But we can judge Asokan art better from sculpture rather than from architecture.

The sculpture of Asoka's age is noble. Its evolution is however hidden from us for the reason stated already, namely the use of perishable materials for constructional purposes. But there are indications that the artist in stone closely followed previous patterns in wood and ivory. The Asokan art though tinged by Persian and Hellenistic influences is mainly Indian both in its spirit and execution. The famous Saranath temple is a grand example of this. The design the pose and style of the lions and the bas-relief of the guardian animals are purely Indian. Sir John Marshall speaks with profound admiration of "the masterful strength of the crowning lions, with their swelling veins, and tense muscular development" and declared them to be the "masterpieces in point of both style and technique- the finest carvings, indeed, that India has yet ancient world". The same writer comments elsewhere on "the extraordinary precision and accuracy which characterizes all Maurya works and which has never, we venture to say, been surpassed even by the finest workmanship on Athenian buildings". The Chinese pilgrim Fa Hian was awestruck when he gazed on the ruins of Asoka's vast palace with the mighty walls and gates decorated with delicate carving and intricate sculpture and declared them to be the work of no mortal hands".

The skill of the stone-cutting during that age could not be surpassed. The monolithic columns of the fine-grained sandstones, some of which exceed forty feet in height are “marvels of technical execution”. The art of polishing hardstone was carried to such perfection that it is said to have become “ a lost art and beyond modern powers”. The side rocks of the Barabar caves are so burnished that they appear like glass mirrors! Several of the polished stone pieces are so exquisite that observers have mistaken them to be metallic. The stone works of Asoka’s times are equally well finished in all other respects. Most of the inscriptions are incised with extreme accuracy in beautiful cut letters.

The engineering ability displayed in handling and transport of huge monolithic columns conveyed over immense distances is astonishing. Authorities agree that the command of the Maurya monarchs over luxuries of all kind and skilled craftsmanship in all the manual arts “was not inferior to that enjoyed by the Mogul emperors eighteen centuries later”.

Education

Asoka’s decision to publish his views on Buddhist doctrines and the moral code for “all sorts and conditions of men” in documents composed in vernacular dialects and inscribed in two distinct scripts implies a comparatively wide diffusion of education in his empire. The sites of all the inscriptions were chosen of people either passed or congregated for one reason or the other. The heavy cost of publication in such an enduring form would have been a waste if people could not read the edicts, Probably the numerous Buddhist monasteries served the purpose of schools as they do now in Burma and thus helped the wider diffusion of learning.

Literature

The style of Asoka’s inscription is forceful and dignified. There is evidence to show that many of the writings were the compositions of the Emperor himself.

The chronology of ancient Indian literature is extremely ill-defined. It is difficult to name any other literary work dating from the Mauryan age. Some critics believe that Kathavatthu, an important Buddhist treatise in Pali was composed during Asoka’s reign. But it is almost certain that the Mauryan age during which magnificent courts were maintained and where every form of art flourished cannot be unadorned by literary works of some eminent authors. It is definite that in the 4th century B.C. Indian literature could look back on its traditions ranging over many generations. In that case its history could not be suddenly interrupted in the 3rd century B.C. when “the Mauryan empire had attained its widest extent and was in close touch with civilizations of Western Asia and Northern Africa”.

Conclusion:

It seems that Asoka’s empire was divided after his death between his two grandsons Dasaratha and Samparati, the two succeeding to the eastern and western provinces of the empire respectively. But nothing more is known about them. Brihadratha was the last king of the Mauryan dynasty. He was slain about the year 185 B.C. by his commander -in- chief, Pushyamitra Sunga and there ends the history of the Maurya dynasty.

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