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Gandhara Buddha in a Greco-Indic Mixed Expression: A Historical Perspective

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Abstract:

From the ancient times to till now human emotions always demands for the best mode of expression, and its came in the form of art. In another way we can argue that the material expression of human emotions came in to existence only through the art. There are various categories of art ether it may be in the form of music, dance, painting, or sculpture. And the community production of art indirectly claim for the, its (community) social, economical, or political development in that particular historical time period.

Interaction between the traditions remains a major cause in the alteration or modification of art and its form, either this interaction is made by invasion, trade, or migration. In context to the Greco-Indic art interaction during the beginning of first millennium A.D. in the North-West region of Indian sub-continent, it was the budding of one of the most famous and celebrated Indian school of art (sculpture) the "Gandhaar School". The main objective of this paper is to observe and analyse the 1) Post Alexander influences over the "Indian art" and tradition. 2) Buddha as an "ideal" subject for the Gandhaar School of art.

There is no doubt among the historians that the invasion of Alexander in India during 326 B.C. was a major historical event, and it was not because that it was the first foreign invasion but it was the opening of Indian gateways towards the western knowledge, culture, science and art.

1. Introduction

In the 4th century B.C. the Greeks and Iranian were fighting for the supremacy over the world and finally Greeks succeeded over Iranians under the leadership of Alexander of Macedonia. In 326 B.C. as a preliminary step to conquer India Alexander marched towards the North-West of Indian subcontinent and he defeated Porus and made his rule over the Taxila region. This invasion made a geo-political change particularly by opening up of land and sea routes between Indian and Europe; it brought both of them closer to each other. Indirectly this invasion made possible the establishment of Indo-Bactrian and Indo-Parthian states, which at later stage considerably influenced Indian architecture and help in the development of Gandhaar School of arts.

About 250 B.C. Diototus, the governor of Bactria revolted against the Greeks and proclaimed his independence and from there we have some well known Indo-Greek kings like, Euthydemus, Demetrius, Eucratides and Menander. Among all the Indo-Greek rulers Menander (165-145 B.C.) was the most illustrious in Indian historical context. Sakala the modern Sialkot (Pakistan) was his capital. According to Greek writers he was a great ruler and his territory extended from Afghanistan to Uttar Pradesh in east and Gujarat in the west. Menander was converted to Buddhism by the Buddhist monk Nagasena. According to an ancient text 'Milindpahno' Menander asked Nagasena many questions related to philosophy and Buddhism. In history of India, the Indo-Greek rulers were the first ones whose coins carried the portraits of kings and their names. The Indo-Greek coins are known for the depiction of realistic and artistic portraits.

In another word we can say that the process of intercultural exchange between western world and Asia was begin to start in a more grand way but at the same time it would be the wrong assumption that before the expedition of Alexander there was no cultural exchange between the western world and East. We have some classic references from the Indian and Chinese texts about the long route trades through the classic Silk Route, which was the only connecting link between the various lands and people. The expedition only enhanced the process of cultural exchange.

As we know that trade is not only about the exchange of goods and products but it also about the exchange and movement of ideas, values, religion, art, science and knowledge from one place to another. And a trade route has been established between India and Alexandria by connecting ancient Mathura, Taxila, Bactra, Margiana, Selucia, and then Alexandria.

2. Art (Greek & India)

“Greek art was built upon the firm foundation and accomplishment of the Egyptian and the Aegean’s”¹ the Greek had a particular ability to taking something in the rough, shaping it, putting on finishing touches, and turning out a masterpiece. Art for them was a representation of nature in which they attempt for the expression of beauty and idealism. The development of various forms of Greek art can be traced by three rather different periods: the Archaic, the Hellenic, and the Hellenistic. The Archaic was the formative period in Greek art, the gradual emergence from barbarism and infusion of ideas from other worlds. The Hellenic period was the culmination of the Greek Ideal. The Hellenistic age ushered in by Alexander’s conquest, represented a more inclusive type, a mixture of Greek culture with influence of eastern world.

The development of Indian architecture was slow in comparison to the Greek because no stone building were constructed before the time of Asoka. “This is due to fact that the religion did not stimulated the building of great temples at that time, all that was needed for performing religious ceremonies was an alter created in any open air space”² Asoka who was the great creator in Indian civilization was not satisfied with past and inspired by descriptions brought to him of buildings in the west and then he decided to construct structures dedicated to Buddha. And certainly Indian architecture found its way wherever Buddhism went its direct influence can be seen in Java, Ceylon, Siam, Burma, Mongolia, China and Japan.

There is some Hellenistic influence on Indian art particularly in the Northern region. Indian art is a striking symbolical representation of the diversity of social customs and religious beliefs. The aesthetic ideal was not in clear cut fashion, differentiated from religious feelings. The art was regarded as divine force and as an approach to reality, rather than as an effort to understand and portray nature. “Consequently purely secular art did not exist in between 1st millennium A.D.”³

3. Post Alexander Enfluence Over Indian Art and Tradition

As it is very clear that the begging of the Hellenistic age of art was a direct result of Alexander’s conquest in to the Eastern world, and it was a mixture of Greek and Eastern culture which was accumulated in both of the tradition as ‘buffer’ product between them. The so called Gandhar School of art which is also called as Graeco-Buddhist was actually the product of culture, and regarding the influence over the Gandhaar School of art scholars of ancient Indian history like D.N. Jha believes that “it was less influence by Greek than by Roman art.”⁴ It enjoyed its period of greatest prosperity under the Kushana emperors. The subject matter of Gandhar art was predominantly Buddhist but many of the sculptural motifs are of Hellenistic. The mother of the mother of the Buddha resembled the Athenian matron. Many early Gandhar Buddha’s have Apollonian faces, their draperies arranged in the style of a Roman toga. Stucco (lime plaster) for sculpture was in use in the Gandhar region as early as the first century A.D. However Prof. Romila Thapar in her classic book ‘Early India’ from origin to A.D. 1300 argues that ‘the art of Gandhar majorly reflects a Buddhist patronage, although other deities and themes were not ignored.’



Figure 1

¹ Swain, J.E. ‘A history of world civilization’ Eurasia Publishing House, Ned Delhi, Second Indian Reprint, 1970, pp-133

² Ibid pp-202

³ Ibid pp-204

⁴ Jha, D.N. ‘Ancient India: In Historical outline, Manohar Publishers, New Delhi, 2009, pp-145

The range of ordinary people shown in various scenes as Figure 1, which is from Hadda Gandhar 1st century C.E. bore the imprint of distinct Greco-Roman style, “although afield in India and central Asia stylistic Identities become more diffuse”⁵. The magnificence of stucco art at Hadda was the high point of the achievement of local artists of Gandhar region the figures of immense size, “commanding the landscape, were located in a cliff at Bamiyan, mother goddess images were abundant, their worship continuing to be popular both in themselves and as a part of fertility cults.”⁶

Post Alexander influences are not only visible through the arts and its way of presentation but also with coins hoards from the Roman maritime trade were more evident in South India, the impact of Greco-Roman Ideas and artefacts were obvious in the North. The exchange of merchandise led inevitably to an exchange of Ideas. At one level, worlds, largely of a technical kind were borrowed, at another level the aesthetic impact is seen particularly in Buddhist art. “Coin legends in Greek point to the continued use of the language in addition to *Prakrit* and *Sanskrit*. Indian folk-tales and fables travelled west world and collection such as the *Panchtantra* were subsequently translated in to neighbouring languages. *Chaturang* a game after four traditional wings of the Indian army and played by four players, became popular in west Asia and evolved in to chess”⁷.

4. Buddha as an “Ideal” Subject for the Gandhar School of Art

In ancient Indian tradition there were basically three schools of Indian art and they were: Gandhar, Mathura, Amravati, and according to Prof. D.N. Jha Mathura school was the first one produces the Image of Buddha, “his presence in the earlier *stupas* was being indicated by the symbols only”⁸

Since in the west religion was the driving force for the propagation of art and culture, and the Greco-Roman Influence arrived at the Gandhar region with the after the Alexander effect they the (artist) were searching theme for their art structures. Certainly the expansion of Buddhism from Northern India to the North West and towards the far Eastern was at bloom; especially it was become such as a missionary religion after the great patronage fro Asoka.



Figure 2

As shown in Figure 2 Buddha and Buddhism Gradually became the theme for the Gandhar School because the Idealistic resemblance between the Greek gods and Buddha was more rather than any other Indian Gods. Since the dominance of expression of nature and emotion in the Greek art was in core that’s why the simplistic calm nature of Buddha get accumulated with the demands of Gandhar school, which was originated as through the major influence of Greco-Roman art over Mathura school of art.

The emergence of Gandhar art coincided with the introduction of multiple celestial beings and havens in Buddhist theology, which lent themselves ideally to manifestations in sculpture and paintings. “The diverse influences affecting Gandhar art suggest that it should not be taken as a uniform style and should be subdivided according to its diversity.”⁹ Despite of all it had a long and eventful history “in Europe as an alternative philosophy to the Judaeo-Christian tradition, and associated some of its Ideas with what was believed to be Asian thought and practice. Certain aspects of life of Christ are so closely parallel to events in the legends of the life of the Buddha”¹⁰.

⁵ Thapar, Romila, ‘Early India from the origins to A.D. 1300’ Penguin Books, New Delhi, 2002, pp-269

⁶ Ibid pp-269

⁷ Thapar, Romila, ‘Early India from the origins to A.D. 1300’ Penguin Books, New Delhi, 2002, pp-253

⁸ Jha, D.N. ‘Ancient India: In Historical outline, Manohar Publishers, New Delhi, 2009, pp-143

⁹ Thapar, Romila, ‘Early India from the origins to A.D. 1300’ Penguin Books, New Delhi, 2002, pp-254

¹⁰ Ibid pp-254



Figure 3

As shown in Figure 3, which is a 1st century A.D. sculpture from the modern Afghanistan region, it clearly shows how the Hellenic influence was made over the Buddhist theme of art. Their dresses and the style of ornamentation on both pillars, as well as the encircled head which is the insignia of the divine power, clearly indicate the Greco-Roman impact over the Indian art.

5. Conclusion

The grand expedition of Alexander was a 'historical event' for the Asian civilisations as well as for the Greek also, because it led to a great cultural interaction between the ancient traditions of the world. But at the same time we cannot make a strong argument that before Alexander's invasion these both traditions were totally unaware of each other. As to understand the past and its meaning over the historical journey of time, we should not assume that intercultural assimilation or interaction is about the dominance of one culture over another, instead as a process of historical development through the varieties of knowledge and ideas through it. Gandhara School of art is a fine example for us to see and analyse the product of knowledge and ideas between these ancient traditions and right at the point Buddha appears as a 'connecting link' between them.

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