A Study of the Sanskrit Texts on the Inter-relationship of the Performing and the Plastic Arts

(With special reference to the Devangana-s of Khajuraho)

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The Natya Shastra of Bharata is the earliest text on Dramaturgy, Dance, Music etc. and, in fact, a basic treatise on Fine Arts. It is assigned to the third century A.D. Its fourth chapter contains an interesting katha which sheds valuable light on the inter-relationship of two sets of Fine Arts, the Performing and the Plastic. The katha states that Brahma took Bharata and his troupe to Kailash to present a dramatic performance before Shiva. Two forms of drama, a samavakara entitled 'Amrit-manthana' and a dima
called ‘Tripuradaha’, one of Shiva’s own exploits, were staged there before the Lord. After the drama, Shiva praised Brahma and the actors. However, as a measure of improvement, he suggested that the beautiful karana-s and angahara-s of the Tandava nrutta, which he himself performed every evening, might be introduced into the Purvaranga of their drama so that their Shuddha-Purvaranga might become a Chitra-Purvaranga:

\[
\text{मरे चाये शृवके हतु त्वमा सुदी: प्रणोजित:} \| \\
\text{सचित्रे मिशिते वाये निशी: नाम नविद्वस्ते} \|
\]

(\text{NS, IV. 15-16}).

On Bharata’s agreeing, Shiva called Tandu to teach him 32 angahara-s and 108 karana-s of the dance.

Besides being meaningful in several respects, this reference also aspires to define Chitra. The Purvaranga of a drama i.e. a drama with only dialogue and action, but without the karana-s and angahara-s (rhythmic movements of limbs, and various postures or compositions thereof) of Nrutta (Dance), was a Shuddha or plain Purvaranga; it becomes Chitra-Purvaranga when a drama is performed with the karana-s and angahara-s of the dance. This shows that karana-s and angahara-s go to make Chitra. It is precisely the dance-postures that constitute Chitra. In other words, an art which has a Laya, Tala or Chhandas (rhythm) of its own is Chitra. This is the classical meaning of the word as ordained by the NS over and above the art of painting which it popularly signifies.

The Third Khanda of the Vishnudharmottara-Purana (which may be assigned to circa 650 A.D.) delimits its meaning to painting-and-sculpture, i.e. to the Plastic Arts. Thus when King Vajra asked Sage Markandeya why one should study the Fine Arts and why texts (Shastra—Theory) should be compiled in order to regularize their practice, the latter replied that one should build temples of gods if one desired happiness in this world and the world beyond, and there in the temple, one should worship images of gods made in accordance with the prescriptions of the Chitra-Sutra (more precisely the text on Plastic Arts), e.g.:

\[
\text{कुल्मा पूजने लग्नले ये लोका अति: बुद्धाता} \| \\
\text{देवा नामालम: कायी द्रयम चारि देवपते} \|
\text{अन्यायम निशिशेषे शृ अमोित} \text{विचारात्} \| \\
\text{चित्र सुत्र विचाराने देवतारूहि विज्ञितम ताम} \|
\]

(VDP, III. 1.4-7).
It was thus that the Fine Arts were brought within the Hindu Temple forum, and gradually they assumed a sacred character. This also suggests that the Chitra-Sutra is as much a treatise on Sculpture and Iconography as on Painting. As a matter of fact, Chitra has been used in the texts not to denote painting alone, but, in a wider sense, to include Sculpture and Iconography.

The Second Chapter of the Third Khanda of the VDP further elaborates on this subject and vividly explains the inter-relationship of the Fine Arts. When Vajra asks Markandeya how to make the images of gods, the latter replies that he who does not know Chitra-Sutra cannot understand Sculpture and Iconography:

\[
\text{चित्र सूत्रं नं ज्ञानति यहनं सम्मुखं नराधिप!}
\]
\[
\text{सतीमालं धारयन्ति वै नं शाब्दं तिनं काहीं पितं ॥}
\]

(VDP, III. 2.2).

Chitra-Sutra cannot be understood without Nrtta-Shastra (Theory of Dance) as in both these Fine Arts worldly phenomena are imitated:

\[
\text{विनित्तं तु नृत्यं सर्वं त्रि।}
\]
\[
\text{विनित्तं सुदुर्विद्म ॥}
\]
\[
\text{मानतो तु नृत्यं चाय।}
\]
\[
\text{दृष्टं रिपतं सातो नृप ॥}
\]

(VDP, III.2.4).

Markandeya adds that it is necessary to know Instrumental Music in order to understand Nrtta, and to know Gita (Theory of Musical Composition) to understand Instrumental Music. One who knows Gita-Shastra knows all the Fine Arts.

A clue to an understanding of the VDP reference, jagato-anukriya, and the subject-matter of worldly phenomena which are stated to be imitated, is provided by the Aparajitaprchchha of Bhuvanadevacharya5 of the late twelfth century A.D. In Sutra-224, Aparajita asks Vishvakarma about the subject-matter of Chitra, how it originated, how many types of Chitra existed and other questions relating to Chitra. The latter explains to him that Chitra is the source and the cause of the whole of creation; it is the origin of all the three Loka-s, subtle and gross worlds, the gods including the Trinity, the planets including the Sun and the Earth, vegetation, all species of living beings etc., etc. The whole of creation is, in fact, a Chitra and the Brahmajnani perceives this world in the form of Chitra as one ordinarily looks at the moon reflected in the water; Chitra is an image of Brahman itself:

\[
\text{परमज्ञनं भासं परं तलं कर्मसं यथा}
\]
\[
\text{तदृष्टं ऊर्ज्ज्रं सर्वं परमाणं ब्रह्म द्वितीयं ॥}
\]
This phenomenal world is *Chitra*; in fact, the latter is the living force of the former. Water and well are so interconnected as to be two aspects of the same entity; similarly related are *Chitra* and the world and we cannot contemplate the one without the other:

\[
\text{(AP, 224.11-12).}
\]

Apart from expressing the monistic concept of creation, this *Sutra* laid down that the rhythm (or *Chhhandas*) of creation forms the subject-matter of *Chitra*. It is this rhythm, imitated from the phenomenal world, that constitutes the subject-matter of the Fine Arts. To be precise, it is the incarnation of the subtle aspect of the gross world. That is what the VDP reference denotes by *jagato-anukriya*.

The VDP emphasized the inter-relation, or rather the inter-dependence of the two arts: *Nrtta* and *Chitra*. Dance, the Performing Art, is meant by *Nrtta*. By *Chitra* both the Plastic Arts (the two-dimensional art of Painting and the three-dimensional art of Sculpture) are denoted. Thus it is stated categorically:

\[
\text{(VDP, III.35.5).}
\]

Whatever is prescribed for *Nrtta* is equally applicable to *Chitra* as both imitate (the rhythm or *Chhandas* or the subtle aspect of) the phenomenal world. Movements of eyes, lips and limbs, depiction of *Bhava* and *Rasa* (sentiments) and the various *Mudra*-s (postures), prescribed for Dance are also followed in *Chitra* and the same principles govern the practice of these two sets of Fine Arts, one Performing and the other Plastic:

\[
\text{(VDP, III.35.6).}
\]
Further:

In fact, the Sage declared *Nṛtta* to be *Chitra*, par excellence:

(VDP, III.42.81).

The main practical difference between the two is that while the former has *Tala* or *Laya* because it is related to *Kala* (Time), the latter has *Rupa* and *Mana-Pramana* because it is related to *Dik* (Space).

King Bhoja (1018-54 A.D.) confirmed the inter-relationship of *Natya* and *Chitra* in the chapter *Rasadrshtilakshana* of his most celebrated *Shilpa* text, the *Samarangana-Sutrādharā*:

(SS. LXXXII.33-34).

Iconography laid down rules for the making of images (meant for consecration and worship) and sculptures (meant for occupying various positions in the sectarian hierarchy on the temple walls) of gods and goddesses and, to ensure this, it prescribed figures and postures along with *ayudha-s* (weapons) and *abhushana-s* (ornaments). The iconographic injunctions applied only to the images and sculptures of gods and goddesses. The *Devangana-Mithuna* sculptures (female figures in various sportive postures and amorous or erotic couples) which were used exclusively for ornamentation along the temple walls, were non-sectarian and, in fact, non-religious and they were originally carved without the guidance, control or restraint of the iconographic dicta, much at the discretion of the artist. These sculptures constituted one of the chief ornaments of the Hindu Temple and, as such, their import was essentially aesthetic; it is primarily this consideration which guided their making and stationing on the temple walls.

Except for vague suggestions, here or there, the texts did not lay down rules for them. Thus the *VDP* while discussing the nine *Sthana-s* (postures-in-perspective) of the subjects of Painting and Sculpture made a passing reference to them.
The master-artist should always depict female-figures (Devangana-s) in sportive (Lila) and erotic (Vilasa) postures in which one leg rests gracefully and her mons veneris is prominently shown. It is more a prescription for perspective rather than for posture.

It is around the beginning of the fifteenth century A.D., that a West Indian Shilpa text, the Kshirarnava, discussed the subject in detail and laid down a few general rules for the making of non-sectarian Devangana sculptures. For example, the text, in Chapter CXX, laid down that on the jamgha of the mandovara of the Chaturmukha-Mahaprasada, divinities and gay sculptures of Devangana-s should be depicted in Lasya and Tandava dance postures:

\[\text{(KSV, CXX.82-83).}\]

The fifty and odd shloka-s which follow demarcate different parts of the mandovara where dancing figures, Devangana-s and divinities were prescribed for depiction. More important in this connection is its prescription and treatment of thirty-two types of Devangana-s, all in various graceful dancing postures:
Menaka with sword and shield in her hands is shown dancing. Lilavati in a state of alasya (indolence) and Vidhichita looking into a mirror are also shown in dancing postures and Sundari in proper dance-form. Shubhagamini removing the thorn from her foot and lotus-eyed Hamsavali tying jhān- jhāra or ghunghuru on her ankle are also shown in dance postures. A dancing Sarvakala is shown in a pensive mood with her right hand in varad-mudra and her left hand placed on her forehead. Karpuramanjari, too, is depicted in a dance posture, apparently lost in the presiding sentiment.

It is noteworthy that though some Devangana-s are shown engaged in various playful acts which are essentially part of shringara, each one of them stands primarily in a dance-posture: the eyes, the limbs, and mainly the feet are so poised as to suggest that she is composed in a karana. She does not stand in a normal stance but in a specific dance-posture, however simple it might appear to be.

Dance-postures have been specifically mentioned along with Chitrini (Nṛtyabhava cha chitrini); Gandhari (Gandhari nama-nartaki); Devashakha (Golchakram nṛtyakartri Devashakha); Chandravali (Anjali-baddha nartaki cha Chandravali sulochanā); Sugandha (Sugandha cha chakradhara chakram nṛtyam cha kūrvati); Manavi (Harahasta cha nṛtyangi Manavī); Manahamsa (Prushtavamshodbhava nṛtya Manahamsa cha sundari); Su-Swabhava (Urdhva-pade chaturabhangi swabhava karau māstakai); Bhavachandra (Hastapadauryogamudra Bhavachandra sunartaki); Mrigakshi (Mrigakshi sakala nṛtya); Rambha (Hastadvayen chhurakai dhratva nṛtyam cha kūrvate. Urdhvikrta dakshapadam nama Rambha nartaki); Manjughoshā (Nṛtyavartam cha kūrvati); Jaya (Shirasikalasham dhrta Jaya nṛtyam cha kūrvati) and other Devangana-s. In fact, it was only in a dance-posture that non-sectarian, ornamental Devangana-s were ordained to be presented on the temple walls.

This is illustrated by the graceful Devangana sculptures used extensively on the temples of Khajuraho which were built from 950 to 1050 A.D.

It must be borne in mind in this connection that the Śastra was compiled after long practice and only when the idiom was standardised and ideals established. Actual practice always preceded the Śastra by several centuries, in some cases by millennia. Thus, what the NS recorded in the third century A.D. was the standardised idiom and ideals which had evolved after a long practice of a millennium or more. Likewise, the KSV dicta prescribing Devangana-s in dancing postures to be used for ornamentation on the temple walls recorded what had been the actual practice for quite a long
time, presumably since the Gupta period which set the trend. This is a unique feature of the art of India which had a sound theoretical basis. Art in India was never an unrestrained and sentimental pursuit of the 'beautiful'; as soon as the climax of aesthetic expression in any discipline was attained, its intellectualisation took over and a precise Shastra was written down to regulate and control its course, and to prevent decay and decline. Indian art stood on a secure and solid foundation of Shastra and this is what we understand by its classical character.

The Parshvanath Jaina Temple which is one of the earliest temples of Khajuraho has exceptionally beautiful Devangana-s. They are bold, lively and wonderfully wrought (Plates I to IV). Though each one of them is an ornamental sculpture commissioned into the service of architecture, it can stand independent of any structure whatsoever, as art in its own right. The three largest temples of Khajuraho—the Kandariya, the Vishvanatha and the Lakshamana, have similar sculptures in the parshvalinda-s (aisles on the sides of the mahamandapa) (Plates V to VII), each one standing on its own pedestal, entirely lost in its own act. They are as lovely and graceful as are the vrakshika-s (tree-nymphs) which adorn the capitals of the mahamandapa and antarala pillars of these temples (Plate VIII for example). Similar Devangana-s have also been used on the bhadra-s and karna-s of these temples in three or two bands along the three sides of the exterior (Plates IX to XIII) and also on other temples of Khajuraho (Plate XIV).

These Devangana-s are shown engaged in the following acts:

1. **Playing with a ball:** as shown in Plates VIII and XII (upper left figure), the body is twisted and poised in an attempt to throw the ball in a direction, adopting a graceful dance-posture which may be the Bhujangatrasita\(^1\) or Bhujanganchitakam\(^2\). The simple act could have been shown without the posture, which has been incorporated deliberately to bestow an artistic effect to the figure. It is comparable to the Marichika (without the bow), Su-swabhava and Chandravakra Devangana-s of the KSV text.

2. **Holding a mirror** (either applying bindi on the forehead or sindura in the manga): Plates VI, IX (lowest band, left figure), X, XI (lowest band) and XII (lower band, right and left figures) depict these figures. Each one stands in a graceful dance-posture with the entire weight of the body resting on one leg, the body twisting on three points and the head bending slightly forward towards the mirror. It is the Vidhichita of the KSV. It is noteworthy that in a large number of cases, a dance-posture has not been so completely imitated as to enable us to identify it and fix it within the rules of a treatise; it is followed only partially. Though each Devangana is engaged in her own act of holding a mirror, the standing figure is poised in a particular manner which is essentially a Nṛttā-way.

3. **Removing a thorn from, or applying mahawara or mehndi on the foot:** Plates I, V, XI (middle band, central figure) and XIII (middle band, right figure) depict these figures. In each case the figure stands on one leg, the other is bent upward with the characteristic twists and bends of a dance-pos-
tured. The KSV described these figures in dance-postures as Shubhagamini and Manahamsa. It is noteworthy that normally a woman engages in one of these acts in a sitting posture; the artist has always depicted them here only in a standing posture which is, almost as a rule, a dance-posture.

(4) Applying kajal: Plate III depicts this figure, again standing in a dance-posture, resting on one leg, the other easily bending on the knee, with the whole body inclined on one side for support.

(5) Bearing a kalash on the head or in the hand or worshipping, offering water or flowers: Plates IX, XI and XIII depict such figures. In each case, the Devangana stands in a dance-posture. It may be reiterated that each one is a unique adaptation of the prescription and not a literal imitation. Thus the Devangana is not shown in a regular dance-act, but engaged in something else with the figure, head, eyes and legs poised in a dance-posture. These figures, to be precise, do not stand as they would have in a natural way but always in a dance-posture. The KSV describes them under Jaya and other Devangana-s.

(6) Uncovering under intense Kama—passion: Plate XI depicts two such figures (middle band, left figure and lowest band, right figure). In each case, the figure stands on one leg, the other is slightly raised and bent forward and the body bears three curves: on the knee, waist and neck. Gracefully poised on its own pedestal, each one appears to breathe heavily due to an intense feeling. The artistic posture has lent credence to a lively figure.

(7) Squeezing the hair dry after a bath or dressing: Plates IX, XI and XIII depict such figures. As in the foregoing cases, each one stands in a dance-posture, though she apparently appears to be busy otherwise. The KSV text described such Devangana-s under various titles.

(8) Singing, playing the flute or musical instruments or dancing: Figures engaged in musical performance and dancing figures have been used at Khajuraho very frequently. Plate VII depicts a typical dancing figure. This shows the extent to which a dance-posture could bestow effect to the mass of stone that a sculpture represents. So faithfully and truthful is the depiction of the former that the latter is entirely lost; the sculpture is so vibrant with the motion of the dance that it is impossible to believe that it is a piece of stone! The KSV text has a general comment on the prescription of these dancing figures.

(9) Writing a letter: The KSV text described this figure under Patrakehka; the figure has been frequently depicted at Khajuraho, standing gracefully in a dance-posture like other Devangana-s.

(10) Waiting on the threshold or standing by the pillar in Chinta (anxiety); or Alasya (indolence); or Vibodha (awakening) and any one of the 33 Shastric transitory states, e.g. Shanka (apprehension); Shrama (weariness); Harsha (joy); Autsukya (impatience); Smrti (recollection); Vrida (bashfulness); Chapalya (inconstancy) etc. Such figures, looking pensive or thought-
ful, have been most frequently used at Khajuraho and Plates II, IV, IX, XI, XIII and XIV depict some examples. Each one is a beautiful figure, standing in a graceful posture which is again a dance-posture. These have been described by the KSV under various heads.

As these examples adequately demonstrate, the dance-posture gives each sculpture a rhythm which is its soul or spirit. It is this which makes it a Chitra in the right sense of the term. The stone-mass seems to breathe and pulsate like a living organism as a result of this rhythm arising out of dance-postures. Hence the dictum of the Shastra.

It is this unique aspect of Indian Art which distinguishes it from Greek Art or any other art of the world. Greek Sculpture, for example, is an art of the Form, excellent Form. But it lacks that soul or spirit, the rhythm which is the basic characteristic of Indian Sculpture. The rhythm stems from dance-postures, and instils life into its form. Over and above the art of Form, Indian Art is an art of soul and an art of spirit too. The Shastra-s ordained a little in respect of the Form, they prescribed in detail in respect of the Soul.

References:
2. NS, IV. 4-10.
4. Vishnudharmottara-Purana, Third Khanda (ed. Priyabala Shah, G.O.S. No. CXXX, Oriental Institute, Baroda, 1958) hereinafter referred to as the VDP. This volume of the VDP deals exclusively with the Fine Arts, e.g. Kavya and Gita (Poetry); Sangita (Music); Nrtya (Dance with Drama); Chitra (Painting and Sculpture); Pratima (Iconography) and Vastu (Architecture).
5. Aparajita Prachchhītha (ed. P.A. Mankad, G.O.S. No. CXV, Oriental Institute, Baroda) hereinafter referred to as the AP.
7. How far Sculptural Aesthetics in India was simply outlined by the prescribed icon and how far it was essentially the result of the artist’s doing (as determined by his genius and training) has been discussed by the present author in his paper: Bhu-Varaha Sculptures: Indian Art vis-a-vis the Iconographic Prescriptions’, Annals of the Bhaundarkar Oriental Research Institute, Pune, Diamond Jubilee Volume, 1977-78, pp. 799-811.
8. For a study of the ornaments of the Hindu temple, reference may be made to the present author’s Lahara-Vallari in Indian Art, Indian Museum Bulletin, Calcutta, Vol. X, No. 2 (July 1975) pp. 57-70, Mithuna-s call for an extremely important and independent study; this subject has been dealt with separately by the present author in his articles: ‘Raison d’etre of Mithuna depiction on the Hindu Temple’, National Museum Bulletin, New Delhi (in print) and ‘Notice on an important reference to the erotic depiction in the 15th century Hindi work: ‘Chhita-Charti’, Shaód-Pātra, Udaipur, Vol. 28, No. 2 (April-June 1977) and in greater detail in the monograph entitled: ‘Introduction to the Art of Khajuraho’ (Abhinav, New Delhi, in press, to be released shortly).
9. The Kṣīrāṅgavva (ed. and tr. by P. O. Sompura, Palitana, 1967) hereinafter referred to as the KSV.
10. KSV, CX. 113-131.
11. NS, IV. 84-85.