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Aesthetic Ideas during Vedic Period

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Abstract:

There are variety of terms in Vedic literature which encapsulate various kinds of artistic and aesthetic ideas and activities. Some of these find expression under the broader category of silpa. The Vedic treatises refer to a number of manufactured arts and crafts which indicate to the existence of the specialised group of artisans in the Vedic society. The Vedic data on arts and aesthetics are not constructed only to elucidation of their divine origin; but points out the skill of craftsman with perfection and accuracy.

Keywords: Aesthetics, silpa, maya, divinity, creative skills

1. Introduction

The basic concepts of aesthetics embedded in the Vedic texts mentions the highest spiritual bliss with aesthetic enjoyment. Indian art in the Vedic period is described as a combination of the abstract philosophical concepts of Aryans. The history of artistic advancement of the Vedic people may be started with an examination of sources in which many enormous examples were mentioned.

2. Discussion

The general term for arts and crafts was 'silpa'. In the ancient Indian literary tradition, the term silpa of which silpin is a derivative has been used widely and denotes all kinds of aesthetics.ⁱ In the Rigveda, it occurs twice with the prefix su, meaning the charming beauty of Usa. Subsequently, it became a synonym of fine arts as well as crafts. From the time of Panini, the term silpin came into vogue and denoted artisans in general. The celebrated grammarian mentions the village artisans as 'gramasilpin'ⁱⁱⁱ and those who were patronised by the state as 'rajasilpin'ⁱⁱⁱⁱ Patanjali also mentions silpin and like Panini employs the term silpa both for the arts and crafts.^{iv} Panini provides us with a long list of industry and crafts, connected with fine arts, pottery, carpentry dyeing, dress and garments, gems, metals such as gold, silver, iron and tin.^v Yajnavalkya refers to silpa as one of the ten sources of livelihood which may be resorted to during the period of distress.^{vi}

Those who have gone through the Vedic literature with a view to locate the arts and aesthetics, their nature and development, should have unfailingly noticed a variety of terms such as vastu, pratima, citra, prakriti, rupa, pratirupa, pesa, likha etc. which indicates various kinds of artistic and aesthetic ideas and activities.^{vii}

With the growth of agriculture and economy there also developed several new arts and crats. The arts and crafts during this period include wood-craft, chariot making, carpentry, leather craft, ceramics, stone work, metal work, the making of bows and arrows, bamboo making, weaving, textile, basketry, beadmaking, making mats out of grass and seeds etc.^{viii} Weaving technique were recorded in the Atharvaveda. The existence of female weavers eg - 'Vayanti', 'Sin', 'Vagitri', and 'Pesakarisi' indicate that work of weaving was done mainly by the special care of women.^{ix} Various kinds of beads were used as ornament and amulets. The term manikar in Vedic literature denotes to a bead maker or jeweller. The few metal objects mentioned in the Rigveda are kshura (razor), khadi (bangle) and asi (axe) etc. The arts and crafts points out the skill of craftsman with a high degree of perfection and accuracy. These references also indicate that art and craft is concerned with the industrial activity and artistic expressions. People followed different modes of production and occupation which influenced their lifestyle.

Several Vedic divinities such as Prajapati, Agni, Asvins, Varuna, Mitra, Indra, Vishnu and Trasta are supposed to be engaging themselves in the acts of creation.

In Rigveda Prajapati is said to be the creator of heaven and earth by the act and power of 'saci'. The term 'saci' is mentioned many times in the Rigveda. Several kinds of creative skills and technical skills have been described as being inspired by saci.^x

'Maya' stands for innate creative energies. As a creative energy, it is found associated with a number of deities such as Agni, Varuna, Asuras, Mitra, Trasta and Indra.^{xi}

The Rigveda mentions that Agni who purifies all the words, invests the heaven, the waters and clouds over the unbounded firmament by the energy of maya.

It is also associated with Varuna. The wonderful act of Varuna was done only by a creative energy of maya. Varuna is sometimes mentioned in the company of the deity Mitra. Both of them are accredited with causing the variegated clouds in the sky, sending down the rains and sustaining the sun by their combined energies.

Maya is also associated with Tvastr the divine artificer, who fashions the drinking vessels of the gods.^{xii} Tvastr has also been considered as the master of craftsman of Gods.

Number of passages in the Rigveda refer to its energy and association with Indra in generating innumerable forms and causing destruction to his enemies. Maya is also explained several times as the potency to assume different forms.

The term 'visti' also designates a potent mysterious power of creation. It is derived from the root vis means 'to be active'. Visti stands for a mysterious power transformed into an extraordinary creative skill.^{xiii} In some Rigvedic passages the root vis and vistvi are mentioned in connection with the mysterious creative energies of the Rbhus the great technicians. Vishnu also derived from the root 'vis' literally means to perform action.

The analysis of the terms 'saci', 'maya' and 'visti' makes clear that the earliest concept of art or craft or any kind of work involving creativity left their lasting imprint on the Indian thought of the later times.

Tvastr is associated with all kinds of forms, animate and inanimate. He is the deity who had adorned with forms the two generatrices, heaven and earth, and in fact all existence. He is, therefore, called the Visvarupa, the Omniform, the Multiform etc.^{xiv} He is accredited with fashioning all creatures. He is also the generator of all kinds of animals. He removes whatever is uneven, cult or defiled. Tvastr is accredited with fabricating some specific objects such as, vajra of Indra, Camasa, the drinking bowls of the gods. He is also associated with shaper of living beings.^{xv}

Likewise, Rbhus obtained divinity, exercised superhuman powers. He is accredited with fashioning of a chariot of Ashvins, creation of two steeds for Indra etc. In several passages, he is spoken as fashioning riches. These evidences indicates that Rbhus are the artificers of versatile ability.^{xvi}

The tenth mandala of Rigveda mentions about Visvakarman who is the sole repository of all kinds of artistic and technical skills during Vedic period. He is known as a Supreme Artificer.^{xvii} In the post Vedic period Visvakarman becomes the master architect of the angles and patron of human craftsman.

3. Conclusion

Thus, these evidences indicates that aesthetic sense during the Vedic period left its indelible impact on the later art traditions.

4. References

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- x. Rigveda, 1.3.1.
- xi. Rigveda, V. 85.5.
- xii. Rigveda X. 53.9
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- xvi. Rigveda I.111.1
- xvii. Rigveda. X 81.3.