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Aśvaghoṣa and the Painting of Cakravarti Buddha in Indian Art

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Abstract

Aśvaghoṣa was nothing more than a name a hundred years ago. But today all his important works have been published and he is recognized as the first great kāvya poet and precursor of Kālidāsa. As an easterner, Aśvaghoṣa's admiration of the *Rāmāyaṇa* is explicable while it is probable that he belonged to some such Buddhist school of eastern origin as the Mahasaṅghika or the Bahuśrutika. Here in this paper we have tried to show that Aśvaghoṣa has all along shown his mastery over the general principles of all sciences. In his Kavyas and Natakas he has in many places displayed his knowledge of the sciences with accuracy. He perhaps followed the maxim 'Sarvato dīkṣā hi kavayaḥ.' So far as scholarly accuracy is concerned, he is unrivalled and he is practically free from any lapse from correction. He is strictly adhered to the authorities and wherever he is incorrect the inaccuracy lies with the source material.

Keywords: Aśvaghoṣa, Precursor of Kalidāsa, Buddhist school, Eastern origin, General principles of all sciences, Knowledge of sciences, Source materials

Introduction

Aśvaghoṣa has all along shown his mastery over the general principles of all sciences. In his Kāvya and Nāṭaka he has in many places displayed his knowledge of the sciences with accuracy. He perhaps followed the maxim 'sarvato dīkṣā hi kavayaḥ'. So far as pedantic accuracy is concerned, he is unrivalled and he is practically

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free from any lapse from correctness. He is strictly adhered to the authorities and wherever he is incorrect the inaccuracy lies with the source material. The *Vedas*, *Upaniṣads*, *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* have been extensively studied by him. His *Buddhacarita* and *Saundarananda* have ample evidences of this. He has referred to all principal philosophies of the heterodox system, as well as the Bauddha and Jaina religion. His works describe to a greatest extent the illumination of the development of the poetic profession from the technical side in his day. Similarly it is a treat to observe that Aśvaghoṣa's poems reflect at times the high level to which contemporary art had reached. Painting, sculpture, Iconography and iconometric references are not rare in his writings. In this connection special mention must have to be made so far as the painting of the Cakravartin figure is concerned. The verse 34 of the canto of his *Buddhacarita* may be quoted in this regard:

Dīpaprabho'yaṃ kanakojjvālāṅgaḥ
sulakṣaṇairyaistu samanvito'sti/
Nidhiguṇānaṃ samaye sa ganta
buddharṣibhāvaṃ paramāṃ śriyaṃ va// *Buddhacaritam*, 1/34
(śāstrī, 1989:112)

That means, according to the science found on this excellent one the brilliance of gold and the radiance of a lamp he will certainly become either an enlightened seer or a monarch on earth among men.

The painting of the figure Cakravartin has attracted the attention of the writers on treatises of ancient Indian painting. In fact, the catchword Cakravartin, i.e. Cakravartin Buddha plays an important role to form the connecting link between the Bauddha ācāryas and Indian ācāryas of painting. The Cakravartin enjoys a central position in the whole theory of painting, the measurements of his limbs, his characteristics, his gait are depicted with loving interest to the minutest detail. He is hence the chief subject of painting but at the same time the most intricate and the most complicated special attention is given to him in connection with the method of teaching for pedagogical reasons too. It may be observed from the following statement:

Cakravartin Buddha is a significant concept in Buddhism, referring to the Buddha as a Universal Monarch or Wheel Turner (Chakravartin). The term Chakravarti derives from the Sanskrit words Chakra(Wheel) and vartin (one who turns), symbolizing the idea of a ruler who wields power and authority over the world as well as the ability to establish the Dharma (Buddhist teachings in the world). (Rao., 1991:129)

He who knows how to paint Buddha Cakravartin will easily master the other figures, for they are nothing but a lesser reflection, a reduction of the type of Mahāpuruṣa. In describing his physical qualities numerous expressions are used which are known to us from the two series of the thirty two major and the eighty minor marks of beauty of the Mahāpuruṣa. It would be an appreciable task to write a history of the development of these survises consisting of so many heterogeneous elements; they certainly have not been made up by the Buddhists but were existing already in ancient Brahmanical times and represent the ideal of a national hero. We know that Buddha was identified with Cakravartin, that this name is given to him repeatedly in Buddhist texts. The ideal of the Cakravartin was consequently transferred to the Buddha as well as to the Bodhi- sattvas when the Buddhists for the art of painting adopted the canon of a heterodox sect, the reason guiding them must have been that here they found a ready method of how the Cakravartin was to be portrayed in painting. This proves first of all that they pointed Buddha and Bodhisattvas. It must be noted that in painting Buddha types are met with which have no counterpart in sculpture. It is not necessary to set the field gun of anthropology in motion to perceive that Buddha types of Ajanta represent a real Indian and have no connection with the gandhara sculptures. This may be conceived from the following opinion:

The Sculptures in Ajanta are primarily centered around the life of Buddha depicting various scenes from his life and the Jataka tales (Stories of Buddhas past lives). The Buddha statues are characterized by serene expression detailed ornamentation and fluid poses that convey spiritual calmness and enlightenment. (Deo., 1973:69)

Granted that their might have existed school of painting represented in the grottoes or Ajanta are genuine Indian and have no gandhara features. Sculpture and painting are clearly distinguished in our texts and have different traditions which go back to widely separated epoch. But admitting the actual painting of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, we must refrain from being too hasty and not generalise our conclusion by assuming that the Buddhists had generally and solely used this pattern excluding all others. As in the history of Buddhism we must always pay attention to the particular school with which a certain phenomenon is connected as well as to its proper place in time and space, we should always keep in mind that the individual sects have their corresponding art school, that there existed moreover different traditions of painting widely separated by time and space.

In this context the contribution of Āśvaghōṣa particularly his *Sūtrālaṃkāra* is immeasurable. It speaks about the special circle, sect or school which has made this art attractive. It is presumed from Āśvaghōṣa's observation that the noteworthy details which the Buddhists have perhaps in early times already received in regard to painting and a model of the Cakravartin Buddha from non-Buddhist Indian circles very probably the Jains. There must have been indigenous painting existing in India before Buddhism and we must also reckon the Buddhist art with Jaina influence which deserves a detailed investigation. Much in Buddhist art that remains mysterious to us so far must with great probability be traced to this fact. In this regard perhaps the iconography of the 'arhats' and the 'sthaviras' whose history is completely in the dark may be taken into consideration. Arhats, in Buddhist tradition, are individuals who have attained enlightenment and are freed from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth (samsara). The term 'Arhat' is derived from the Sanskrit word 'Arahant' or the Pali 'Arahant,' meaning 'worthy' or 'deserving.' Arhats have achieved Nirvana, the ultimate spiritual goal, by overcoming all worldly desires and attachments, and they are no longer subject to the sufferings of this world. The 'Sthaviras' is a term from early Buddhist tradition that refers to 'elders' or 'senior monks.' The word is derived from the Sanskrit term 'sthavira,' which means 'elder' or 'venerable.'

Sthaviras were senior members of the monastic community who held authority and were respected for their wisdom and experience. The term 'Sthavira' also plays a significant role in the history of Buddhism, particularly in relation to the early schisms within the Buddhist community. After the death of Buddha, disagreements arose among his followers over various doctrinal and disciplinary issues. This eventually led to a split with one group being called the 'Sthaviras' (Elders), who upheld a more conservative interpretation of the Buddha's teachings, and the other being the 'Mahāsāṃghikas' (Great Assembly), who were more liberal in their approach. The Sthavira tradition later evolved into the Theravāda school of Buddhism, which is still practiced today, particularly in countries like Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Myanmar. So we see that 'arhats' and 'sthaviras' were not completely in dark position as Alberuni referred these terms.

In Theravada Buddhism, an Arhat is considered the ideal goal, representing a person who has followed the teachings of Buddha and has reached the highest level of spiritual development. In Mahayana Buddhism, the concept of Arhat is sometimes seen as a step toward becoming a Bodhisattva, who delays their own Nirvana to help others attain enlightenment. Of course there exist some scholars who wish to derive all Brahmanical and all Jaina art from Buddhist art. This is an exaggeration of the pan-Buddhist idea. Nobody will be tempted to deny that the Buddhist art has at the time of its highest development disseminated fruitful impulses everywhere and influenced the Brahmanical as well as the Jaina pantheon. This, however, does not prove a higher age of Buddhist art. It does not always show a complete domination of Buddhism over Brahmanical and Jaina art. The time of mutual influence is but an epoch or later historical development. The period of which we talk have and which is represented by such early text as the Citralakṣaṇa of Nagnajit lies, however, far beyond the late phase and proves the originality of Brahmanical and perhaps also Jaina artistic ideas and works of art when compared with those of the Buddhists. The late are moments preserved for us in India cannot modify the conclusions to be drawn even from the Citralakṣaṇa of Nagnajit.

Aśvaghoṣa gives a very clean pen-picture of the Cakravartin King in several verses of his *Buddhacarita* and *Saundarananda*. Its characteristics are enumerated in the following verse which is as follows:

Api ca niyata eṣa tasya bhāvaḥ
smara vacanaṃ tadṛśeḥ purāsitasya /
na hi sa divi na Cakravartinrājye
kṣaṇam api vāsavitum sukhena śakyah// *Buddhacaritam* 8/84
(Śāstrī, 1989:148)

That Means, moreover this his state of mind was predestined, call to mind the words of the seer Asita of old. For it is not possible to make him stay happily even for a moment in paradise or in a Cakravartin's rulership.

The measurement of a Cakravartin figure is very interesting. The *Sūtrālamkāra* of Aśvaghoṣa clearly states that the thirty two lakṣaṇas and eighty anuvyañjanas adorn him and make his resemble a painting. The description seems indeed to depend upon a painting. Several of the expressions used in this context as available in the *Buddhacarita* as his body resembles a mass of molten gold in its colour the tongue resembling a lotus petal, the naval winding to the right can be actually found in the Cakravartin painting of the Buddha figure, when a picture of the Buddha ordered for a painter, stress was placed on the lakṣaṇas. Instances are not rare when it has been stated that i wish now to get a figure of Tathāgata painted with its beautiful paints of excellence. It is clear obviously that the 32 marks of beauty of the great men which are known as lakṣaṇa were once more systematically summed up in Buddhism and attributed to Buddha himself. (Dasgupta, 1977:75)

What Aśvaghoṣa has done is just a forecast of the measurement of the Cakravartin Buddhas. Getting the clue the ancient Indian treatises on painting describe the teeth, the tongue, the hair of the head and of the body with special reference to colour as well as to the poise of the body and the gait of the Cakravartin. Here the description goes beyond the needs of a painter probably with the intention of carefully impressing on him the effects to be produced by a picture of the Cakravartin.

In other words while before substantial measurements were taught, the theme is the spiritual essence, the sublime expression of the painting. Thus when the voice of the Cakravartin is compared to that of an elephant, of the king, or horses, of thunder, the painter is thereby not held to depict an open mouth as in the case of Laocöon, if only required that his figure be impressive enough to elicit in the spectator even as it were the sensation of his voice.

The gods are to be painted like the Cakravartin, but more youthful; their bodies are without hair and similar to those of sixteen year old youth; for their faces the colours of the Cakravartin are not to be used. In addition two main types, the sages, the ordinary kings, the kings of men and finally the average people are described. In connection with this we learn the important detail that an exact scheme of measurements exists for the Cakravartin only not for the other figures which are to be depicted according to the Individual judgment and must be correct in their proportions. It is thus obvious that the theory of art did not put the artist into a strait jacket and preserved for him creative freedom. The motto given to him is simple beauty or as stated by the text in the negative, avoidance as displeasing effects. The young artist is to start his practice with the sages, probably for pedagogical reasons, because they can be mastered most early from their gradually advancing to the complicated body of the Cakravartin, The apprentice student is warned not to indulge too much in painting demons, for they could easily become a danger to his fellowmen. Here, once more we meet the concept that a painting is something real, something living, that the figure represented by it may assume form and life as we so frequently find in the biographies of the Chinese. Noteworthy is the fact that king Rama, the hero of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, is referred to a subject for painting; he favours a group together with three other kings where names have not been taken from the *Rāmāyaṇa*. They are Balin, Sūrya and the son of Manu. Also it must be left to the acumen of Indologists to ascertain another group of four names, who judged by their relative size, must follow the Cakravartin in grade or rank.

Aśvaghoṣa has always tried to paint Buddha in the light of the ideal Cakravartin king. He remarks with his lustre and steadfastness he appeared like the young sun come down to earth and

like the moon. Despite this his dazzling brilliance when gazed at, he held all eyes like the moon.

Dīptyā ca dhairyēṇa ca yo rarāja
bālo ravir bhūmim ivāvatīrṇaḥ /
tathātidipto'pi nirikṣyamāṇo
jahāra cakṣūmsi yathā śaśāṅkaḥ // *Buddhacaritam*, 1/12
(Śāstrī, 1989:110)

That means, Buddha by his glowing radiants of the limbs eclipsed like the sun the radiants of the lands and beautiful with the hue of precious gold, he illuminated all the quarters of space.

Aśvaghoṣa has painted Buddha in the following way also. He was like the constellation of the seven seers. He walked seven steps with such firmness that the feet were lifted up unwavering and straight and that these strides were long and set down firmly.

Anākulānyubjasamudgatānī
niṣpeṣavadvyāyatavikramāṇi /
tathaiva dhīrāṇi padāni sapta
saptarṣi-tārā-saḍṛśo jagāma // *Buddhacaritam* 1/14
(Śāstrī, 1989:110)

That means, two streams of water clear as the rays of the moon and having the virtue, one of heat, one of cold poured forth from the sky and fell on his gracious head to give his body refreshment by their contact. He lay on a couch with a gorgeous canopy, feet of beryl and framework glistening with gold. Everybody bestrewed him with Mandāra flower.

khāt prasrute candramarīciśubhre
dve vīridhāre śīśiroṣṇavīrye /
śārīra-saṃsparśa-sukhāntarāya
nipetatur mūrdhani tasya saumye // *Buddhacaritam* 1/16
(Śāstrī, 1989:111)

That means, on a bed that was radiant like moonbeams, spread beneath the open sky and adorned with golden splendor, there sat that supreme man (Puruṣottama) his radiant body shining like gold, appearing as if heaven it self had taken from.

Thus, it is obvious that the idea of the Chakravartin Buddha was deeply rooted in Aśvaghōṣa and he displays his painting in detail on more occasions than one.

The Barhut sculptures show flagpoles with human figures for their flags, the flag-bearers being mounted. This seems to be in all certainty modelled after Aśvaghōṣa's verse (*Saundaranandam*, 3.25) which contains the following phrase: 'Hemamañijāvalainam dhvajam.'

There is a verse in the *Buddhacarita* also which draws the same picture. This is as follows:

Nava-rukma-khalīna-kiñkīṇīkam
 pracalac-cāmara-cāru-hemabhāṇḍam /
 abhiruhya sa kanthakam sadaśvam
 prayayau ketumiva drumabjaketuḥ // *Buddhacaritam*, V/3
 (Śāstrī, 1989:130)

That means, he went out mounted on the good horse kantaka the bells of whose bit were of fresh gold and whose golden trappings were beautified with weaving chowries so he resembled a Kārṇikāra emblem mounted on a flag-pole.

The measurement and different symmetrical ascertainment of the extent by comparison with fixed unit of a Cakravartin figure as in the later *silpa* texts follows Aśvaghōṣa's path. The principal extent of measurement is as follows:

Of the great men, there should be no hair in the places adjacent to shanks, armpits, noses, ears, face, things, neck and cheeks. The chest of the kings should be embellished with the circles of hair, soft, fine, tender, decorative, attended with the lines of web and shining like the blue collyrium. There should be no beard on the face, no hair on those men who are represented as gods. It should be known that their bodies should be free from hair and resemble those of sixteen year old boys. The multitude of hair on the (head of the) gods is attached with one another like the fine creeper, blue, pleasing to the eyes and mind and gives delightment to everybody. The paramount rulers shine with the bodies appearing like the colour of the melted gold accumulated from the Jambu river.

These are like the yellow ‘campaka’ flower. They give satisfaction like the belt of the interior part of the lotus petal. The great people have such forms. These are the characteristics of the paramount rulers. They have gait like that of elephants, make steps like those of the king of the bulls and possess majesty like that of the king of the deers. These are the characteristics of the Paramount ruler. Their feet are as strong as the elephant, face is as hard as the bull or the lion and he is as much energetic as the swan, As in dress, he surpasses everybody’s gait. He resembles the scenery of drama and a teacher of the human beings. His gait attracts everybody. The fragrant skin is thin, pleasing and soft like mirror. It is not polluted either by dust or dirt. He is nicely dressed in white garments. He appears like a dazzling gem. He is thin and engulfed by rays on all sides. Thus a king should always be painted. The characteristics of the paramount ruler are these that he has a body excellent like the cloudless moon and encircled with a halo of lustre.

The face is as white as the moon. It is so much pleasing and graceful that another moon has as if appeared on the surface of the earth. The eyebrows, neck, forehead and face are excellent. The hairs are beautifully curled, tender and pleasing, the nose is attractive, the fine lips are red and the teeth are clear like the sky. The eyelashes are long and fine and have a soothing colour. The eyes are blue and black, long and very much attractive. The eyebrows are always to be bright and these are delightful to eyes. The appearance of the ears is like full blown lotus bed. These having a few lines of hair are very much pleasing and are regarded as the ornaments of the limb or the body. The lobes of the ears are to be drawn symmetrically. The two shoulders are white as couch, joined each other and have their parts well filled up. The chest serves as an ornament of the body. The chest is muscular. It is proportionately long and is also proportionately broad. The waist resembles the belly of the lion and is of round shape.

The navel is coiled to the right and proportionately deep. The cavity of the penis is of the nice appearance like those of the celestial elephant (Airāvata). This is round on all sides and its lustre should not be made visible indeed. The things resembling the trunk of the

elephant are proportionately broad. These are thick at the beginning. The ankles also are not visible. The surface of the feet is said to be very tender and greenish. It is as fleshy as tortoise, and marked with 'cakra' of the toes which are radiant like the half-moon. Here the toes are well connected and hence it is beautiful. The two forearms are round and symmetrical like the tail of the bull. Herein are long fingers. These are radiant with the lustre of the nails and when stretched out these are long and bedecked with the marks of the 'cakra'. A paramount ruler is decorated like a garland of 'champaka' flowers. He is equipped with the gait of the swan. He is charming in all limbs which are exquisitely proportionate. He is always powerful and full of virility. The measurement of his length and breadth has been explained. The thigh and the places adjacent to shank in the body are well developed. The hands and feet are beautiful and the joints are not visible. The belly and the back are beautiful, the face is pleasing and charming. The two arms are attractive and the body is well measured. All limbs are muscular and the body is of pleasing colour and is attended with the quality of pleasing magnanimity. A paramount ruler possesses a pleasing body and gait of a swan. We may have a clear conception from the description below:

The phrase Buddha garlanded by Champaka flowers and with gait of the swan likely refers to a specific representation of the Buddha that highlights his beauty and grace, emphasizing symbolic elements associated with his teaching and spiritual qualities. Buddha is often depicted adorned with floral garland including Chompoko flowers signifying his divine beauty and the respect given to him by his followers. The mention of the gait of the swan emphasizes the Buddhas serene and composed demeanor, embodying the qualities of wisdom compassion and detachment. (Sharma, 2002:79)

The expert artists should carefully draw beautiful head, neck, a pair of arms, thighs and places adjacent to shanks in a human body. In all the above mentioned cases, wherever there is the doctrine of measurement, there is all cases measurement by his own finger is intended. The length, breadth and thickness of the secondary limbs should be beautifully executed according to the

rules of measurement and should be proportional. Hence an expert should carefully know the measurement. The divine gods leave always those idols where measurements, foundation, composition and others have been violated.

The sources are related to the Jātakas and works on Iconography.

Conclusion

Thus it is observed that the early writers on Art in Sanskrit have substantially elaborated scheme of the representation of the Cakravartin, i.e. Cakravartī Buddha beautifully schemed and formulated by Aśvaghōṣa.

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Paintings and Sculpture



Buddha in Art images of enlightenment.



Enlightenment of Buddha Schist 2nd-3rd Cent. A.D. Kushana Freer Gallery, U.S.A.



Buddha Meditating Sculpture, Gai Vihara, Sri Lanka.