

Art and Artists in Ancient India

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Arthashastra mentions “**artha**” (livelihood of a man) is greater than “**karma**” & “**dharma**”. [1]

When we talk about the word “Artist” in the Indian context, we don’t find the exact term which defines it, **Stella Kramrisch** holds the belief that the terms “*Silpin*” or “*silpi*” does not correspond to the terms ‘artist, artisans’ or ‘craftsman’ completely and she holds the opinion that this is because temple and image making includes a lot more of things rather than just the production of art, a **magic power** that leads to such creations around who created it, who sponsored it and the general public. [2]

Panini’s *Ashtadhyayi* talks about artists in terms of arts and crafts such as dance and music, potter etc. Even in Dharmashastra & Buddhist text the term ‘*silpi*’ is used as a general term to the class pursuing different crafts [3]

Silpin are the ones who produce *silpa* & *kala*, terms which refer to Art, the term *silpa* and *kala* are somewhat same but the former represents skills of a manual labour and the latter is based on theoretical arts.

Ancient texts like *Silpaprasna* talks about the artist after achieving knowledge and expertise over art created, they attained euphoria along with freedom from rebirth and merit.

Right from the Vedic times, we see artists having importance in ritual practices, *shilpis* such as *rathkaras*, chariot makers etc were invited to public sacrifices, **Manu Smriti (v,129)** supports this argument that the craftsman engaged in his work is ritually pure. But this situation does change with time, where we even see artists attaining high merit in Maurya times and further their situation getting exalted in the feudal times.

Artists in the Social Hierarchy

In the Vedic period with the social formation and stratification through inter-ethnic mingling and mutual accommodations, we see apart from agriculture and trade, arts and crafts acquired the fourth varna in the society.

Several Buddhist texts talk about the condition of artists, along with the status of *karma*, *Kula* & *jati* decide their status, *sippam* is found mentioned in *hina* (lower category) in the society.

Buddhist Jatakas recognise 22 guilds of artisans, including those of wood workers, smiths, painters, ivory carvers.

Dharmashastras refer to *takshan* or Carver, *ayaskara* or *vardhaki*, in the Gautama Smriti, the ‘*silpi*’ is clubbed with other impure occupations, like fallen women, hunter who lived on leftover food, further the text states that food offered by this class should not be eaten, the same text elsewhere also mentions that Brahmana can accept food from a trader who is not a *silpi*. The **Parasara Smriti** also clubs *silpa* in Vaishya class.

Several references from the **Silpasastra**, it is established that image making was hereditary occupation related to the 5 mythic sons of Vishwakarma (the divine artificer) **Stella Kramrisch** in her works has also supported that the profession of artists was a hereditary one, but she does mention the importance of acquiring skills under a skilled artist to keep up the artistic standard. **A.K. Coomaraswamy** also talks along the same lines of skill learning talks that a young *silpin* learnt his skills under an expert since childhood. [4]

Texts such as *Samarangana Sutradhara* refers to the punishment of death given to the artist committing mistakes. Art slowly slowly by the Mauryan times gained more recognition. Arthashastra mentions capital punishment was provided to the person who caused harm to the artist leading to their incompatibility of work.

Artists in Mauryan and Post Mauryan Period

In the Mauryan period we see artists being identified by their respective work, names, titles, specialisation but not by their caste.

After the second urbanisation of the 6th C B.C.E, there was a surge of artists coming from the rural areas to fulfil the growing demands of art in the society which contributed to the socio-economic history of that time. **S.Setter** also talks about the indigenous or regional artists who got exposed to various Hellenistic and Persian influences, shows the rise of crafts specialisation at a massive scale. **A.H.Dhani** refers to the sophistication in work during the Ashokan times,

where the writer guided the engraver about the style of writing, to which engraver cut the carving the stone with the letters, engraver blindly believing the writer whatever he dictated.

It is in the Mauryan times we see names of artists mentioned on the Panguaria minor edict, shows raising social status and enjoying various privileges. **Mahesh Vikram Singh** talks about the services provided to the artists in the Mauryan times like protection, habitation place, free from taxes but these privileges were only open to those artists who were employed by the state, the independent artists started to organise themselves in to organisations like Sreni to gain more social importance, Megasthenes has put traders and artisans together in 4th strata of the society.

After the Mauryas we see hundreds of monuments getting shaped under Shunga and Kushanas in the north, Satavahanas and Vakatakas in Deccan

Artists as Patrons

Crafts as donors tells us about the penetrations of art activities in the social, political, economical and cultural fabric in the post Mauryan period

Heitzman in Early Buddhism, Trade and Empire talks about the non royal patrons, he marks the act of donating was somewhat related as marker of status

In the context of Buddhist art, artists making donations, which perhaps refers to social evolution in their status. Donations by them show that artists had considerable economic resources & enough surplus at their disposal to support the Religious activity in terms of Art & Architecture.

At South gate of Sanchi from 1stC, a stone panel was donated by ivory carvers of Vidisha. In Mauryan times we see exception of artist, Chapada engraver of Ashokan edicts (Brahmagiri, Jatinga) mentioned on the minor edicts. Also evidence of artist cheating on Patron is of Agisala who supplied a bronze relic instead of gold. Kaman stone inscription of 786-906 A.D mentions donations made by artists, part IV mentions guild of gardeners supplied around 60 garlands at Chamunda and Vishnu temple.

We don't have much evidence of Patronage because art was considered an offering or votive ritual object.

The mentions of gifts / donations made during the early Buddhist period such as Karle, Sanchi, Mathura etc refers to various evidence of collective and popular patronage. **Vidya Dehejia** in The collective & popular basis of early Buddhist Patronage talks about donations, at Sanchi mentioning 631 donative inscriptions, including donations by royal scribes, artisans, at the south gate of Sanchi, the top beam is inscribed as the donation by Ananda the supervisor of King Satkarni. **Stella Kramrisch** says that Ananda was a popular court artist and he was entrusted for making high quality art but she contradicts this and points out the average quality of relics inside and outside the beam. The Vinaya text mentions Anath-pindika who constructed various ponds, wall sheds at Sarnath.

Why European scholarship stresses that India didn't have art is based on the speculation on the anonymity of artists. Personal identification of craftsmen in Indian context is seen minimal like Gugga, maker of Sakti Devi & Laksana Devi images [Prof Seema Bawa (Rudra & Soumya Aspects of the Goddess)]

We don't find individual identity for the sculptures in India, because the nature of art was very different, right from the beginning, as compared to the nature of the art produced by ancient Greeks/Europe etc. As art was considered an offering or a votive/ritual object about the nature of the object, we can say that the artist who had made it became very insignificant in the scheme of things. This shows why we don't have names of artists on the inscriptions, but this anonymity of artists does not decrease the aesthetic value of art.

Gugga, sculptor from 7thC and Early 8thCE, who is responsible for making four brass items in upper riverbed Valley at BHARMOR, CHATRARI he makes the images of Laksana Devi, of Ganapati, Nandi where is subscriptions, tells that these were built under the rule of Miruvvarman and Karmin i.e. Gugga made them. This combination of ruler and artist is very rare in ancient Indian history. This body of work can be connected between sculpture, sculptor and patron.

By early mediaeval times, art is seen to rise over their relegation to the status of Shudras, acquiring, honour, and glory. A combination of factors seems to have contributed to their ascendancy, their skills, learning, and their proximity to patterns of higher status, like rulers, their family etc, e.g. Chandela inscription from Kalanjara stotakachari of Visvamitra. Artists, aided by such skills in learning, rose to high positions and received titles. The artist in the early mediaeval times, expose themselves to various social and economic privileges eg- Stotakachara who is the Shilpi and could recite Sastra.

Further, the people from higher varnas take up the role and designation of Sutrardhar, the chief architect.



R. C. Majumdar defined the composition of the guilds in the early, mediaeval times, the sreni, organisation of the artisans, like weavers, oilmen etc. did not remain confined to the original community but could enlist people from the upper class too.

The Mandasor and Indore inscriptions of Gupta refer to the same. Apart from this the state opened up various opportunities for artists and allowed them to intermix and interchange the functions and skills with other functionaries who traditionally performed other roles. The low status of artists got further dented as subordinate officials- Kayastha , Karanika began performing tasks related to art and architecture.