

## Archaeology, Art history and Iconology

The three distinct ways man expresses himself are through Language, fine arts and the technology. It was quite popular to gauge his achievements in terms of his technological progress. The concept of historiography was ostensibly changed when Archaeology, that was accepted as 'a hand maid of History', started parading its prized material evidence that was showcased in the light of Geology and precise methods of dating material objects. History, earlier relying solely on 'written contemporary records', could not answer the riddles in preliterate human societies, especially the evolution of Man and his Culture. The frame work for periods, epochs and eras provided by the new, and precise methods of dating, made dry history, that was enmeshed in dynastic tables, more spicy and juicy! Again with the help of material evidence it was easy to know about life of common gentry more easy and interesting. This way, the picture of the bygone ages became more colorful and complete. Archaeological investigations in a sociological and linguistic perspective, termed as New Archaeology, tried to answer more complex questions regarding changes that ancient societies underwent. With the help of Structuralist methodology, involving analysis of the systems of culture ( viz. the economic, social, political and religious ) the archaeologist sought answers to know why the changes are there and how they developed \*. Still, the question that perplexed archaeologists, like V. Gordon Childe, was as to how to know the mind of the people of the bygone ages. The Archaeologist claimed that he 'dug the People', but could not dig his mind. He could hardly know his ideas about the ancient contemporary myths, rituals and his ethics, his ideas about beautiful and ugly. Post-Processual archaeology aims and claims to do exactly the same. In the Indian context Professors D. D. Kosambi and M. K. Dhavalikar tried to shed light on the ideas about life after death in the Late Harappan society, with the help of evidence regarding the beliefs among the Vedic Aryans and the Dravidians \*. Dr. Shubhangi Atre showed how the Mother Goddess cult was the most popular cult among the Harappans; and not the Rudra-Shiva cult,\* as was thought by earlier scholars.

Another area wherein the play of the human mind was at its best was the Fine Arts. In the visual arts, the symbols and their meaning has a unique place. Art history is the discipline that critically analyses the visual forms. And with the help of the changes in those, and the contraction, expansion or transformation that meaning of those forms undergo, the Art Historian traces the evolution the art of a given artiste or of a school of art /region. The method that helps an Art historian in his task is to study and understand distinct features of the 'style' of a given artiste or the art of a given region or a school of art. The style thus remains the backbone of the art historical studies. In the case of ancient Indian art therefore the earlier studies concentrated in demarcating different periods, and along with that,

and in the study of art that developed in different regions of India. As the patronage came from royal dynasties to the art that was mostly religious , for the sake of convenience, the art historical periods were named after the dynasties ( such as Mauryan, Shunga, Satavahna, Kushana etc.) \*, and Buddhist, Jain or Brahmanical as per the religious affiliation of the work of art. As per the historical / aesthetic perception of the art historians , there developed, in the West, four schools of art history, viz. i) the Formal, ii) Symbolic, iii) Social, and iv) aesthetic.\* The earlier two schools gave respectively more importance to the study of form and meaning in the appreciation works of art; the social school looked at the art phenomenon as the product of the interaction among the patron, the mediator and the user/connoisseur of the art in general. While the aesthetic school put emphasis on the the pure aesthetic experience, rather than on form, symbolic meaning or the social context of art product.

None of these schools satisfactorily explained the total meaning of an art historical specimen of art or the art historical objects of given region, period, or a people/culture, it was felt. This dissatisfaction on the part of the connoisseurs/ critics was very strongly felt especially in the case of the ancient art that was most of the time religious. As a result of this dissatisfaction, a new school of studies in art developed under the banner of iconology. The first important publication (1939) in this direction was Panofsky's *Studies in Iconology*. This new method emphasized tracing of the meaning and symbolism of a form with reference to the changing cultural context, especially religious and philosophical in the case of religious art. A general patent example from everyday life to explain is that of the convention of raising one's hat to greet another gentleman. As explained by Panofsky, the roots of this go back to the time of crusades, when the fully armored chevalier removed his helmet to indicate his friendliness; but if not reciprocated by the stranger put it back to resist the stranger's attack.

Thus in a art historical object there are three levels of meaning. One was initially understanding the basic characters in a given work of art. Second was identifying the story behind the sculptural piece with the help of iconographic attributes. And then lastly, delving into the hidden meaning with the help of the cultural context. One of the very simple examples in the Indian context is the iconographic scheme at the Great cave at Gharapuri.\* In this cave temple, designed on somewhat unfamiliar plan , there are two accesses to the shrine ; one leading to the three-headed Shiva, and the other to a four-doored shrine consecrated with the Shivalinga. There are, besides this, eight panels in the corners of the huge open hall, narrating some important Shaiva myths. Departure from the conventional plan of Hindu temple becomes very clear and significant, when slowly the viewer realises that these images are connected with the Pashupata sect, and that the three-headed image is of Sadashiva, the linga

represents nishkala aspect of Shiva, and the panels depict Shiva's very gross aspect that is invoked by a devotee for the fulfillment of his mundane desires. The architectural scheme of the whole cave has been fashioned to suit certain stages of the spiritual developments of an initiated pashupata aspirant!

One of the most bold examples of the application of the iconological methodology is the research done by R. C. Dhere, who delved into the hidden meaning behind the worship of nude female figures of the so-called 'Lajjagauri '. With the help of the oral traditions current in some of the autochthonous tribes in Karnataka and Maharashtra, fertility rituals current among them and aborigines in other parts of India, and the data in the Purana-s, he was able to shed light on this folk divinity, that was hastily disposed of as the 'shameless woman' by some renowned scholars. This study of images of 'Lajjagauri ' with ethnological method was reciprocated by an art historical exercise by Carol Bolon, who tried to understand the process of assimilation of the tribal divinities and rituals in the elite Hindu circles. \*She also draws parallels from the Jagannatha Cult of Orissa, which according to Herman Kulke, sheds light on the process of assimilation, also observed in the 'Hinduised States' of South-east Asia.

The methodology of Iconology runs, it can be observed, parallel to the methodology inherent in some of the applications of 'Post-Processual ' archaeology and 'Cognitive' archaeology. Best examples are, as pointed out earlier, were studies of Dr. Shubhangana Atre, who was able to prove the prevalence of the West Asian cult of 'leaping over the Bull', and a strong possibility of the mother Goddess cult ; thereby setting aside the present belief among the scholars regarding the prevalence Dravidian cult of Rudra-Shiva as the main religious cult in the Harappan religion.

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