

Analysis of Various Forms of Buddhist Idols in Ancient Times

Dr. Raj Kumar

Department of Ancient Indian History, Culture and Archaeology, Tilka Manjhi Bhagalpur University

Abstract

Buddhist idols in ancient times are the result of the basic teachings of Buddhism, devotional tradition and socio-cultural environment. The creation of Buddha idols was not only a symbol of religious faith, but it also presents a mirror of the art, culture and philosophy of that time. Analyzing the various forms of Buddhist idols helps us understand how Buddhism developed a deep and meaningful medium of worship for its followers. Initially, the followers of Buddhism believed in Buddha as a witness and teacher, due to which his idols were created in symbolic form. Gradually, with the development of traditions of devotion and worship, idols of Buddha started being created. This process involved the development of various styles and artistic trends that reflect the evolution of Buddhism. Ancient Buddhist statues, such as those of Mathura and Gandhara, were not only expressions of devotion but also aimed to guide towards social unity and welfare of humanity. Various postures, such as Abhaya Mudra, Varada Mudra, and Dhyana Mudra, express various aspects of the Buddha's teachings. Thus, the analysis of Buddhist statues is necessary not only from the religious and artistic point of view but also from the social, cultural and philosophical point of view. This study helps us understand the depth of intellectualism, art, and religious sentiment of ancient Indian society, and shows how Buddhism created a unique identity through various cultural changes.

Keywords: Buddhist, Idols, Gandhara, Mathura, Abhay mudra

The creation of Buddha statues was not an accidental event in the history of Buddhism. The creation of Buddha statues became possible only after centuries of expansion and development of the religion and efforts in this direction. In the early form of Buddhism (Hinayana), Buddha was considered superior to other Ahrats. There is no doubt that his birth and death characteristics are unique, but in this form of Buddhism his creation is not different from other Arahuts. In this stage of Buddhism, it is believed that the departed Buddha cannot interfere in the world.¹ Buddha was not a messiah, he himself had said that every effort has to be made for construction, one has to become one's own lamp (Appadeepobhava). In this task, no one can help except religion. As a result, in such a religion, no one can help except an idol. As a result, what importance can any idol have in such a religion.²

Hinayana does not believe that Buddha can give blessings by worship, but it definitely believes that by meditating on Buddha, the mind gets purified and prepares the person to move forward in the direction of construction.³ In literature, Buddha has certainly been described as transcendent, but it only means that Buddha is above this world like a lotus leaf, his only specialty is that he showed the path of Nirvana. Therefore, in Hinayana, the question of worshipping Buddha in the idol form does not arise. Thus, after accepting Buddha as supernatural, the way for making his idol was paved. This was the era when all Indian

sects were being immersed in the wave of devotion, the complete form of Shiva or Buddha as a deity became absolutely necessary.

In front of this strong insistence, the fanaticism of the Buddhist sect ended and it had to give permission to make the Buddha statue. This process took a lot of time and has many stages. It is clear from Maha Parinirvana Sutra that before his Parinirvana, when his disciple Anand was asked about his last rites, Buddha gave permission to build a stupa on his remains like Chakravarti kings.⁴

After devotion and worship, only one stage was left for the construction of the statue of Buddha in human form, which was completed around the first century AD. During the reign of Kushan dynasty rulers Kanishka and Huvishka, many statues of Buddha in human form were made. The inscriptions obtained from this time also confirm the construction of the statue. In the third year of Kanishka's reign (3-78), a chhatra yasti with a Vohhisaran idol was installed from Kharpallan, the chief of Varanasi.⁴ During the reign of Kushan dynasty's king Vashishtha, Buddha idols were installed at various places. The installation of Lord Buddha's idol has been mentioned in the idol inscription available from Sanchi of Kanishka (28-106 AD). It has been mentioned in it that the idol of Lord Shakya Muni (Buddha) was installed in the vihara built by Dharmadev. Similarly, the Mathura idol inscription of Kushan ruler Huvishka mentions that the idol of Buddha was installed in the vihara built by Huvishka for the welfare and happiness of all creatures. Thus, during the reign of Kushans, human-form idols of Buddha started being made.⁵ These idols were made in Mathura art and Gandhara art of the north-west. But there has been a big controversy among art thinkers about the question that where was the first Buddha idol made? Scholars like Fush Gunwedel, Smith, Tarn etc. believe that the first statue of Buddha in human form was made in the Gandhar art of the north-west and it was the work of Greek artists. According to these thinkers, the form of the statues made in Gandhar was adopted by the artists of Mathura. In the opinion of thinkers like Anand Kumar Swami, Vasudevsharan Agarwal etc., the initial statue of Buddha was created in the art of Mathura. There was an independent tradition of making Buddha statues in the Mathura region, which was completely free from the influence of Gandhar.⁶

It was natural for this religious environment to have an impact on Buddhism. It was not possible to keep the Buddha devotees satisfied with symbols for a long time and the environment for making statues that was in Mathura and its surrounding areas was not there in Gandhar. Icon worship of Buddha was already going on, statues of gods were being made in other sects, only the order of making statues was left in the Buddhist sect. When we study Mathura and its surrounding environment, it becomes clear that there were three reasons that provided an opportunity for the construction of the Buddha statue, which were not present in Gandhara. After devotion and worship, only one step remained for the construction of the statue of Buddha in human form, which was completed around the first century AD.⁷

During the reign of Kushan dynasty rulers Kanishka, Vashishka and Huvishka, many statues of Buddha in human form were made. The inscriptions obtained from this time also confirm the construction of the statue. In the third year (3 + 78) 81 AD during the reign of Kanishka, Mahakshatrpa Kharpallan of Varanasi established Chhatra-Yashti with the Bodhisatva statue.⁸ During the rule of Kushan dynasty king Vashishka, Buddha statues were established at various places. The installation of the statue of Lord Buddha has been mentioned in the statue inscription of Vasishka (year 28 = 106 AD) available from Sanchi, in which it has been told that the statue of Lord Shakyamuni (Buddha) was installed in the Bihar built by Dharmadev. Similarly, the Mathura statue inscription of Kushan ruler Huvishka mentions that the statue of Buddha was installed in the Bihar built by Huvishka for the welfare and happiness of all living beings. Thus, human form statues of Buddha started being made during the reign of Kushans.⁹ These statues were

made in Mathura art and Gandhara art of the north-west. But there has been a big controversy among art thinkers about the question that where was the first statue of Buddha made? Scholars like Fouche, Grunwedel, Smith, Tarn etc. believe that the first statue of Buddha in human form was made in Gandhara art of the north-west and it was the work of Greek artists. According to these thinkers, the artists of Mathura adopted the form of the statues made in Gandhara.

When we consider the religious background, we see that North India had been influenced by devotion even before the beginning of the Christian era. In most cases, the idol form of the deity is essential for the devotee. Keeping in mind this feeling of the common people, idols of deities started being made in many sects.

(i) In the inscription obtained from Mathura in the first century BC, there is a mention of the Devyuddha between Vasudev Sankarshan and Panchveeras and their worship.

(ii) In the inscription obtained from Ghosundi in Rajasthan, there is a mention of Narayan Vatak, in which there is a mention of the temple of two deities Sankarshan and Vasudev around which a Shila Prakar (stone altar) was built in the first century BC. It is clear from this article that there was a temple in Ghasund (Rajasthan) and probably the idols of Sankarshan and Vasudev were also installed in it.¹⁰

In the Kushan period, the Buddha idols were made in both the standing and the seated postures. The ideal of the idol made in the standing posture was the earlier prevalent Yaksha idols and for the idol in the seated posture, the artist kept the ideal of a Yogi in front. Buddha was a great man, who had thirty-two characteristics.¹¹ Therefore, the ideal of the idol characteristics was accepted on the basis of the characteristics of a great man. The first characteristic of a great man was accepted that there should be a mark of Urna (tuft of hair) between the eyebrows. Among other characteristics, *Pralambakarnapaash* (long lower part of the long ear), *Aajaan Bahu* (long hands till the knees), broad chest, Chakra-marked hands and feet, *Jalangulikar* etc. were accepted and they started being depicted in the idols. From the ideal form of a Yogi, the features like looking at the tip of the nose, meditation posture, lotus posture etc. were accepted and from the ideal of the emperor, holding the *chavargrahi* on the side and umbrella over the head were accepted.¹² Thus, by coordinating all these elements, the features of the idol of Buddha were determined and the idols were made.

After the Kushan period, the sculpture-specificity is seen in the Buddha idols made in the Gupta period. The features of the Buddha idol remained the same as were determined in the Kushan period, but there was some refinement in the style of making the idol. The softness in the body structure of the Buddha, peace on the face and spiritual brilliance are the features of this period.¹³ Apart from this, there was refinement in the clothing design as well. The pleats of the clothes started being displayed more artistically, curly hair started being shown on the head of the idols, normal lines were shown on the hands and feet in place of triratna and chakra. The display of *jalangulikar* also ended. Along with this, Buddha statues started being made in different postures.¹⁴

Abhaya Mudra- In this posture, the lower part of Buddha's arm is stable like a perpendicular to the upper part, the right hand and palm are outward. His left hand is holding the end of the Sanghati. **Varada Mudra-** Standing statues have been found in this posture, in which the right hand is shown downwards and the palm is shown in front.¹⁵ His left hand holds the Sanghati. **Dhyana Mudra-** In this, Buddha is in Padmasana and both the palms are shown in the palms, one above the other. There is also the Bodhi tree above Buddha in the stone. **Bhumisparsha Mudra-** In this posture, Buddha's left hand is shown in the palms and the right hand is shown on the seat pointing towards the earth. The purpose of this posture is to tell that the earth is the witness of the victory that Buddha had achieved over death after attaining enlightenment.¹⁶ Sometimes

the depiction of the Bodhi tree is found in this type of statues. In some statues, the earth is also depicted under the seat.

Dharmachakra Pravartan Mudra- In this posture, the statue of Buddha is always in Padmasana. In this, the expression of the hands is in Vyakhyan Mudra. The thumb and little finger of the right hand are shown touching the middle finger of the left hand. The special statues of the Gupta period include the Buddha statue of Man Kunwar, the Buddha statue of Sarnath, the Buddha statue of Mathura, the Buddha statue of Bodh Gaya, the Buddha statue of Sultanganj, etc.¹⁷ In which physical beauty and inner spirituality are completely prevalent. In the Gupta period, along with the Buddha statue, Bodhisattva statues have also been made. The form of Buddha before attaining enlightenment was given a concrete form on the basis of iconography. In this form, he is not shown completely as a prince, but he is decorated with crown and other ornaments. The number of Bodhisattvas are as follows: Avalokiteshvara, Sidvaikavara, Manjushri, Maitreya and Sambar. The relationship of these five Bodhisattvas was established with the five meditative Buddhas Amitabha, Akshobhya Ratnasambhava, Amoghasiddhi and Vairochana. These Dhyani Buddhas are depicted in the crowns of Bodhisattvas, thereby identifying them.¹⁸

There are different Bodhisattvas born from each Dhyani Buddha and his power. In the ancient Buddhist tradition, Bodhisattva meant the Sangha. Each member of the Sangha was called Bodhisattva and later on, the great saints and scholars of Buddhism came to be called Bodhisattvas. In the time of Hieun Tsang, the famous Mahayana monks and teachers of the Buddhist Sangha were called by such names as Nagarjuna, Ashwaghosh, Maitreyaanaath, Aryadeva etc.¹⁹ Along with this, divine personalities also came to be called Bodhisattvas, who will continue to do the work of the Buddha until the Buddha is reborn on earth as a human. Nowadays, until Maitreya Buddha is reborn, Amitabha is doing the work of the Bodhisattva Padmapani human Buddha of Dhyani Buddha. The concept of Bodhisattva is the biggest feature of the Mahayana sect of Buddhism. The literal meaning of Bodhisattva is a person who wishes to attain enlightenment (Bodhisattvam Abhiprayo'syeti Bodhisattvah). The aim of life of a seeker who attains this state is extremely lofty, noble and wide-spread. The aim of his life is to bring about the ultimate welfare of the world. The self-interest of a Bodhisattva is so vast that all the living beings of the world are included in the ambit of his 'self'. His main qualities are Mahadevi and Mahakaruna. As long as even a single creature in the world experiences sorrow, he does not want his own liberation. His heart naturally melts by observing the sufferings of living beings.²⁰

The making of the Buddha statue is an important link in the development of Buddhism and the devotional tradition. This process happened gradually, in which many social, religious and cultural factors contributed. In early Buddhism, especially Hinayana, the making of the Buddha statue had no importance. Buddha was worshipped as a symbol of superiority over other Arhats and was seen as a witness to the path to Nirvana.²¹ As Buddhism spread and devotion swept across Indian society, the need for the creation of Buddha statues was felt. In the Kushana period, especially during the reign of Kanishka and Huvishka, human form images of Buddha were created.²² These images were not only important from the artistic point of view but also represented the ideals and teachings of Buddhism. The tenderness, spirituality and sensitivity seen in the Buddha statues of the Gupta period reflect the depth and development of this religion. During this period, various aspects of Buddha's life were depicted through his various postures, such as Abhaya Mudra, Varada Mudra, Dhyana Mudra, etc. Eventually, the creation of Buddha statues was not just a religious necessity but also became a symbol of faith, devotion and compassion towards society within Buddhism. Through the concept of Bodhisattva, it is evident that the goal of Buddhism is not only individual liberation but also the welfare of all beings.²² Thus, Buddha statues are not merely

religious symbols but they are the manifestation of the devotion, compassion, and humanity that make Buddhism unique. This conclusion makes us understand how the creation of Buddha statues became an important phenomenon through religious belief and cultural changes.

References:

1. Agrawal, Vasudevsharan, *Fundamentals of Indian Art, Varanasi*, 1966, p.134.
2. Coomaraswamy, Anand, *Buddhist Art in India*, Madras, 1937, p.89.
3. Nanda, Jagadish, *Gupta Art and Culture*, New Delhi, 1982, p.67.
4. Mishra, Anantasagar, *History of Indian Sculpture*, Patna, 1978, p. 93.
5. Sivaramamurti, K., *Development of Gandhara Art in India*, New Delhi, 1975, p.56.
6. Tiwari, D.N., *Gupta India*, Varanasi, 1973, p.115.
7. Pandey, Rameshchandra, *Origin and Development of Indian Sculpture*, Prayagraj, 1980, p.116.
8. Chakravarti, B., *Kushan Art and Culture*, Kolkata, 1969, p.101.
9. Singh, Indradev, *Buddhism and Indian Art*, Varanasi, 1970, p.123.
10. Banerjee, S.C., *Ancient Indian Sculpture*, Calcutta, 1958, p.89.
11. Sinha, Shailendra, *Stages of Development of Indian Sculpture*, Patna, 1965, p.56.
12. Sharma, A.K., *Ancient Indian Sculpture and Style*, New Delhi, 1972, p. 109.
13. Shrivastava, Rameshwar, *Sculpture of the Gupta period*, Lucknow, 1976, p. 124.
14. Shastri, Pandit Suryakant, *Characteristics of Mathura Art*, Allahabad, 1964, p. 97.
15. Seth, Acharya Vidyadhar, *Development of Idol Worship in Buddhism*, Kashi, 1977, p. 94.
16. Rai, Jaikishore, *Religious Sculpture History of India*, Patna, 1984, p. 119.
17. Gautam, Rajesh, *Indian Sculpture: Cultural and Religious Influences*, Agra, 1995, p. 97.
18. Das, Kishore, *Indian Art and Traditions of Sculpture*, Bhopal, 1990, p. 82.
19. Shukla, Mahendra, *Cultural Importance of Gupta Sculpture*, Meerut, 1987, p. 118.
20. V. A. Smith, *A History of Fine Art in India and Ceylon*, p. no. 52.
21. A. K. Kumaraswamy, *History of Indian and Indonesian Art*, p. no. 57.
22. R. P. Chanda, *Memories of the Archaeological Survey of India No. 5*, p. no. 169-171.