



VEGETAL MOTIFS IN ANCIENT INDIAN IMAGERY- WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE FROM HARAPPA TO SANCHI

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Abstract

Nature always attracted all of us. Artists and poets being especially sensitized and absorbed by it have created beautiful forms of designs inspired by nature since the antiquity. In this research, I have tried to find out the origin of vegetal motifs. What had been the situations which triggered early artists to 'recreate' natural forms in various mediums, forms, and techniques? Since this is an abundant area to be taken for research, I tried to focus upon art practices within the Indian subcontinent only; right from Harappan culture which is the oldest urban civilization of the world to the age of Vedas; from the rise of Buddhism and Jainism to the mighty Mauryans, Satvahanas to the great Stupa of Sanchi. This research proves that vegetal motifs developed from simple organic forms to stylized motifs in the early phase of Indian art. May be this analytical research prepares a prolific ground for further researches that can be undertaken consecutively.

Keywords- *Nature, vegetal motifs, rosette, aniconic, stylization.*



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Introduction

The word *nature* originates from the Latin word *Natura*, that means "essential qualities, or inherent character". Actually, *Natura* is a Latin transformation of Greek word *Physis* which basically associated to the fundamental individualities¹ that plant; animals, and other elements of the physical world develop on their own consensus or they are bound to do that by 'nature'- their

distinctive character. Thus nature is the physical phenomena, which is one of the several expansions of the supreme unique conception.

Nature is a phenomenon of physical world which may be named as 'Life' itself. We, humans have always been significantly captivated by nature; examples can be observed throughout history. Its representations in various forms together have been designing evidences of our existence.

Since the beginning of the civilization, living traditions and cerebral thirst were fulfilled by humans by depicting their experiences/feelings/fears/attractions in the form of visual representation on cave walls and relief structures. Nomadic people were utterly bounded by natural vegetation, thus, it was obvious for them to represent nature in numerous forms. Along with the quest for communication, the perpetual desire to beautify themselves and the environment, played vital role in depiction of vegetal splendor because this was the only inspiration available to the early artists.

Methodology-

This is an analytical paper with fundamental research that takes references only of the findings of earlier as well as contemporary radical researches to analyse and support the Hypotheses and will conclude with a summation of findings with a suggested framework for further study on the untouched prospects of the issue.

Two methods are used in this research-

Analytical and Descriptive

The discussion is divided into following categories-

- Beauty in nature and its representation in art
- Representation of Nature in Indian art
- Representation of nature in Harappa cultural
- The Dark ages?
- Mauryan Art
- Botanical Motifs on Punch marked coins
- Stylization of botanical forms at Sanchi
- Conclusion

In order to support the research, some of the images are drawn, some self- clicked photographs and some are retrieved from various sources which are analyzed as per their formal and content beauty, symbolism, metaphorical aspects and stylization.

Beauty in nature and its representation in art-

Aesthetics is the branch of philosophy, which studies beauty or nature. It is said that love of beauty is taste but the creation of beauty is art. Infact, nature is illustrated and celebrated by so much in art that it has become the synonym of each other and thus nature and beauty is associated evidently. Reasons and elements of this association are studied by Aesthetics. There are certain fundamental features about nature, beauty and aesthetics, to which most of the scholars are agreed upon. Nature in its enormous forms has remained the most important theme or supporting element for creation of art throughout world history. Chinese painting is the example of representation of nature in its pure (as it is) form, while Indian art is evidently significant to represent nature in personified forms and the greatest supportive as well as empathetic element towards all human activities and moods.

Whereas Plato and Aristotle declared "Art as the imitation of nature." at the same time they accepted that it is not only mimesis (Greek – imitation) but it is proved that the perfect mathematical patterns are existed in nature, as we see in different leaves and flowers, for example the complete spherical flower of Kadamba tree, the pentagon of Christmas tree which is a repetition of triangle individually, Snowflakes defines hexagons, Honey comb is perfect hexagon and Lotus or Marigold are examples of *n-gon* ($n > 3$ or may be infinity), while trees are cylindrical in shape which may be an inspiration for the shafts of pillars in Greek, Indian, Mesopotamian and Egyptian architecture.

As David Rothenburg writes in his book-Survival of the Beautiful: Art, Science and Evolution, "The beautiful is the root of science and the goal of art, the highest possibility that humanity can ever hope to see".² Unification of science and art always produces great results. Hence, we see that nature with all its mathematical qualities; as it is, and in the stylized forms, has been a dominant element to be represented in different art practices. Artists have designated the mathematical attributes of nature for functionality with aesthetic, metaphoric and philosophical aspects for creation of beauty.

Representation of Nature in Indian art-

Indian intellect and creativity have always been encircled towards nature. The Himalayas and other mountains, rivers- Ganga, Saraswati and many more, plants like Tulsi and trees such as

Pipal and Banyan are worshiped as abodes of deities and deities themselves. Tree worship was performed at the time of Harappa and still continues with all its glory and significance in some parts of the country, at least in rural India.

According to the sacred Indian text, Lord Brahma- the creator deity in the Trimurti of Hindu Philosophy originates from the sanctified 'Lotus' which arose from the naval of Lord Vishnu, who's 'Lotus' feet are also the abode of holy river Ganga. In the Gita, Lord Krishna embodied himself with Pipal tree and says 'Ashwatthah sarv vrikshanam'³

Trees are worshipped since the ancient times as they have consciousness. They are the natural shelter for the followers of 'Sat, Chit and Ananda'. The Banyan tree became evident of enlightenment of Buddha; similarly under the branches of sala tree, the Mahaveera renounced the world. Not only trees, all natural objects received their fabulous personified glories in Indian intellect and therefore expressed with great affection and veneration in Indian arts.

I researched various phases of Indian art starting with Harappa and observe how vegetal motifs gradually developed through the ages and took stylized forms in their progression.

Representation of nature in Harappan cultural-

Decorative designs on Harappan earthenware and later Chalcolithic culture is found from many sites in Rajasthan and Gujarat which are the evidences of matured tastes of Harappan people. These motifs consist of various natural forms converted into stylized floral and vegetal motifs, geometric and stylized patterns, human figures and much more. As stated by Preeti Panjwani and Bratati Sen in their research paper-

"The paintings demonstrate a remarkable blend of geometrical as well as natural motifs, rendering natural harmony to the subject."⁴

According to the recent discoveries, and excavations it has been proved that the earliest pottery at Harappa (Period 1 A) are completely hand-built shapes with a range of decoration from plain to polychrome (painted pottery). Later on potter's wheel was evolved and used that resulted in new symmetrical forms.⁵

1. In 1993, a decorated dish of a pedestaled vessel from Harappa was found. Brown surface is embellished with black and red. The decoration is divided into sections. Multiple motifs are created on the dish with repeated patterns which do not leave empty space. It was found in the room from a house at recently excavated Mound ET. (Ancient Cities, Mr. J.M. Kenoyer, p. 324)



Image 1, Painted dish from Harappa ¹

2. Pipal tree Tablet- Discovered in 1995, a beautiful clay tablet. As stated by Mr. J.M.Kenoyer “Growing from a low platform, this sinuous tree with short leaves may have been held sacred like the Pipal tree.” ⁶



Image 2, Pipal Tree Tablet, self-drawn, ²

3. Excavated from Chanhudaro in 1935-36 guided by Ernest MacKay, one of the finest vessels was found. A red strip and motifs painted in black colour which includes various intersections, vegetation and peacocks. In Ancient cities of IndusValleyCivilization,Mr. Jonathan Mark Kenyor writes-

"Large storage jars with red slip and black painted motifs, including peacocks, vegetation and the famous intersecting-circle design. Such vessels were probably used as marriage gifts or for other ritual occasions, and the motifs undoubtedly represent auspicious blessings on the owner"⁷

Vegetal motifs from the vessel are drawn here just to represent the design sensibility of Indus artists.

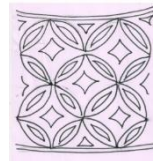


Image 3, self-drawn, Ceremonial pot³

4. The impression of Pipal Tree leaf is found in excavation of a drain in Harappa which indicates the importance of sacred Pipal tree since the distant past.



Image 4, Impression of Pipal Tree⁴

5. Beautiful plant motif is created on a seal found at Mohenjo-Daro. Plant is recognized as Pipal Tree again. According to Indian Philosophy, Pipal tree is known as tree of conception and existence. Two headed unicorn is also engraved on the square seal with few more animal and geometric patterns.



Image 5, Mohenjo-Daro Mythological Creatures and plant Forms Seals, Marshall, Vol. III, P. 389,

6. A unique reconstructed well and associated bathing platform is discovered in Mohenjo-Daro which beautifully resembles the Pipal leaf structure. The structure of well is constructed with mud bricks.



Image 6, Pipal leaf shaped well, Mohen Jo Daro⁶



7. Image 7, self-drawn, polychrome cup, Mehargarh, 3rd millennium BC⁷

Among a number of unicolor articles, a polychrome (Multicoloured) pot is found in Mehargarh. It consists of vertical geometric lines, forms and pipal tree leaf in coloured bands. This shows the refined taste as well as aesthetic awareness of Indus Valley people. Similarly, the statue of priest king from Mohenjodaro also represents a unique trefoil floral pattern on the drape which is still considered so fashionable. Drawing of a painted dish proves the sophisticated artistry embodied in Harappan culture.



Image 8, self-drawn, Painted Dish, reference 5000 Designs and Motifs from India, AjitMukarjee, Dover Publication Inc, Pg.4.⁸

Indus culture is also known as terracotta culture, the reason is obvious- baked and glazed mud bricks, monochromatic and polychromatic clay pottery, seals, toys etc. Decoration inspired from natural forms over the Harappan pottery and seals are substantial characteristics of this culture. Forms used, were mainly vegetal motifs with various animal along with geometric patterns.

The Dark Ages?

History of artistic illustration in India started in Indus Valley Civilization around 4000 BC to 2500 BC. Followed by a large gap until 600 BC (birth of Mahavira) and Buddha (480BC) with the origination of Mauryan Empire that a thriving artistic tradition came in to existence. What could have happened during the gap? 'The dark ages' of India had provided several literary sources and a few archeological evidences also which are mainly collected from sites as Hastinapur, Indraprastha, Mathura, Kurukshetra, Merut, Dwarika etc.⁸ These Painted grey ware people provided the philosophical doctrine for which India is known worldwide; e.g. 1. Vedas and Upanishadas 2. Iron technology with painted terracotta artefacts, 3. Revolution in the settlement pattern in north and central India and to some parts of Dakshinapath. The artefacts created by these people have linear and stylized decorations which is the next stage towards the formation of celebrated stylized beauty of Indian art. A few sketches are represented here-



Image 9, self-drawn, Few designs from painted grey ware, 1500 BC to 600 BC.⁹

Excavations from Hastinapur and Atranjikhera have provided the remains of painted grey ware. Another type of pottery which is called Red and Black Ware, have also been founded which is decorated with stylized floral and geometric motifs. Around 134 mud houses from Inamgaon, Maharashtra are excavated with more than one rooms. Pottery and stone tools are also found also

artefacts made by copper with vegetal motifs. These remains gives us clues how people in the age of Vedas survived and composed the greatest literature of the world on which further generations founded and structured their knowledge of science, literature, art, architecture and many more.

On the bases of this culture, super structures of Mahajanpadas and Mauryan culture developed which is the next stage for discussion.

Mauryan Art -

Emperor Ashoka, after accepting the Buddhism, erected several pillars and rock edicts throughout India. Chinese traveller Fahiyen records six and Xuanzang records fifteen pillars out of which only a few are surviving. Lion Capital, Sarnath shows a gorgeous motif of a bell shaped lotus carved on the pillar as the base for the frieze crowned by four lions which is considered as the National Emblem of India. The pillar is erected by sand stone with special 'Mauryan Polish'. As a part of the capital, this bell shaped lotus became iconic for all the mauryan pillars with its rounded pettles and stylized silhouette.



Image 10, Lion Capital, Ashoka¹⁰

Capital from Patliputra, 3rd Century BC, made by sandstone which is now a part of Patna Museum is a marvelous example of natural vegetal motife decoration in Indian Imagery.



Image 11, Self Drawn, Mauryan capital,

This capital defines floral motifs with repeats and stylized vegetal decorations on all sides. It has four cylindrical volutes from the sides and on the top there is a row of rosettes. It represents the Indian interpretation of Greek-Iranian influence in Mauryan Art. I would like to share the views of Mr. Roy C. Craven which he expressed in his book- Indian Art, A Concise History, pg. 45. He writes-

“The carving is voluptuously realistic and each turn or fold of the indicated flesh has a slightly inflated sensuousness which paradoxically invests the heavy stone with lightness. This quality is heightened by the smooth, glossy surfaces which are contrasted with the meticulously carved details.....”⁹

Botanical Motifs on Punch marked coins-

India has a long history of coinages starting from Sixth century BC as per records. Magadha, Panchala and Mahajanpadas issued various coins with different symbols, motifs and imagery. As stated in ‘50 coins in 2,500 years- A numesmetic walkthrough Indian History’ <http://coinindia.com/fifty-coins.html> ‘....Coinage was invented independently in India’ and not inspired by Greek Akhaemenid.’¹⁰



Image 12, Coin 3: Magadha janapada, Silver karshapana, c. 4th century BCE.

The punchmark coin of Magadha- the most powerful of all the sixteenth Janpadas clearly shows some motifs derived from flowers, a sun and perhaps Swastika.

Here are a few motifs from Pre Mauryan, Mauryan and other Janpadas which represent vegetal imagery.

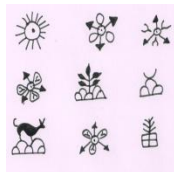


Image 13, Self Drawn, Pre Mauryan Motifs on coins

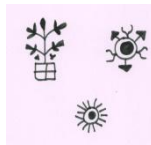


Image 14, Self Drawn, Motifs on Coins from Mithila, Parellel to Mauryan



Image 15, Self Drawn, Vegetal motif on the coin from Shishunaga dynesty, 4th Century BC.



Image 16, Self Drawn, Motif on punchmarked coin from Shishunaga II

All the above images represent the beginning of stylization in Indian art that became monumental in Sanchi and gave way to further innovations and theorization of art in India.

Stylization of botanical forms at Sanchi-

Famous for the Great Stupa, Sanchi is located in Raisen District of Madhya Pradesh. Sanchi Stupa was commissioned by Emperor Ashoka over the relics of Buddha in 3rd century BC. The magnificent Stupa at Sanchi is an important landmark in the evolution of Buddhist art and architecture. There are three main stupas, stupa no. 1, 2 and 3. Stupa no. 1 is a hemispherical dome with a Chhatra. A pillar was also erected there with the renowned Mauryan polish. During the Shunga rule, the Ashokan stupa was enlarged and the stairs and hermika at the top were added. Later on Satvahnas (Andhras) reached Sanchi and as per the inscription, the four illustrious gateways to Stupa 1 were commissioned by Satvahana King.¹¹

Mr. Promsak Jermsawatdi writes in his book- 'Thai Art with Indian Influence' pg. 44-¹²

“The Sanchi Stupa represents the perfect specimen of early Buddhist Stupa architecture. It is pointed out by the scholars that really the crowning glory of the great stupa at Sanchi is its richly carved gateways.....The Sanchi Stupa served as basic prototype for Buddhist architecture throughout Asia when Buddhism spread to countries outside India in later time.”

Buddha was represented by symbols in earlier tradition not in human form. Thus, at the gateways of Sanchi Stupa, several symbols were used to embodied Buddha,..... “Among the symbols used to suggest the Buddha were: The Tree of Enlightenment, The Wheel of Doctrine, Dharm Chakra, The Throne, The Pillar encircled by flames, The Foot Prints and the Stupa.Many of these symbols, however, not only denote the Buddha as such, but are related to particular important events in his life- for example, his Enlightenment, his birth, his decision to take up preaching Dhamma and his entry into irvana...”¹³

Accordingly, a magnificent example of artistry is represented in North Gateway of the Stupa 1, middle inside panel of the right post. The monkey being the central character, has taken over Buddha's begging bowl and filled it with palm syrup, is shown twice. At left, he presents the offering to Buddha. Right, he raises his arms in admiration as the offering is accepted. Buddha is represented aniconically, in the form of a tree.*

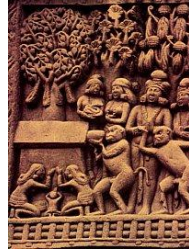


Image 17, Buddha represented as Tree¹⁷

*(**aniconic**, adjective) the representation of divine beings in non-figural form, such as Shiva's Linga, Vishnu's Saligrama or Buddha's Footprints or Lotus.¹⁴

The reliefs gradually develops into medallions and half- medallions on stambhas(pillars) and upon the architraves. Reliefs of trees and lotuses shows major events of Buddha's life. Stylized floral and vegetal forms enriches the beauty of mythical illustrations.



Image 18, Trees of Buddhas - Top Architrave - Rear Side of East Gateway, Stupa 1¹⁸

Six different varieties of trees are illustrated on the third panel of East Gate beautifully denotes the amazing craftsmanship. Swans with lotus leaves and waves signify the complete story of conversion of Kasyapas clearly. Trees on both sides of the centrally oriented composition give a harmonious appearance to the relief.



Image 19, East Gate, Front, South Pillar, 3rd panel: Conversion of Kasyapas¹⁹

The southern gate is the main entrance of the Stupa. The royal visit of Ashoka to Stupa is represented amongst the stylized foliage. The upper horizontal beam is decorated with the scene of birth of Buddha or Laxmi with the stunning illustration of vegetal motifs.



Image 20, Upper Architrave, Southern Gate, Stupa 1²⁰

The Eastern Gateway of the Great Stupa represents the Jataka stories- the early manifestations of Buddha. The highly decorated gateway consists of elephants and the world famous Shalbhanjikas, winged lions and peacocks. Enormous stylized vegetal motifs are erected on the torana with horizontal volute end beams, friezes and the shafts. Along with the Eastern gate, a statue of meditating Buddha is erected that belongs to Gupta period, around 5th century AD. It is a life sized statue and may be the last edition to Sanchi stupa. The Aura besides the Head of Lord Buddha is adorned with ornamental floral motifs with a central medallion of Lotus flower with three layers of decorative floral creeper designs with outermost circle of triangular pattern.



Images 21, 22, 23, 24, 25 Self Clicked Image^{21,22,23,24,25}

All the four gateways are decorated by relief artworks with highly stylized and ornamental human, animal and vegetal forms. Creepers and climbers with decorated leaves, flowers, birds, animals, Mythological characters, metaphorical images and other vegetal motifs are very skillfully arranged that no empty space is left.

Various stories from the life of Bodhisatva and Jatakas are depicted on all four gates and horizontal beams with volute ends. Kamal van with elephants, peacocks, sunflowers, trishulas (trident- symbol of Tri-ratna of Buddhism), mandalas and solar disk motifs complemented with huge number of different vegetal forms and designs intricately carved on these structures. These magical designs starting from one end and expand over the whole surface. Looking at these astonishing visuals it becomes difficult to believe that they were carved in such a distance of time when no tools or machinery were invented.



Image 25, Self Clicked , Western gate

Central Medallion of the lowest architrave is skillfully carved with the pandative formation of a circular full blooming flower with more floral ribbons on either sides.

Conclusion-

In this research, I tried to focus on the development of botanical forms from organic to stylized. Vegetal motifs developed in the beginning of civilization with the medium locally available such as clay tablets, seals, and pottery. Crossing the ages, (beginning in Harappan age up to the age of construction of Sanchi Stupa, approx. 1st century BC) botanical decorative patterns found their way to be represented in stone. The finishes of all vegetal motifs and other illustrations on the stone leave us in totally astonishing condition which required highly skill full artistry and intellect to combine natural elements with divine as well as worldly beauties. This study provides base for further research on the particular areas of monumental decorations in India in various ages of history which may be taken over in future.

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