

INTERSECTION OF GENDER AND AESTHETICS IN THE ŚILPAŚĀSTRAS (C. 500-1100 CE): LOOKING AT “THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION”

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Abstract—The corpus of canonical/normative literature on art and architecture is referred to as the *śilpaśāstras*. They are pedantic compendiums of rules and regulations of art production. Through the case-studies of three *śilpaśāstras* – the *Citrasūtra* of the *Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa* (c. 500-900 CE), the *Mānasāra* (roughly, 7th century) and the didactic portions on *śilpa* in the *Agni Purāṇa* (roughly dated between the 8th and the 11th centuries), this paper tries to interrogate, explore, demonstrate and highlight how do the categories of gender and aesthetics mingle and fuse in these art-manuals. How do gender and aesthetics feature in the procedures and techniques of these *śilpa* texts by which certain representations are manifested? Is aesthetics an ‘innocent’ paradigm of beauty and visual depiction, or is it shaped, determined and underpinned by the dynamics of gender in these handbooks? In the gamut of beauty outlined in these digests how do the female bodies figure in the representation?

To cite an example, the numerous references in the *Agni Purāṇa* to the beautiful characterizations of the female deities/divinities do not belie the fact that they are mostly seen and delineated in association with their male counterparts, and in subordination and subservience to the same. For instance, the images of the goddesses Śrī and Puṣṭi are to be made reaching up to the thighs of Vāsudeva. The goddess Lakṣmī is to be shown as shampooing a leg of the Śaranga manifestation of Hari. In the rendition of the Varāha (boar incarnation of Viṣṇu), Lakṣmī should be depicted as sitting at his feet. This paper addresses, underscores and tries to render an analytical treatment to such portrayals in these treatises that have a significant bearing on our understanding and conceptualization of gender and aesthetics.

1. INTRODUCTION

The corpus of canonical texts on art and architecture is referred to as the *śilpaśāstras*.ⁱ They are the pedantic compendiums of rules and regulations of art production. Parul Dave-Mukherji says [2001-xiii] that her interest in a *śilpaśāstra* like the *Citrasūtra* of the *Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa* was that it would aid an entry into concerns that surround and inform art practice. It is said that experience of generations and experiments of centuries are contained in them.ⁱⁱ T.S. Maxwell contends [1989-11] that their purpose

was to preserve former traditions and recent conventions, and to discuss associated issues such as aesthetic theory. From a wider perspective they shaped and reflected the culture in which the artist lived and worked and from which he drew his inspiration. At the same time they have endeavoured to preserve parts of his vision.

A deeper look at the concerns, nuances and intricacies of Indian art and Indian textual tradition, both as separate and as inter-connected categories, would show that the *śilpaśāstras* served as a grammar for artistic language and practice. They reveal the vast and inexhaustible “canonical” storehouse that was open and available to the artist. Whether they claimed and exercised absolute authority and control on the creativity of the artist, or granted and allowed him considerable freedom to bring out his ingenuity, is both an intriguing theme and a debatable problem in Indian art history, and has been dealt with by me elsewhere [2011].

2. THE ŚILPA TEXTS CHOSEN FOR THIS RESEARCH:

The *Mānasāra* (*MS*), which means the essence of measurement, is a voluminous treatise on south Indian art and architecture belonging to *Draviḍa* school. The colophon annexed to each of the seventy chapters contains the expression *Mānasāre Vāstu-Śāstre* which is, apparently, intended to mean either the *Vāstu-Śāstra* by *Mānasāra* or the *Vāstu-Śāstra* named *Mānasāra*. In a passage, the term *Mānasāra* has been used in both senses [1934-xi]: “The treatise, compiled by the sages or professors of architecture called *Mānasāra*, was named after the sage or architect *Mānasāra*”.

Of the seventy chapters the first eight are introductory, the next forty-two deal with architectural matters and the last twenty are devoted to sculpture. It is held to be the most representative and most authoritative *Vāstuśāstra* treatise, at any rate the most complete one available. Regarding its date P. K. Acharya, its translator and editor, says [1934-4], “Those

who are inclined to connect the treatise with the king of Mālwa of the same name (mentioned in the *Daśa-Kumāra-Carita* of *Dandīn* of probably the 6th century CE) would assign the treatise to the 7th century”.

The *Viṣṇudharmottara* is an *Upa Purāṇa*, a supplement or appendix to the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*. It consists of three *khaṇḍas* (parts) and 807 *adhyāyas* (chapters). David Pingree and Pratapaditya Pal have ascribed Kashmir as its provenance. Chapters 35-43 in the third *khaṇḍa* constitute the *Citrasūtra* (CS) – a section on painting, which is, by far, the most worked of all the *śilpaśāstras* and has received maximum scholarly attention, by pioneering art historians and Sanskritists like Stella Kramrisch [1924], A. K. Coomaraswamy [1932], Priyabala Shah [1958, 1990] and C. Sivaramamurti [1978]. The best study is by Dave-Mukherji [2001] in which two more manuscripts from Nepal and Bangladesh are used to eliminate some problems affecting the understanding of the older editions. Her interest in the text was further augmented by her suspicion on the question of interpretation that surrounded Orientalist discourses of the colonial/post-colonial era. On the basis of both internal and external evidence she dates it between c. 500 and 900 CE.ⁱⁱⁱ

The *śilpa* canon of this period is amply exhibited and reflected in all the eighteen *Mahāpurāṇas* and the *Upapurāṇas* with its relevancy and relation to Hinduism, as they are, essentially, sectarian/religious texts. The *Matsya Purāṇa* sets the ball rolling in terms of describing art and architecture, and the *Agni Purāṇa* (AP) exemplifies the maturity. It is related to Śaivism, Vaiṣṇavism and Śāktism but, foremost, it contains descriptions and details of the various incarnations (*avatāras*) of Viṣṇu. It is post-Gupta and has been roughly dated between the 8th and the 11th centuries. The range of topics covered by it include ritual worship, cosmology and astrology, mythology, genealogy, law, politics, education system, *iconography*, taxation theories, warfare and organization of army, theories on proper causes for war, martial arts, diplomacy, local laws, building public projects, water distribution methods, trees and plants, medicine, *design and architecture*, gemology, grammar, metrics, poetry, food and agriculture, rituals, geography and travel guide to Mithilā (Bihar and neighboring states), cultural history, and numerous other topics. It has sixteen chapters on *śilpa*: three on architecture and thirteen on sculpture.

3. INTERSECTION OF GENDER^{iv} AND AESTHETICS^v:

Beauty in the representation of the female figures is a prerequisite. While ordaining the representation of a woman the CS prescribes [2001-45] that the breasts should be made *beautiful* (*manoharau stanau*), in proportion to the chest. Elsewhere, it elucidates the sensual description of a female figure [2001-97]: “The wise [painter] should depict a female form [in the following manner] – One foot should be made

straight and other languid. The body should be made pliant in some part and firm in some. The enormous hips should be [depicted] swaying in playful abandon. One leg should be stiff [while the other, relaxed].”

The chapter in the AP titled *Strīlakṣaṇam* outlines the attributes of feminine beauty with which an image of a woman should be accomplished [1901-621]. It mentions that a woman “possessing eyes agile and full of desire, like those of a pigeon, intoxicated with the wine of youth, should be deemed as specially fortunate.” It further states that the woman possessing a luxurious growth of dark black hairs, a beautiful complexion, a pair of elevated breasts closely pressed against each other and whose body is shorn of all superfluous hairs should be looked upon as lucky. Further, a woman with the external stump of her umbilical chord involuted from the right to the left, whose private part resembles as *Aśvatha*-leaf in shape, whose ankles have a little dip in their middle, and the dip of whose naval measures the length of the head of the thumb should be deemed as a woman possessing commendable features. The text further expounds that a woman whose cheeks resemble the *Madhuka* flower, and whose arched eye-brows do not meet each other over the root of the nose, should be considered as desirable.

However, can women be held in high regard just because of the plethora of their “beautiful” representation in classical Indian art? Vidya Dehejia observes and infers [1997, 2-8] the *śilpaśāstras*’ stress on the potency of women’s fertility, and its equation and conflation with growth, abundance and prosperity, as leading to woman becoming a sign and mark of auspiciousness. She informs us that the *Śilpa Prakāśa*, a 10th century Odishan art compendium, emphatically and categorically directs temple architects and sculptors to represent beautiful female figures on temple walls as a prerequisite. It lists sixteen types of women who best adorn a monument, and instructs the *śilpin* on how exactly to carve these images. It prescribes sculpting types such as a maiden in a *torāṇa* (door-way), a girl holding a mirror or playing with a parrot, a dancer etc. It warns that without such representations the temple will bear no fruit. From this she infers that the notion of women’s auspiciousness was “magically” transformed to, and ingrained in the monument upon which she was sculpted or painted. According to her whatever was the status and positioning of women in ancient Indian society, such depiction appears to have conveyed a positive signal of powerful affirmation and has been viewed by women themselves as a marker of affirmative engenderment. She argues that the association of woman with nature and fertility, thus, has positive connotations.

Dave-Mukherji [2003] critiques Dehejia by arguing that Dehejia’s reading of the instructions for bountiful beautiful representations of women in the *śilpa* treatises cannot be construed as indicative of a positive, affirmative engenderment. Rather, she explains as she reverses the

argument, it exhibits women as carriers or agents of the notions of perfect domesticity and male pleasure, complying with the patriarchal expectations of perfection in domesticity and sex, and such a depiction, in fact, underpins their subordinate, subservient and marginal placing. Intriguingly and quite convincingly, she states that to draw a direct parallel and establish a correlation between abundance of beautiful representations of women in classical Indian art as dictated by the *śilpa* manuals and their imagined social empowerment overlooks the political strategies of representation. She refers to an excerpt from the *CS* [2003-45], “Just as men are understood to be of five types according to the measurement of the major and minor limbs, there are five types of women corresponding to them. When standing next to the man a woman should be made as tall as the man’s shoulder. A woman’s waist is to be made two *aṅgulas* less than that of a man and her hips exceed that of a man by four *aṅgulas* (my parentheticals).”

As is evident, she stresses that at the root of such an instruction lies a patriarchal bent of mind and strand of thought, as the portrayal of a woman’s body is derived from the male model which is set as the ‘ideal’, as the ‘standard’. However, she also points out that despite that there are some instances of representational autonomy which are to be noted in the same text. The *CS* categorically ordains that when women are shown along with men their height should not go above man’s shoulders. But when shown as *eka* (alone) the same rule does not apply. These little aberrations need closer investigation to have a more nuanced understanding of the underlying patriarchal frameworks.

Beauty is a primary determinant and vital parameter of defining and delineating the portrayal of female deities/divinities in the *AP*. It ordains [1901-113] that in the globe over the *Kalaśa* (the conical ornament placed over the pinnacles of temples) an image of *Lakshmī* should be carved as an extremely beautiful maiden (*surūpikām*) sitting upon a lotus flower and the *Dikgajas* (celestial elephants) pouring water over her out of the pitchers raised with their trunks. While describing the images of *Lakshmī* and other goddesses it lays down [1901-120], “The ears shall be made beautiful (*surūpam*) in shape ... The neck shall be made to measure a *kalā* and a half, with a breadth not affecting the beauty of the same (*tadvistāropa śobhitā*) (emphases added).”

However, the numerous references to the beautiful characterizations of the female divinities do not belie the fact that they are mostly seen and delineated in association with their male counterparts, and in subordination and subservience to the same. For instance, the images of the goddesses Śrī and Puṣṭi are to be made reaching up to the thighs of Vāsudeva.^{vi} The goddess *Lakshmī* is to be shown as *shampooing a leg* of the Śaranga manifestation of Hari and the female personifications of the divine energy known as *Vimalā* etc. as *blowing chowries unto him*.^{vii} In the rendition of the *Varāha*

(boar incarnation of Viṣṇu), *Lakshmī* should be depicted as *sitting at his feet* and the earth also as falling prostate thereat.^{viii} Elsewhere, it enjoins [1901-155] that Hari should be worshipped with all his appurtenances as forming one whole. The universal sky should be considered as his embodiment, or in other words, his image should be deemed as reflected in the infinite expanse of the heaven, while the earth should be *reckoned as his foot stool*. These references speak volumes about the gender-bias that the *AP* reflects by assigning female deities a rather subordinate status and inferior position to the male divinities.

In the context of the magnitude of the images of the gods vis-a-vis that of the goddesses, we have the iconometry delineated by the *MS* [1934-522] according to which the artists should make the stationary or movable images of the gods *Brahmā*, *Viṣṇu* and *Śiva* with all the limbs in the largest type of the *daśatāla* measurement. In contrast, the limbs of all the goddesses should be measured in the intermediate type of the *daśatāla* system. According to the text, in the chapter on the characteristic features of the crowns worn by (the images of) gods and the kings, as a general rule, the *karaṇḍa* and the *makuta* types of crowns are stated to be fit for all the female deities and for the inferior gods^{ix}, thereby placing the female deities on the same footing as that of the inferior gods.

4. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this article has been to reinvent the discursive process of the *śilpa* canon in the light of power relations, struggles and hierarchies centered on gender and aesthetics as a paradigm of beauty and visual representation. The essay has tried to investigate, analyze and rewrite Indian art history from the vantage points of gender and aesthetics, interrogated through strategies which codify their abstraction, relationship, collusion, intermixing and weaving in the *śilpaśāstras*. As we have seen, the question of aesthetics itself is centrally germane to the pursuit of gender in visual art imagery that could be gleaned from these textual sources. Gender differences are subsumed within aesthetics. It can be seen as a mode of intervention into particular hegemonic discourses surrounding gender. I have taken as my task to evolve a more nuanced understanding of the intersection of these two categories in the process of reading between the lines of the *śilpaśāstras*. I have endeavored to bring and club them together, and consider their convergence and the interplay between them. This study shows that aesthetics is no less ridden by social and political inequities. Taking a broad view of aesthetic concerns across gender it explores comparativism in art history. I inspect the strategies adopted while making a representation ‘beautiful’ which, though they may appear to be, are not ‘simple or plain aesthetics’, but, rather and indeed are, a “politics of representation”. For example, the inferior positioning and secondary status ascribed to the goddesses vis-à-vis gods in the iconographical descriptions given in the *AP*.

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working as secretaries, primary school teachers, nurses etc. Griselda Pollock (‘Feminist Interventions in the Histories of Art’, in Eric Fernie (ed.), *Art History and Its Methods: A Critical Anthology*, 1988, p. 169) quotes this verse from Tennyson:

“Man for the field and Woman for the Hearth;
Man for the sword and for the needle She;
Man with the head and Woman with the heart;
Man to command and Woman to obey;
All else confusion.”

Robyn R. Warhol and Diane P. Herndl (*Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, 1997, p. xi) argue that masculinity and femininity are not predetermined by the body itself, but are constructed within culture. For instance, it is ‘female’ (just as it is ‘male’) to grow hair on the legs and in the armpits, but it is deemed feminine (but not masculine) to shave that hair off. So, the ‘female’ is a matter of sex, the ‘feminine’ a matter of culture. A. L. Tsing and S. J. Yanagisako (‘Feminism and Kinship Theory’, *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 24, 1982, p. 513) state that gender hierarchy is essentially a construct related to the notions of power and powerlessness, and gender politics may be viewed as “a system of power relationships and value hierarchies which necessarily includes both women and men”.

^v This term was coined by Alexander Baumgarten in his *Meditationes* (1735). It was derived from the Greek word ‘aesthetikos’ or ‘aesthanomai’ – the root ‘aesth’ signifying ‘perceiving’. Etymologically, therefore, aesthetics is explained as “belonging to the appreciation of beautiful” and “appreciation in accordance with the principles of good taste”. As for ‘aestheticism’, it is assumed and believed to have started as a movement in Europe in the latter part of the 19th century, with its roots going back to Kant (1790) who proposed a theory of the autonomy of a beautiful object and the disinterestedness of aesthetic contemplation resulting there from. K. S. Ramaswami Sastri, in his *Indian Aesthetics*, defines aesthetics as science of beauty as expressed in art [1928: 1]. Aesthetics, therefore, in simplest words, can be defined as “the study of beauty” or “the science of the beautiful”.

^{vi} Dutt, 1901, p. 119.

^{vii} *Ibid*, p. 128.

^{viii} *Ibid*.

^{ix} Acharya, 1934, p. 484. It is prescribed that the height of the crowns of all the female deities should be twice their face. See *Ibid*, p. 485.

Endnotes

ⁱ Tapati Guha-Thakurta, 2004, p.90; D.N. Shukla, reprinted 1993, p. 82.

ⁱⁱ Shiva Sheikhar Misra, 1982, p. v.

ⁱⁱⁱ In personal communication she aptly and grippingly remarked that it is better to be broadly right than to be narrowly wrong!

^{iv} The concept of gender implies that masculine and feminine characteristics are socially imposed and not biologically inevitable. Gender is a social construct and comes into play when the biological differences are exacerbated. Therefore, ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ are not synonymous. ‘Sex’ refers to anatomical distinctions; it is a term of biology and physiology that is arguably neutral. See Lyn S. Chancer and Xaviera B. Watkins, *Gender, Race and Class: An Overview*, 2006, p. 18. ‘Gender’ refers to the social and cultural interpretations that turn sexual difference into more than a merely biological distinction. As Simon De Beauvoir states, “We are not born but become women and (men).” Cited in V. Geetha, *Gender*, 2002, p. xi. To cite a case in point, it has been argued that women and men experience life differently. Gender stereotypes are thus constructed: Men are expected to be rational, authoritative; studying science/engineering; working as politicians, doctors, lawyers, managers, while women are supposed to be emotional, sensitive; studying arts/humanities and mainly engaged in domestic activities or