

NATIONAL SEMINAR ON TEMPLE ARCHITECTURE AND ICONOGRAPHY

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KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY

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Chief Guest, Distinguished Delegates, Eminent Personalities and Respected Colleagues,

I deem it a great honor to have been invited to deliver a keynote address to the gathering of experts, art historians and art lovers. I express my gratitude to the organizers of this meet for inviting me for this job.

For millennia, the people of India have produced works of art in seemingly endless quantity and of virtually infinite diversity. Art does not exist in a vacuum. It is the expression of many things over a span of time, conditioned by social factors, religious thought, political upheavals, economic conditions, etc. Art is a voyage of discovery and expression, a voyage inspired and marked by joy, love, and beauty, a voyage that brings us closest to the inner recesses of consciousness and unites in its expression the inner and the outer in such a way that the formulations lead the artist and the viewer to something that is within us in order to see the invisible and to seize the unseizable. This is the boon of art and the bounty of this boon we should be able to shower on all the seekers of all ages.

Art is a quest of truth. Just as science is a quest of truth, just as philosophy is a quest of truth, even so art, too, is a quest of truth. But each one of them has its own specific method which distinguishes it from all others. For the study of Indian art requires a fair working knowledge of the history of the surrounding countries- not their entire history, not their dynastic tables, but the broad facts which concerns us is in the development of our own art simply because you can not study Indian art and art history in isolation.

According to Ashok Kelkar there are those for whom art is for delight only. This is hedonism, Anandavad and for didacticist Ashyavada meaning there by art is pure meaning, it communicates a message. He further speaks of vitalism , (Jivanavada), that is to think as to how different ways of life have been embodied in art, how art is influenced by society and its culture, and influences in turn society and its culture. To create and enjoy art are no less than, and no more than, modes of living. Thus, Buddhist art is Buddhist not simply by reason of its Buddhist themes or its creators being Buddhist, but rather by reason of its being an integral part of the Buddhist way of life-elaborates Prof. Kelkar.

There are certain essential elements that are distinguishing features of art and art experience. There is, first, intuition of the artist, ---intuition that marks the awakening in experience that unites the self of the artist and the object on which the artist concentrates.

This experience leads up to identity and is marked by sincerity. The result of the experience is the discovery of the truths of the object and the discovery of the beauty of the object. This beauty vibrates in the consciousness in a state of joy, in a state of feeling, in a state of *rasa* of creation and some kind of inevitability of the expression of form through a technique that is appropriate to the given form of art. Form and technique are interrelated and they demand each other in their road towards perfection. At a given stage of expression and creativity, they assume great importance, and the great masterpieces of art embody these elements and determine their excellence.

There is, I may say, mystery, miracle and magic of form, and the joy of the artist, the creativeness of the artist is in the discovery and expression of this mystery, miracle and magic. The artist arrives at the origin of the form, where the form seems to emerge from the womb of the formless, from the reality that is ineffable, which is yet no monotone and which is not devoid of potency, but is capable of power, and of multiple formations of significant symbolism. Art is thus essentially a journey to the secret where the unseizable is seized, where significant forms are discovered and expressed. The subtlest experience of art consists in arriving at the subtlety of the relationship between the form and the formless, the finite and the infinite, the qualified and the unqualified, the conditioned and the unconditioned.

Indian art has been able to sustain its intellectual appeal for thousands of years. Thus, the statement of Pablo Picasso, that “ if a work of art cannot live always in the present, it may not be considered at all. The art of the Greeks, of the Egyptians, of great painters who lived in other times is not an art of the past; perhaps it is more live today than it ever was.” is equally valid for ancient and classical Indian art. (Quoted by Radhakamal Mukherjee in *The Cosmic Art Of India*, p.32).

It is said that man is not an island and the same is true with art. It is closely associated with life, inseparably related with all aspects of human life, be it social, religious, or spiritual. In the Indian context the art is one of the ways of expressing philosophy though it is often difficult to find out the exact relation between art and philosophy as the former is concrete and the latter is abstract.

Any society can be known comprehensively only when we know culture which has two aspects, material and metaphysical. The material aspect is known from the things material which a society uses and with which a society tries to lead a happy worldly life. The metaphysical side consists of the thoughts that motivate a society, thoughts that culminate in creative outpourings: religious, philosophical, ethical, literary and artistic. The material culture, one may say, represents the outer casement (body) of a society and the metaphysical, its soul. Society sans culture even if materially rich is like mortal being without a soul and the art is such a medium which subtly and inextricably links both the material civilization and culture.

ART AND ARCHAEOLOGY:

Archaeology reveals the man’s past of millions of years and art is such a media which infuses life in the skeletons dug out by the archaeologist. Thus the strength of art enabling archaeologist visualize life of human beings in the past. Every body from us knows that the excavations at Mohenjodado and Hadappa yielded striking artistic objects for the first time in India. Some of them are sculptures in the round denoting progress of those artists in the plastic art. Moreover the objects of different shapes and sizes found in the excavations show not only material development but are also suggestive of cultural aspects, for example the statuette of a dancing girl presents not only the knowledge of art of dance, but also the aesthetic sense of the artist of that age. Right

from the Harappan period the Indian artist brought forth passionately artistic productions of both men and animals in a variety of mediums; T.C., bones, ivory, metal, and paintings on the earthen wares. All these represent the rich variety of people that were living in the cities and villages of the Indus civilization.

Again archaeology brings forth bones of males and females while the art provides an idea of their multiple activities, activities related to even love-games, all this is difficult to visualize through the finds unearthed by the archaeologist unless aided by artistic devices. The sacred and revered objects which a spade of an archaeologist digs out speak volumes of the mind of inhabitants who create these. Archaeology alone is not capable to visualize this aspect of human life sans the help of art. To be brief, it can be said that the art enriches archaeology, it gives flesh and forms to the bones the archaeologists dig out and infuses life in it. And thus art and archaeology are interdependent, inseparable and constitute an integral part of each other.

ART AND RELIGIOUS IMAGERY:

Indian art does not express things but sublime ideas, complex meditations, flashing intuitions. The Hindu artist of the ancient and medieval periods has unfailingly expressed his deep faith in transcendental Reality. It is to be noted that art in India assimilates the truth and values of the metaphysical order into all spheres of life-social, moral, artistic. It knows no antithesis between the immediate and the ultimate, the earthly and the heavenly, the sensuous and the transcendental, and enjoyment (bhukti) and liberation (mukti)

The Shilpashastras codified the symbols, motifs and forms of Indian images. Without their depiction in stone, says Havell, the numerous gods of Indian religion would have ceased to exist. (Radhakamal Mukharjee , op.cit., p.32)

In the Indian context art is one of the sources of expressing philosophy and religious predilection of the society. The anthropomorphic forms of the poetic imagination of the Rig-Vedic nature-worshipper took a long time to crystallize into the iconic moulds. As the need to establish a more personal rapport with the divines arose man rather chose to worship them through symbols and rightly so, for how was he to differentiate between

one anthropomorphized divinity and another minus the poetic descriptions. The symbols became the differentiating marks giving shape and form to the various functions and attributes of the gods. Iconography brings forth the ethical values, philosophy and spiritual life. Iconography is the final culmination of the sculptural art; it constitutes the highest achievement of the artist. The earliest icons were modeled after man's own image, but at the folk level of worship. From the yaksha figures of the pre-Maurya or Maurya period it was not long before the Vedic gods too came to be endowed with physical forms characteristic of their natural powers. Man has found his God –*yatha dehe tatha deve*. Even then the search for the perfect physical form of the divinity on one hand and for the metaphysical formless Brahman or Atman, on the other continued their separate but parallel courses for a long time, the Saguna and the Nirguna unable to find a meeting ground. The emergence of the bhakti cult changed the entire scenario. For the ardent devotee the Saguna icon was merely an outer casement, a symbol of the formless Nirguna that permeated the entire universe, the ultimate goal of life being the realization of the intuitive identity of the individual and the universal soul, the Atman and the Brahman or the Jivatma and the Paramatma (Ishwara).

The pre-eminence of the Saguna worship led to a spate of new gods and goddesses, brought to life through sculpted stone images. The artist-sculptors let their imagination run-riot to create a crowded pantheon of vivid forms and rich symbolism. Gradually the attempts were made to create a form representative of the Avyakta (invisible) Brahma. It was of course the work of the philosophers and the thinkers among the sculptors. I have chosen to call the finest product of their iconic vision Bimba-Brahma, the Bimba, the image symbolizing Brahma was the ultimate in the art of icon making. Neither the sculptor nor the artist could aim to go beyond it.

While personifying the philosophy the artist has to go beyond the usual human form. He has to create images multi-armed and multi-headed. This, of course, was not properly perceived by some writers both Indians and Europeans. They took such images as an unpardonable defect. Vincent Smith does not admit such images as pieces of art and say they lack beauty. He was followed by Maskell and Sir George Birdwood; the latter says "this is possibly why sculpture and paintings are unknown in India. It is easier to prove them totally wrong for they could not catch the concept and significance of this

creation by philosopher-sculptor. While criticizing artistic creations one should try to know its aim.

It is better here to take in consideration Mr. Holmes suggestion that a work of art must possess in some degree the four qualities of unity, vitality, infinity and repose. In other words a work of art is great in so far as it expresses its own theme in a form at once rhythmic and impassioned, through a definite pattern it must express a motif deeply felt. So the work of art has the qualities which Holmes demands, if it is felt, need we further concern ourselves with arithmetic? asks Anand Coomarswamy (The Dance Of Shiva, 1991edn., p.82) The greatness of the Indian artist lies in the fact that he created an image as a masterpiece which is enshrined and worshiped. This can be taken as a work of art which lives always in the present, as says Pablo Picasso.

ARCHITECTURE

Indian architecture, particularly Indian sacred architecture, in its inmost reality is an altar raised to the Divine self, a House of Cosmic Spirit. Art and architecture are considered an important source for understanding the material culture of a society. But they are not sufficient to understand life in its entirety because they do not throw adequate light on the metaphysical life of society. The exception is that of the temples among architecture and icons as far as sculptured stones are concerned. Both of these form a precious source of knowledge of both the material and metaphysical aspects of culture.

Scholars like Lethaby defines architecture as a matrix of civilization. Others state that it reveals man's mind in terms of wood, bricks and stone. On the basis of these and other definitions one can visualize architecture which enables us to know man's mind and the height of material culture which he has achieved. But the knowledge of the working of the mind does not mean the knowledge of the metaphysical attainments. While this holds good for secular architecture of all kinds, the temples are a marked exception. These religious structures are not simply places of worship and devotional congregation, but they have been conceived conceptually from their very foundations to their finials. The structural concept draws its inspiration from the Vedic tradition and the sacred lore of Brahmanism but their actual shapes and forms are the product of primeval modes of building whose rules are enshrined in the treatise on architecture.

Temple architecture in India was born of the truly Indian concept of a divinity in a spiritualized body. The organic theory cognizing architecture in terms of human organism permeates the entire structure of a Hindu temple and constitutes the primary subject-matter of *Shilpashastras*.

Ancient seers had always conceived of the human body as an abode of god, but it took the '*sthapati-s*' a long time to put forth a structure in the likeness of the human form. When the *Prasada* finally appeared, it was the realization of the dream of centuries of the ancient seers, philosophers and *sthapati-s* alike.

The Indian *sthapati-s*, however, took some centuries to translate into appropriate visual form, the abode to the immanent spirit-the god in the universe. His omnipresence has to be confined within the walls of the shrine in a befitting manner as the soul within the human body. The fundamental purpose of the temple architecture in India was to concretize the prevailing spiritual ethos/ consciousness into rock, brick and stone.

The enunciation by ancient philosophers of the organic theory that god and his temple correspond to the soul and the human body, posed a challenge before the *sthapati-s*. This was the stage where some sort of a structural shrine was felt necessary to house the anthropomorphic form of a deity. The *sthapati-s* in this respect had to start from naught. There was no model, no structural form to emulate.

A temple according to Brahmanic conception is the visible outer casement (body) of the invisible deity, a visible image of which installed in it. It is regarded, like the human body, as the outer visible form of the formless. And so the *sthapati-s* had to strive hard to endow the shape of the human body to the temple structure which had evolved by then to the sanctum stage.

According to *Mayamata* (xv111.193), the temple contains the whole manifestation in which He is beheld as *Purusha*, the supernal man. The *Agni-purana*, the *Hayashirshapancharatra*, the *shilparatna*, etc. describe various parts of the temple along with the corresponding limbs of the human body. They describe as the hair, the *Amalaka*

(*Anda*) the head, etc. and finally the image (*pratima*) is the *Jiva* its life. Temples with all these ingredient parts are full-fledged and can be called *Prasada* according to the *Samaranganasutradhara* and *Vimana* according to the *Ishansivagurudevapaddhati*.

A complete temple in all respects is the achievement of the ancient architect. There is no need to restate that symbolism is the *sine qua non* of Indian architecture.

I would like to draw attention of the scholars in the field to think of temple as social institution. We know that the temples in ancient India were the centers of social activities along with religious ones. This is to be elaborated while discussing the functions of temple and another point is related to the presence of *Surasundari*-s on the exterior walls of the temples. Their identification, the roles they play, and significance. They are not given their due importance by the scholars in the field.

I am sure that scholars would consider this seriously in future when they write on temple architecture.

Thank you all.