

## INDIAN ART PRACTICES AND ŚILPA ŚĀSTRAS: A WAY TO SUSTAINABLE MATERIAL CULTURE

\* *Snehal Tambulwadikar-Khedkar*

\* *PhD Scholar, Department of Drawing and Painting, S.N.D.T. Women's University, Pune*

### Abstract:

Indian temples are embodiments of the Indian psyche. These masterpieces were put together by guilds of skilled craftsmen. The art of their creation was sustained for over a thousand years by oral traditions passed on from one generation to another, documented and canonised by the Śilpa Śāstras. This paper attempts to understand Śilpa Śāstras in a new light, recontextualizing the material culture and artists guilds to understand how they have identified and inherited the idea of sustainability.

**Key words:** Śilpa Śāstras, Indian temples, sustainability, material culture, Indian texts

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### Introduction:

The Indian art creations, architecture, sculpture and painting traditionally have used material available in vicinity, have exploited styles coming from immediate observations by artisans living in close geographic areas. Indian art, temples carved in stone, put together with interlocking systems, painted in organic colours, are embodiments of the Indian psyche. They reflect our indigenous philosophy transcending boundaries of social, economy and religion.

The art of their creation was sustained for over a thousand years by oral traditions passed on from one generation to another, documented and canonised by the Śilpa Śāstras. There also remains to be a complexity as the texts seem to have been written from scholars of language in their own time, and thus could be observational writings at large. It would mean that most practices and material cultures in the Indian subcontinent have been somewhat lost in time being oral narratives and passed on in specific families or communities.

Today as we recontextualise and revive our heritage, the knowledge systems are being understood and redefined. The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) is a methodical transmission of knowledge from one generation to the next. The practice of art creations, especially temple building, was a well-structured system of knowledge transfer documented in Śilpa Śāstras, passed on from generations. It was never merely tradition, as we see patrons and artists striving for evolution of style, having ambition to become grander, more complex in design, aspiring to generate aesthetic experiences and generate conscious connoisseurship. (Bhojadeva, 1924, #) If these Śilpa Śāstras are recontextualised as Indian Knowledge systems of sustainability and creation, the Indian material culture towards an ecological living can make a difference.

### Methodology:

This is historic research which will be conducted based on textual resources and comparing their findings with physical art creations. The research methodology used is grounded theory, based on comparative research of available source material.

Resources used for this research:

- *Nāṭyaśāstra* by Bharata, 1st century BCE - 1st century CE
- *Chitrāsūtra* of the *Vishṇudharmottara Purāna*, 4th century CE -6th century CE
- *Chītralakṣhaṇā*, 9th century CE - 10th century CE
- *Samarāṅgaṇasūtradhāra* by *Bhojaraja Deva*, 11th century CE
- *Mānasolhāsa/ Abhilashitārthachintāmaṇi* by *Someswara*, 12th century CE
- *Śilparatna* by *Sri Kumara*, 16th century CE
- *Itihāsa (Rāmāyana* by *Maharshi Valmiki*, *Mahābhārata* by *Veda Vyāsa*)

### Analysis:

The above-mentioned texts are from different time periods, written in Sanskrit. For the case studies here, the scope of the texts is limited to Sanskrit language canonical texts only. We can thus assume that a fair amount of art practice must have gone through time till it was critically observed in the texts. Also, the authors of these texts are not essentially practising artists or craftsmen, thus the writings are said to be observational. It is significant to identify who the *śilpa śāstras* were written for, it might have been for the guild master of the artists' group, certainly for the patrons to understand the nuances of artistic patronage and probably for art enthusiasts to have a more informed *rasika* experience of the artworks. The *Chitrāsūtra* was less a manual for practising painters than a guidebook for the public. Sri Kumara, the author of much later text, the *Śilparatna* said, 'I describe the methods of painting for the benefit of the ignorant'. *Chitrāsūtra* does much more than that. (Sivaramamurti, 1978, xiv) Rajasekhara (880 - 920 CE) mentions in his *Kāvyaṃīmāmsa* how kings themselves learned and art-minded, could foster art and literature by holding assemblies of those proficient in these adjudging and rewarding them, *rājā kaviḥ kavisamājam vidadhīta, rājani kavau lokaḥ kavis syāt, Kāvyaṃīmāmsa* 1, 10. Bhoja of Dhara (c.1010 - 1055 CE) is noted for his great contribution towards art, engineering, medical science, philosophy, literature and so forth. Bhojasāgara, the huge irrigation lake, was his creation. His *Samarāṅgaṇasūtradhāra* has discussions on art just like the *Mānasolhāsa* by Somesvara Deva (c. 1042 - 1068 CE), the Western Chalukya king. The *Śilpa Śāstras* can be understood thus in context of the art of the period when respective text was written or art preceding it.

The early structures available to us are stupas built in stone, terracotta and rock cut monuments mostly adhering to the Buddhist theosophy, patronised by various patrons. We see remarkable resemblance to wooden and clay architecture which must have existed for people before the idea of permanent monuments became popular. The power structure was decentralised which led to eclectic patronage and could be a reason for local craftsmanship and material culture evolution. For our case, let us take the Ajanta Group of Caves in the Sahyadri range of mountains, currently located in Maharashtra state of central India.



### 1. Ajanta Group of Caves from viewing point

The activity at this site must have been on for about two hundred to two fifty years from 2nd century CE to mid-5th century CE. The stone here is flood basalt and granite rock of a cliff, formed by successive volcanic eruptions at the end of the Cretaceous geological period. The craftsmen seem to have experimented with stone till they identified its characteristics and achieved the best possible art from it. One of the earliest available texts referred here, the *Chitrasūtra*, must have been compiled during the evolution of these structures.

The Ellora group of caves about 100 km from Ajanta are part of the Sahyadri ranges of Deccan and have been built in the same stone. The artists' guilds seem to have understood the material now, thus even after the shift in patronage, and the change from Buddhist to Brahmanical, we see the continuation of artistic fervour of Ajanta architecture and sculpture at Ellora too.



4. Dwarapala, Ajanta, Cave no.16



5. Dwarapala, Ellora, Cave no. 15

The aesthetics, classical forms and the material culture can be seen evolving together which has a profound impact on art and architecture of the years later. Even when creating architecture, the whole structure was assumed as one whole. The plan makes the site of the building in his image which is his form. The plan of the building is in the likeness of the *Puruṣa*, or of the totality of manifestation. (Kramrisch, 1976, 21)

Continuation of the extant tradition is usually a convenient option as the local guild/s could be continued with new definitions and intentions of spaces. It might have been the same in the case of architect guilds of the early Brahmanical caves forced to alter the space definitions in accordance to new liturgical and ritual needs. Along with the liturgical demands the guilds had the responsibility of defining political rhetoric of the new emerging power whether it was Vishnukundind or Eastern Chalukyans. (Kannal & Poduval, 2005, 53)



10.

11.

12.

13.

10. Buddha, Ajanta, Cave no. 29

11. Naga King, Ajanta, Cave no. 16

12. Shiva, Ellora, Cave no. 21

13. Yaksha, Ellora, Cave no. 33-34

One can see the similarities and subtle differences in the Buddhist, Jaina and Brahmanical sculptures at the Ajanta and Ellora which are in geographical vicinity and probably had continuation of style. It is important to understand how the *Śilpa Śāstras* might have enhanced the connoisseurship and patronage that led to use of same or similar guilds from vicinity for making these architectures and sculptures. As the texts refer to details of iconography and emotions through *rasa*, the images are manifestations of the idea and thus could have similarities and stylistic overlaps. There of course is the undeniable impact of having common patrons pan religion in some sites.

*Śilpa Śāstras* have spoken in detail about the architect and the architecture. From readings of texts like *Samarāṅgaṇasūtradhāra*, *Durgavidhāna*, *Śilparatna* to name a few, we observe that a lot of emphasis has been given on understating the terrain of the space the temple is to be built on. Whether an Indian temple is built of wood, brick or stone, the work is done with precision. Bricks and stone are carefully laid and joined (*suyuktyā*; *Vishṇudharmottara*, III, ch. XCI, 12). The stones are frequently kept in position without any cementing material,

iron clamps are used for wooden joints, if need be and where masonry is dry the stone blocks are held together with iron dowels, *Sudhāsīlā*, plaster, and *Vajralepa*, a glue cement and coating, were applied; there is no lack of prescriptions how to prepare them. *Vajralepa* is a hardened glue mixed with other substances such as conch shell powder or white earth (caolin). *Vajralepa*, which means 'diamond plaster', is so called because it is especially durable and firm; it is recommended for these qualities in *Śilparatna* (XIV, 58-75). (Kramrisch, 1976, 121)

It is interesting to note that the principles and aesthetics of building can be applied to any material used for art creation, thus binding the artists together in a form of classicism yet having liberty to develop their own idiom. We find thus different idioms developed across various geographical areas of the Indian sub-continent, and material has been instrumental in deciding the stylistic details, scales and proportions. This has led to a sustainable use of resources. Observe a few examples.



14. Bhutanatha Temple, Badami, Karnataka, 7th cent. CE

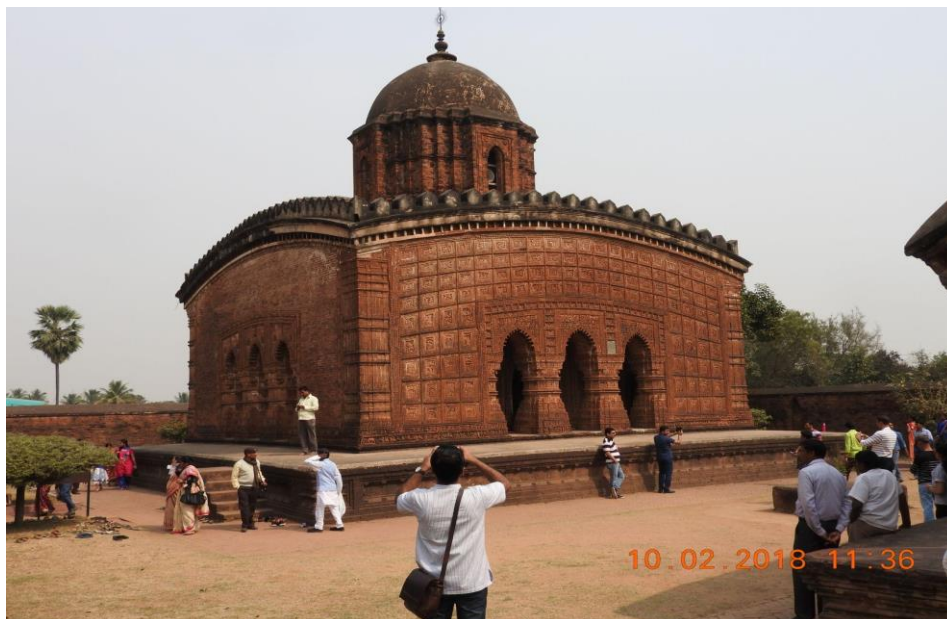
The temple (fig.14) is built in between mountains without quarrying them, on the bank of the lake. Built in sandstone, which is locally available as seen in the rocky mountains around. The temple at Modhera (fig.15) too is built in sandstone, which is found in Gujarat area and has possibilities of detailed carving which can be seen in the structure.



15. Sun Temple, Modhera, Gujarat, 11th cent. CE



16. Achyutaraya Temple, Vijayanagara, Hampi, Karnataka, 15th-16th cent. CE



17. Krishna Temple, Bishnupur, West Bengal, 17th cent. CE

The Achyutaraya temple (fig.16) at Hampi is built in locally available closepet granite. Hard to carve details in, the artisans adapted to the available material and increased the scale of the temple to incorporate the principles of structure making. The structure can be seen made in boulders while the part where details are required on *Gopurams*, brick cladding is covered with clay and sculptural details were sculpted in stucco, which are now lost in time. The Bishnupur Krishna temple (fig.17) on the other hand is built in terracotta tiles and base in hard rock cut in neat boulders. The alluvial delta region of river Ganga has a lot of good clay but not much rock, which led to them using terracotta baked tiles for temple building.



18. Krishna Temple, Bishnupur, 17th cent. CE

19. Jaina Temple, Ranakpur, 15th cent. CE

We can see the application of this aesthetics in the structures built across India in different time periods in various materials available in the respective regions. Looking at the details that artists have achieved in two different materials, terracotta, and marble, one can see that they have common elements of understating of rhythm and balance, ornamentation and attention to detail, symmetry.

The *Chitrasūtra* describes many processes, materials, and certain fundamentals of art creation for artists which have led to awareness about nature and material. Organic proportions that can be taken at individual level instead of a centralised measuring system with singular values. Its situation in nature, as seen and felt by the artist, is to be evoked animatedly and succinctly (Sivaramamurti, 1978, x).

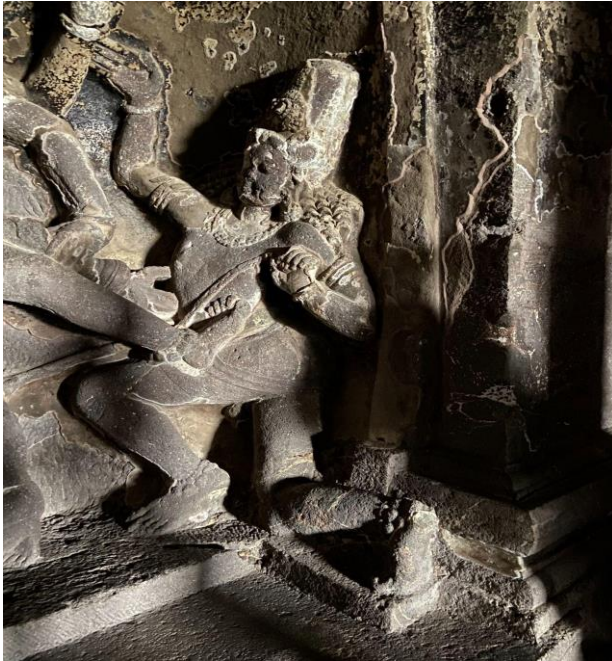
Comparing these two sculptures of Shiva might give us insight into the above references of *Chitrasūtra*. The first (fig.20) is the story of Shiva coming out of his linga and attacking Yama who has come to take Markendeya (the young boy sitting hands folded). This is a large sculpture around nine feet tall and deep in the niche. The stone is basalt, hard which must have led the artist/s to create larger sculptures to achieve details. The second (fig.21) is Shiva skinning the elephant demon alive with his hands, while dancing. It is carved in schist soapstone, quite soft to carve thus the artist/s have achieved great details.



20. Lingodbhava Shiva, Ellora, Cave 15, 8th cent. CE



21. Gajasura Anta, Halebidu, 10th cent. CE



22. Detail, Lingodbhava Shiva



23. Detail, Gajasura Anta

### Conclusion:

The paper has tried to quote *Śilpa Śāstras* to understand their application in the art creations. One can deduce some features which are found in texts and have been practised for many centuries. The texts can be seen encouraging individuality, artistic genius, use of local artisans, as also imbibing immediate surroundings to make the artistic creations more pleasurable. The *Śilpa Śāstras* have encouraged and probably imbibed sustainable creations for generations. Understanding and applying the ideas prescribed has led to sustainable material usage, impetus to the local economy. Today when we relook at Indian Knowledge systems, it would be absolutely relevant to read and recontextualise the *Śilpa Śāstras* which are lost in time and are now merely texts which were once a practical way of creation. Understanding their principles might lead us to better understanding of our own environment, help us become *rasika* and lead to a sustainable future.

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