

Globalization and Cultural Exchange in Ancient India

Dr. Manjiri Bhalerao

Associate Professor & Head

Shri Balmukund Lohia Centre of Sanskrit & Indological Studies

Tilak Maharashtra Vidyapeeth, Pune

Email: manjirib24@gmail.com

Abstract

The migrations of various communities from European countries to India started from around 4th century B.C.E. These were mostly Greek traders who had settled in different parts of the ancient world. After coming to India some of the traders settled down at different places. They also gave munificent donations for the creation of monuments. These donations were recorded by writing inscriptions in these monuments. Along with these inscriptions some Greek motifs and symbols were also used in the decorations of these monuments. These monuments were created from 2nd century B.C.E. onwards. The ancient globalization had led to the cultural exchange in India as well as in other countries. This paper aims to explore these probable exchanges and their reflection in the contemporary society.

Keywords: globalization, European countries, Greeks, inscriptions

Introduction:

Mythology has always played a major role in the life of people throughout the ages. India is not an exception to it. Many of the myths that have been known to people from time immemorial have been documented in different forms. The texts are one of the most important forms of documentation but at the same time it is not the sole form of documenting the myths and legends. Even though the myths are elaborately preserved in the texts some of the other forms have also stored a huge collection of myths and beliefs in them. The oral traditions have preserved and at the same time changed the mythology and legends over a period of time, to a certain extent. However a very important but not too explicit form of preserving myths and legends in a society is the art and architecture. This form of preservation of the contemporary myths is generally not given its due attention. Numerous symbols and motifs are depicted on the ancient monuments, coins and in the sculptures. Many of them are understood as per the interpretation done by the scholars in a particular spacial and temporal framework. However the need of the hour is to try to understand the evidence in the then contemporary framework from all the perspectives including their contexts. There are numerous such examples that can be seen in ancient Indian Art and Architecture. The present paper would try to analyze a few case studies depicting the motifs that have migrated from a long distance and reached India. Here they were accepted by the local population and were later on carved on various religious monuments. These motifs can be seen in the context of the Buddhist rock cut caves in Western India and some other monuments of ancient India. Most of these depictions can be placed in the timeframe of 2nd century B.C.E. to 2nd – 3rdth century C. E.

The migrations of various communities from European countries started from around 4th century B.C.E. These were mostly Greek traders who had settled in different parts of the ancient world. After coming to India some of the traders settled down at different places. They also gave munificent donations for the creation of monuments. These donations were recorded by writing inscriptions in these monuments. Along with these inscriptions some Greek motifs and symbols were also used in the decorations of these monuments. These monuments were created from 2nd century B.C.E. onwards. It is difficult to explain the occurrence of some motifs however there are a few motifs which seem to have been carved purposefully at these places. Let us see them in detail.

1. **Sphinx** – The sphinx is a mythical animal which is noticed in the ancient Egyptian and Greek art and architecture quite frequently. Similarly in case of India we get to see the depiction of sphinx in the architecture. The original concept of a sphinx comes from Egypt where it was depicted as a male and was a noble figure. In the Greek context the Sphinx was a woman who brought destruction and bad luck. However both the sphinxes were placed at the entrance of the architecture, mostly religious. In Indian context one can see the depiction of sphinx in the religious monuments, that too either at the entrance of the cave or inside the Caityagrha (prayer hall with a stupa). The most noteworthy examples of the Sphinx are at Junnar (Lenyadri group Cave No. 6) (Fergusson & Burgess 1988 [reprint]: 255), Karla Caityagrha and in the veranda of the Cave No. 10 at Nasik (Burgess 1988 [reprint]: 514, Pl. XXIII). The inscriptional evidence at Karla and Nasik reveals that at both these places there were foreign donors. Here the foreign donors probably carried some myths along with them and had depicted the symbols of guardians in the monuments for which they had given money.
2. **Pegasus** – Pegasus is a winged horse. This is also a mythical creature of the western world. In fact he is supposed to be a divine winged stallion with a white colour. He is supposed to be the son of Poseidon and Medusa. Poseidon was the horse god. The legend says that wherever Pegasus struck his hoof on earth, a spring came up. Hence this divine creature was very popular in the Greek mythology. This particular motif occurs on the base of the bench in the veranda of the Cave No. 19 at Bhaja and on the railing of the staircase to the Caityagrha at Pitalkhora. This is the so called new Vihara at Bhaja. It is shown carved in a row of animals. This cave is also significant as it also has some other foreign motifs e.g. the Centaur. But the occurrence of this particular motif is also significant as it shows the association with some foreigner in this region. In case of the motif at Pitalkhora the winged horse occurs in the context of two other load bearer beings with the ears like elves (similar to the wings of the birds). In both these contexts i.e. at Bhaja and Pitalkhora, the winged horse or the Pegasus is depicted as giving support to the structure above.
3. **Centaur** - Centaur is a mythical creature which has the upper body of a human being and the lower body is that of a horse. The Centaurs were traditionally considered as of having double nature. They are warlike and powerful people. Two centaur couples are shown on the capital of the veranda pillar of Cave No. 19 at Bhaja. They are carved in such a way that they are supporting the ceiling. The early records of Bhaja show the sketches of a broken pillar in the same veranda, which is reconstructed now. The original pillar also had a similar motif showing two female centaurs supporting the ceiling of the cave. There is no inscription in this cave. Hence it is difficult to assign the patronage of this cave to any particular donor. However the motifs like the Pegasus and the Centaurs suggest some foreign association.
4. **Griffin** – Griffins are legendary creatures with the body of a lion and the head and the wings are that of an eagle. The lion is considered as the king of the beasts and the eagle is considered as the king of the birds. The combination of these powerful animal and bird made the Griffin as an exceptionally powerful. It has been believed that the Griffins were the guardian of the treasures and priceless possession. In due course of time they were also considered as the symbol of the divine power and the guardian of religious places. Eventually we start getting the depiction of the griffins in the Indian subcontinent. They can be seen on the Eastern Gateway at Sanchi as well as on the pillar capitals of the Cave No.s 17 and 3 at Nasik. Interestingly enough we find that this cave no. 17, which was the donation of a Greek trader (Yavana) called as Indragnidatta. He was a resident of Dattamitri. He had probably used this motif on the capital to safeguard the cave, which he mentions in the inscription as a combination of the Caityagrha (prayer hall) and vihara (residential quarters). Similarly another cave at Nasik i.e. no. 3 also has griffins on the pillar capital. But this cave is not a donation of any foreigner, in fact it is a donation of the Satavahana royal family. However there is a Caityagrha inside this cave along with the vihara. There is a possibility that the

concept of the griffins guarding the religious architecture became popular and was used at various places.

5. **Figures with wing like ears** – The concept of the Elves or the pixies is quite famous in the western World even today. These mythical creatures are gifted with the power of recognizing the calamity in advance. In the Scottish mythology many super natural beings are mentioned. They are called as pixies. These pixies are said to have such long pointed ears. The spread of certain foreign concepts and motifs, and their depiction in the Western Indian rock – cut caves is a well known fact. The depiction of such pointed ears at these two sites could be one of such influences just to indicate their super-humanness. In the Scottish context, they were malevolent creatures initially but later on became benevolent. The possibility of the migration of this concept from the western world to India cannot be discarded. Such guardian *yakṣa* figures occur on the entrance of the Caityagr̥ha at Pitalkhora and Kondane. The *yakṣa* at Pitalkhora is today kept in the CSMVS and the other one can be seen on the entrance wall of the Caityagr̥ha of the cave of Kondane. Both the guardian figures here had ears like the wings of the birds. This probably gave them the power to sense the calamity beforehand. Hence they were carved near the entrance. (Bhalerao 2009: 514-19)
6. **Triskelion** - The Triskelion is a symbol which has three arms that are shown moving in both clockwise and anti-clockwise directions. It is popularly known as the three armed *swastika*. But this symbol is associated with the cult of Apollo. It occurs frequently on ancient Indian Punch marked coins and the on the facades of some Buddhist rock cut caves. These caves are in fact the Caityagr̥ha at Nasik and the Caityagr̥ha of the Isolated group in Junnar. At all these places the triskelion is seen clearly. On the coins of the WaiJanapada and the previous Punch Marked Coins this symbol is seen on a large scale. Hence even though its association in India is not very clear, one thing can be surely said that it had a significant place in ancient Indian visual repertoire. (Bhalerao 2006: 115-18)
7. **Dentils with human faces** - Dentils are the small rectangular projections of the beam-ends. They are seen on the entablature of a structural monument. In India, the dentils are noticed at almost all the early structural and rock-cut monuments. It is for the first time that in the Buddhist caves at Nasik, we came across the decoration on the dentils. The surfaces of the alternate dentils are decorated with human faces. There are three more caves at Nasik, on the facades of which we find such a decoration. They are Caves no.4, 8&17 (Nagaraju 1981 : 264, 265, 279). The dentils on the facades of all these caves are decorated with human faces. This motif is not seen elsewhere other than Nasik. In the western world it was probably carved as a symbol toward the evils off. On Alexander's Sarcophagus (size 10' – 4"), we see the decoration of both the lion heads and the human heads in two different rows. (Bhalerao 2003 : 403-407)

In this way one can see that there are numerous motifs that have migrated from their own lands and have settled in India. The motifs mentioned above are the sample case studies of a huge visual repertoire. The original context of the myths was probably changed a bit and then again were used to suit their own needs and understanding.

References:

1. Bhalerao Manjiri 2003 Dentils with human faces - A Unique motif at Nasik in *Buddhism in Global perspective*(eds.) Sankarnarayan, K., R. Panth and I. Ogawa, Mumbai: Somaiya Publications. Vol. 2, pp. 403 – 407
2. Bhalerao Manjiri 2006 Triskelion on coins & monuments - An unsolved enigma, in *Coinex 2006*, International Society for the Collectors of Rare Items, Ahemadabad. pp 115-118
3. Bhalerao Manjiri 2009 Identification of Sankarin – A Re appraisal, in *Shrinidhih*, , Prof. S.S. Bahulkar Gratitude Volume, ed. Bhatet al, published by Samvidya Institute of Cultural Studies, Pune, 2009.(ISBN : 978-81-920907-0-2)

4. Fergusson James & Burgess James 1988 (reprint) Cave Temples of India, Delhi, MunshiramManoharlal
5. Nagaraju S. 1981 Buddhist Architecture of Western India, New Delhi, Agam Kala Prakashan

Mahratta