

From Buddhist To Folk Art

As Buddhism promotes progressive thinking about Mankind and all living beings with strong emphasis on love, brotherhood, goodwill, peace and independence, it began to spread quickly among the populace, intellectuals and visionaries. Its influence had spread not only throughout India but abroad as well.

Almost 90 per cent of Buddha's disciples were Brahmins who had embraced his philosophy of equality. For this reason, they were killed mercilessly by the upper castes. Buddhist Kings were also killed and deposed by conspirators to be replaced by Hindu Kings.

No sooner they ascended the throne, they reinstated the old practices of Yajna sacrifices, Karma Kand, Aahuti, Casteism, Untouchability and other disparities in society. This type of blind faith, superstition and casteism was spread all over India in the name of Hinduism.

Buddhist converts were forced to live with lower castes far away from the upper caste village precincts. They were forced to do menial jobs and tasks like street cleaning, disposal of garbage and dead animals, scavenging and begging for alms etc as their only source of income.

They were denied access to all the facilities of education and learning or association with any academic or cultural activities. In fact, it became a common practice to reward those killers who brought the severed heads of such Buddhists they had banished and on whose head they had put a price.

In fear a lot of Buddhists ran away and sought refuge in jungles, hills and some even fled to neighboring countries. Thousands of Buddhist sculptures, icons,

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Chaitya halls and Vihara shelters were destroyed. Then came Muslim invaders who pillaged and plundered thousands of Buddhist and Hindu temples and left them in complete ruins or converted them into mosques.

In spite of this Muslim invasion and their mutual destruction, Hindus and Buddhists could not solve their differences as the upper castes continued their atrocities and subjugation of the Buddhists. They even promulgated a moral code or law called the “Manu Smriti” doctrine which was given a religious status.

During the Peshwa regime, in fact, Buddhists and lower castes were forced to tie an earthen pot around their neck and a broom on their waist to ensure they did not spit on the road or dirty it with their feet. This was exactly like how the White Europeans treated the Black African Slaves and even gave it a religious sanction as the Biblical “Mark of the Beast” carried by “people of color” on which basis they were segregated from White Society.

In many respects, the racism of European settlers in America against their African slaves on their plantations and creating a segregated society using “Jim Crow” laws was a more reprehensible form of this caste system. The lynchings and burnings of Africans who resisted continued for two centuries until the Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964 and even Asian immigrants were persecuted and still are even today.

In fact, the Christian invaders of India that followed the Muslims, imposed the most heinous and barbaric system of torture and imprisonment under the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisition from Goa to Kerala under which millions of lower caste villagers and Muslims perished over a period of 200 years only to be later subjugated under British rule.

Be that as it may, the upper caste Brahmins did allow Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras to live among them. They also allowed potters, plumbers, carpenters, ironsmiths, farmers and other tradesmen useful to society to live among them as also their menial servants. They exploited their skills in every way for their own

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benefit. Along with Brahmins, the other three castes also practiced untouchability against the lower castes. They would throw their leftover food as alms to them from a safe distance.

Starving from hunger, the lower castes were forced to eat the meat of dead animals to survive. The untouchables were given different names in different parts and regions of India according to the languages and customs prevalent there. In Maharashtra they were called “Mahars” and also called “Chamars” and “Mang” and other names.

In this way, Buddhists were labeled as “Untouchables” and their entire history and culture was sought to be wiped out. Even their primary needs of food, shelter and clothing were denied to them. After a thousand years of this deprivation, they got used to being a “backward class” of society. Their lives were stripped of any semblance of self esteem as a Dalit or lower caste person.

The upper caste people told them that their lowly status, backward, uneducated, impoverished life was due to their past sins and a curse from God. As a result, to this day they bear the guilt of their so-called past misdeeds and blame their fate and destiny for being born into a low caste.

Over hundreds of years, they gradually forgot their proud ancestry of olden times. Even today, there are many such sub-castes, sects and groups that have not been able to escape this trap. Even those living in the jungles and hills were similarly ostracized by the upper castes.

Such forsaken people and tribes created their own Gods and Deities. A whole iconography and ritual worship evolved from their tribal customs. They began to symbolize the Tathagata Buddha in the form of the Banyan and Pipal tree and its leaves etc. This ritual form of tree worship was passed on from one generation to another. By this token ritual even those Buddhists who converted to Hinduism kept their old religious practices alive.

THE ORIGINS OF FOLK ART

Living in their hutment shanties outside the village, these outcasts became adept at fashioning art objects and icons out of stone, clay, iron etc in the shape of various creatures, birds, fishes, flowers and even human and divine forms.

Art was the only form of entertainment at their disposal. From toys for children in various media like painting and sculpture to divinities like Marimai, Masoba, Malhari Martand, Khandoba, Nag Devta etc became objects of their creation and devotion. Various animals like horses, lions, tigers, elephants, deer, scorpion, fishes, cattle and bulls were depicted and sculpted with a keen eye for detail displaying their skill and artisanship.

As a protector of Lord Buddha, the Naga serpent with its hood spread out was particularly valued for its symbolic and artistic appeal. It almost became synonymous with folk art and Buddha's message of social upliftment and welfare. This is the way music, painting, sculpture, dance, theatre and other art forms were developed by folk artists living in the forests and village outskirts.

By now, many of these outcasts had been converted to other religions like Hindus, Muslims, Christians and Sikhs and they all left their mark on their adopted cultures in the form of this pagan cult of primitivism of worshiping the beauty of nature. Among the tribes who traced their ancestry to ancient Buddhists were Bhils, Gonds, Nagas, Santhals and other Adivasis.

They all created an innocent culture of adoring beauty of nature and human form seen in the nude forms of tribal art and even in Ajanta frescoes which were looked down upon by upper caste society in India until they were given World Heritage status in the West. Only then were they accepted as worthy of inclusion as representing Indian art. The Ajanta frescoes which show the exuberant forms

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of wanton beauty in the bare bodied courtesans and forest nymphs and Apsaras were compared by western scholars and art historians to the great works of the Renaissance masters like Leonardo Da Vinci, Michelangelo and Botticelli.

The compassion and emotions shown on the human faces and the serenity on the Buddha's face was hailed as a new ideal of Indian art. Even the animals were shown in such a humanitarian way that they evoked a sense of piety and wonder. They were cited as a visual metaphor for Dr. Sigmund Freud's theories about sub-conscious desires that he linked to the libido and erotic instincts linked to fertility cults. He said that primitive art could only be properly understood in their context by using the tools of psychology, sociology and psycho-analysis.

His colleague Carl Gustaf Jung gave a more practical application of Freud's theories by linking them to African folk and tribal art. According to him all art springs from sub-conscious desires that remain dormant in the unconscious mind only rising to the surface like ripples in a pond during the act of creation.

In this context, the use of animal forms like horses, elephants, snakes, deer, fishes etc in tribal and folk art has been interpreted as symbolic representation of primeval forces and primitive rituals linked to fertility rites. They represent universal archetypes found in all world cultures.

Tribal artists have used the full gamut of materials like iron, wood, clay, ivory, horns, hides etc for artworks and beads for necklaces and even body painting which survives today as tattoos and also as we celebrate the Holi festival by splashing colors on each other.

Tribal and folk art also took decorative form as seen on doors and walls of village huts we recognize as Warli art and Rangoli. This tradition continues today not only in tribal and village areas but has even spread into cities and the most modern urban homes and art galleries.

In this fashion we see a reflection of the most ancient and primitive forms of Adivasi and tribal art given new life in the most modern and abstract art forms

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like Cubism, Fauvism, Surrealism etc. Tribal art has also inspired Indian masters like the Tagore brothers and other Santi Niketan artists like Ram Kinkar Baij, Jaimini Roy and others.

Indeed, who can deny that it is the nude figures of Ajanta's iconic frescoes like the Dying Princess and the courtesans and Nubian black beauties that sparked the Great Indian Art Revival by such "Progressive" Masters as K.H.Ara, F.N.Souza and Akbar Padamsee down to their cheap imitators today.

THE INFLUENCE OF FOLK ART

Due to the dedicated efforts of a lot of social activists and reformers before and after India's Independence, a lot of Dalits and oppressed people were able to move from their remote village and forest dwellings and dare to live in the big cities. Even in the cities they were not allowed to live anywhere near the affluent areas controlled by merchant landlords in collusion with upper castes.

The lower castes were forced to live in shanties and slums where they celebrated their quaint festivals which were widely different from the mainstream society. A lot of their culture was inspired by their daily lives and problems which found expression in poetry, art and street theatre akin to Tamasha.

Good use was made of songs and instrumental music played on home made instruments. Some of the performers gained a wide reputation and came to the notice of the culture lovers in upper caste society. They even began to perform in mainstream society festivals and programs during Ganpati, Navratri and Divali period when everyone came together.

A lively cultural exchange began between upper and lower caste musicians and performers who learned from each other. The home made instruments went

through a steady improvement and the lower caste musicians gained a familiarity with classical music from the upper castes. The instruments like pungi, dhol, nagara, tarshi, sarangi, kingri, damru, dafli, gong, been, bansuri, shehnai, ektaari etc began to take their place alongside such established concert instruments like the harmonium and tabla.

The ancient world-famous Nalanda university was known for its performing arts department. It attracted students from all over the world. Not only ruling monarchs but even the Buddhist monks of that period respected the musicians, artists and performers there and their students.

The name of Buddhist scholar Ashwaghosh is famous in religious as well as musical circles. In the successive eras of Ashoka, Kanishka and Harsha Vardhan, various styles of sculptures and folk art came into being all over India. Tathagata Buddha was renowned for his mastery in 77 different arts including painting, sculpture, writing, textiles and martial arts. This fact is mentioned in “Lalita Vistara” text written in the First Century AD.

In the same way Gautama Buddha’s portrait was also commissioned by King Bimbisara at the hands of his court painter. This is mentioned in the text “Divyavadan” dating back to that era. With every turn of history as casteism began to increase, Dalits and lower castes came under great hardship including loss of jobs and economic exclusion.

As per the social divisions and order, the role of Brahmins was to perform religious services, rituals and impart knowledge. The role of Kshatriyas was to defend the country from warfare and the role of the Vaishyas was look after trade and commerce. As such, the upper castes had no interest in strenuous task of quarrying stones and sculpting them to make icons or doing forest work or carpentry required for building temples or homes.

As a result such tasks were carried out by lower castes and they were accorded lower status. Such artists and masons were forced to live far away from the upper

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castes in the village. They were even discouraged from teaching their skills to women and other marginalized groups. During festivals and other public programs the musicians and artists were called to provide decorative and musical services and even during birth, marriage and funeral ceremonies.

By this selective process of inclusion and exclusion the upper castes hegemonized the culture of those they oppressed. In the Mughal Era, this denial was also practiced by Muslim musicians and performers against lower castes. Over time, the lower castes saw others making progress at their cost while they faced denial and exclusion in all areas including education.

The Muslim musicians and artists were no exception as they had no objection to teaching upper caste Hindus as their students but refused to have anything to do with lower castes. As a result, since Independence no lower caste musicians could rise to the level of such masters as Ravishankar, Bhimsen Joshi, Bade Ghulam Ali or Kishori Amonkar.

The same situation is true in the dance, theatre and fine art professions. Consequently a few Dalit singers and musicians like Nagarao Patankar, Govind Mashilkar, Krishna & Vitthal Shinde etc pursued excellence in Quawwali form of singing and made a name for themselves.

A few Dalits took the opportunity to convert to Islam and Christianity to try to escape persecution by Hindus and gain success in other communities. But they faced economic hardship and lack of encouragement to be a major handicap.

The manner in which lower castes were denied access to Hindu religious scriptures like Puranas, Ramayana and Mahabharata etc is confirmed by the episodes of the epics themselves in which heroes like Eklavya and Karna were denied instruction in archery and other martial arts because they were considered to be from lower caste.

As time went on, folk art forms were absorbed by modern art practices and new forms of artistic expression came into being. Folk festivals like bail pola,

Dussehra and Holi became popular all over India and were celebrated with gusto with music, dance and theatrical art performances. The gaily decorated cattle and other animals and the cock fights, bullock cart races and other rustic events seen at country fairs and festivals became subjects of high art and even cinema.

It is ironic that over time a lot of lower caste migrants to the city who had forgotten their old village customs and culture had to now access them from such artistic and cinematic depictions. In this way modern artists kept the old culture alive even using the traditional “Geru” colors and folk art techniques to represent tribal art with an authentic albeit modernist touch.

Folk art has thus contributed greatly to Maharashtra’s cultural ethos enriched by old traditions like Nandi bull worship, Dombari, Zarimari, Kadak Laxmi, Vasudev, Pothraj and other ritual practices. As the forest dwelling Adivasis integrated with city dwellers the old traditions gradually went through a new phase of revival.

But some groups like Marathas, Telis, Kunbis, Tambodi’s etc preferred not to join ranks with the lower castes. They chose the Bhakti Marga and took up jobs as bhajan and kirtan performers and played an important role in reformist activities. They adopted the Buddha’s message of compassion, discipline, peace, equality and tolerance to bring about a more egalitarian society.

They produced a lot of poets and saints who were at odds with the upper castes and were therefore victimized. It is in the nature however of music, poetry, art and sculpture to take new forms and that’s how the new culture took form and spread. Almost all the great modern Indian contemporary artists were influenced by folk art and incorporated it into their own personal style.

Among such masters are Jaimini Roy, Nandlal Bose, Ram Kinkar Baij, Badri Narayan, Almelkar, Nandgopal, Janki Ram and even others like Amrita Sher Gill, Bendre, Swaminathan, Ahivasi, K.G.Subramaniam, Laxma Goud, Vaikuntan down to Jogen Choudhury and Atul Dodiya. This is also true in western art where the great Picasso took inspiration from African art to develop his Cubist style. In fact,

it became quite a popular brand to copy folk art forms in India and use its exotic appeal to make a fortune by selling it to art collectors and galleries abroad. Many so-called “Indian Masters” made a name for themselves and became filthy rich by such spurious means. The historical aspect cannot also be overlooked.

The Mughal and Rajput miniatures, for example, developed by royal court patronage to glorify their lifestyle and palatial affluence through the depiction of exotic dances, the royal hunt or shikar, poetic contests, religious festivals and even warfare. In these different styles like Kangra, Guler, Basohli etc there is little to see by way of any uplifting message for humanity or social welfare.

ART AS A MORAL EDUCATOR

Buddhist art played a great pioneering role in promoting humanitarian values among people. The great Emperors like Ashoka, Kanishka and Harsha Vardhan did not use art to glorify themselves. They used it instead to spread the message of peace and goodwill towards all humanity.

Using art for moral education and social welfare was a unique feature of Buddhist art from earliest times. There exists in our historical and archaeological record thousands of stupas and pillars bearing Asoka and Buddha’s messages of peace and harmony for humanity. There are no vices to be seen in any of the Buddhist artworks which only exemplify virtues.

The Buddha’s austere and virtuous life is used as the best example to inspire others to follow in his footsteps. In such a manner, through art works his message was spread throughout the world. The Greek Philosopher Plato described the four main aspects of beauty as: 1. Physical beauty, 2. Spiritual beauty, 3. Moral beauty and 4. Intellectual beauty. Plato said that intellectual beauty is not discriminatory and is the mark of the enlightened person. It is exactly in such a lofty category

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that Buddhist art is accepted in world culture. Thousands of stupas, chaityas and viharas stand testimony to the great achievements of Buddhist art and philosophy. That is why not only scholars and pilgrims but even tourists are attracted till today to visit Buddhist sites which have been World Heritage status in India.

The Bodhisattva icon has an exalted position and status all over the world. It is an image we cherish because it has risen above all human strife, intolerance, caste conflict, war and genocide afflicting the world we live in. It is displayed in all the art galleries of the world to symbolize the peace and harmony we all cherish.

Let us remember that it is also a great symbol of the richness of our own folk art and culture that needs urgent support and funding to maintain our ancient art traditions and their humble practitioners.
