UNIT 17 SCULPTURE

Structure

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17.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit you will be able to:

- know the rich sculptural heritage of India,
- understand its importance in the tourism industry,
- understand the sense of continuity as far as the sculptures are concerned.

17.1 INTRODUCTION

Indians have made a contribution to world art in their sculpture which can only be paralleled by the Greeks. Throughout the centuries sculpture in India has been a dominant expression of the people and their land. The sculptural artists in India had attained a high degree of excellence at a very early period and specimens produced by them are world renowned and objects of international recognition today.

It has often been commented by European scholars of history that Indians are not history conscious and there is no written record of the history of ancient India. If history is not merely a jumble of dates, names of kings and their wars, but means a record of the life of the people and their environment, there is no better historical record than what we find in ancient sculptures and paintings. Like a vast carved picture book, the reliefs of Bharhut and Sanchi illustrate vividly the everyday existence of the ordinary people. Furthermore, they are priceless artistic pieces that attract connoisseurs from all over the globe. That is why it is important for all students of tourism to have knowledge of the sculptural legacies of our country.

It is true that the creation and interpretation of a work of art depends primarily on a nation's rituals, beliefs and culture. But there can be no doubt about the universal appeal that lies in the silent beauty and craftsmanship of sculptures.

17.2 SCULPTURE: TYPES AND FORMS

Sculpture is the action or art of creating three dimensional works out of malleable or hard material by carving, modelling, casting etc. There is a widespread belief that Indian sculpture is architecture. Although, this is true of the bulk, yet, varieties of metal, ivory and wood were used for sculpture. Examples abound from the level of primitive tribes to folk cultures and the sophisticated ones. Then there is the terracotta of which there are enough sculptures. The whole range of South Indian bronze is also non-architectonic. These famous
and exquisite sculptures are technically superb examples of aesthetic sense. The art of sculpture thus remained deeply rooted in the tradition of Indian art and architecture and had more or less an uninterrupted evolution. From the time of the Harappan civilization to the end of the Mughal rule masterpieces of Indian sculpture kept coming by. As students of tourism, it is imperative to get familiarised to all major sculptural forms that are of importance in highlighting the cultural heritage of India and are of interest to visitors. Broadly we can divide sculptural art in the Indian subcontinent into four main streams.

- The Early Period
- The Gupta Period
- Medieval Period
- South Indian stream

All these sculptural forms are equally rich in their content and exhibit the cultural diversity of India. Let us now see how they differ from each other and still hold a continuity.

### 17.3 THE EARLY PERIOD

#### 17.3.1 The Harappans

The early period begins with the Harappa culture and may be said to have lasted until the advent of the Gupta Kings.

The earliest sculptures come from the Harappa culture. The human and animal figurines and figures excavated in this region show a high degree of finish and excellence and disclose an advanced stage of development of the art. A wide variety of impressive terracotta figurines of animals such as dog, buffalo, monkey, squirrel, rhinoceros, crocodile etc show that the artist had a close study of their habits as well as consummate ability to represent them with realistic effect. The figures of animals carved on seals in naturalistic detail convey a high degree of technical skill and artistic ability of the sculptor.
There is no specimen of the art of the period intervening the Harappan culture and the Mauryan period i.e. for more than two thousand years. There was, however, a sudden efflorescence of sculpture under the patronage of the Mauryan Emperor, Ashoka.

17.3.2 The Mauryans

The Mauryan period constitutes a notable epoch in the sculptural art of India. King Ashoka was an ardent Buddhist and he made the fine arts a potent instrument in the propagation of the faith. He got monolithic pillars erected at various places and inscribed on them his edicts or proclamations to place great precepts before the public eye. The capital of each pillar comprised three principal members, namely the inverted lotus bell, abacus and crowning sculpture in the round. The abacus was decorated with figures and the sculpture in the round represented a sacred symbol, such as wheel, or more commonly a symbolical animal or a group of four animals viz. the elephant, the horse, the lion and the bull. These animals were invariably very well executed and chiseled with extraordinary precision and accuracy which characterizes the workmanship of the Maurya age and have not been surpassed in Athens or elsewhere. Another feature of the pillars is the lustrous polish of the surface which misled some to think that these columns were metallic. In these pillars the art of polishing hard stone was carried to perfection.
Remnants of its railings and gateways are now preserved in the Indian Museum, Calcutta and in a number of European and American collections. The sculptured panels on the gates and railings present a vast panorama of life. Amongst the historical scenes, the most interesting are the royal processions of Ajatshatru and Prasenjit and their visits to Buddha. Another invaluable sculpture is the representation of the famous Jetavana monastery at Sarnath with its mango trees and the rich banker Anathapindika emptying gold to cover the ground of the large figures. There are more than thirty statues of Yaksas and Yaksis, devatas and rajahs.

The representations of animals and trees are also very numerous. The other objects are boats, horses, chariots and bullock carts, besides several kinds of musical instruments and a great variety of flags, standards and other symbols of royalty.

The next important landmark in the history of Indian art is the sculptured railings round the temple at Bodh Gaya. The inner side of the rail is ornamented with long lines of animals, elephants, deer, bulls, winged horses, makaras, centaurs etc. and scenes from everyday life; and the outer faces are carved with circular lotus flowers on both sides, some of them containing busts of animals. The sculptures are well designed, laboriously chiselled and carefully finished.

The most magnificent of the early Buddhist monuments is the great stupa at Sanchi. Its importance rests chiefly on the four gateways which are profusely carved illustrating the jataka stories and various episodes in the life of the Buddha which provide a wonderful
There were thirty columns and out of these ten are in more or less perfect state of preservation. Two with lion capital are at Basarh - Bakhira and at Lauriya Nandangarh, both in Champaran district of Bihar. However, the masterpiece of Mauryan sculpture is the Sarnath column. It once stood in Deer Park in Sarnath. The Chinese pilgrim Huen Tsang, who visited the site in the seventh century described it thus: A stone pillar about seventy feet high. The stone is altogether as bright as jade. It is glistening and sparkles like light.

Besides the pillars, there exist a host of Yaksha and Yakshri figures such as Besnagar Yakshi (Indian Museum, Calcutta), Parkham Yaksha (Mathura Museum), Didarganj Yakshi (Patna Museum) - Jain Tirthankaras (Lohainipur Torras) and portrait heads. These bear distinctive Mauryan polish and are, therefore, ascribed to this period. The figures of Yaksha and Yakshi are huge in proportions, are stately and show the artist's technical ability in modelling them.

17.3.3 The Sungas

The Sunga dynasty replaced the Mauryas in 185 B.C. During the Sunga rule there was a marked development in Indian form of sculpture and ornamentation. The sculpture of the Sunga period depicted life in its true form and reality. This is to be seen specially in the railing which stood round the stupa at Bharhut in central India. The stupa is in ruins and the
picture of Indian life and thought. Men, animals, foliage, gods and goddesses are portrayed with great vigour and dramatic intensity. The human figures are evenly carved and shown in various difficult poses. The northern gateway of the stupa is the best specimen as a work of art.

17.3.4 The Kushans

Under the patronage of the Kushan kings, a new school of art known as the Gandhara school came into existence in north-western India. The Gandharan artist adopted the Greek custom of representing gods in sculpture and the Buddha was first represented in art. The appearance of the image of the Buddha was an event of utmost importance because till then stupa was the object of worship. The images of the Buddha and Bodhisattva are carved out in a realistic manner with great attention to accuracy of physical details, especially by the delineation of muscles and addition of moustaches etc. The representation of the thick drapery with large and bold fold lines also form a distinct characteristic of the art. The Gandhara art reached its summit under the rule of Kanishka but this school gave an effeminate and listless gesture to the Buddha figures that barely expressed the spiritual energy of the Buddhist thought.

In the 1st - 2nd century A.D., another school of art flourished at Mathura which was a centre of early indigenous art. The Mathura sculptures are distinguished by the use of spotted red sandstone. The noteworthy specimens of Mathura art are those of Yaksha and Yakshi. These figures exhibit artist's skill in designing and carving of exquisite figures, full of charm and expression. Apart from the Yakshis, a few royal statues of the Kushan kings have been found near Mathura. The statue of Vima Kadphissis and a headless figure of Kanishka of this period are now in Mathura museum. The greatest achievement of Mathura sculptor is the carving of the earliest entirely Indian representation of the Buddha.

It is the yakshis, essentially representing the water and earth principle, which culminate in the image of the river goddess, principally Ganga, Yamuna and Sarasvati. In geographical terms, these are three important rivers of the Indo-Gangetic plain; in mythical terms they are the principle of eternal sustenance. Throughout the subcontinent, Indian shrines portray mighty figures of Ganga and Yamuna standing on their respective vehicles guarding the sanctuaries and preparing the devotee for the inner journey. Sarasvati, the third river, has now run dry, but is remembered as the goddess of speech and learning and also of music.
The myths of Vishnu and Shiva are fundamental. In the case of Vishnu, the evolutionary process is the model. The primeval waters of the universe are churned; the elixir of life is obtained, but not before the deadly poison (kalakuta) surfaces and the dross is destroyed. Many sculptures and innumerable paintings depict this episode of the churning of the ocean for the elixir (amrita-manthana), where a column is shown as the churning rod, symbolizing the centre of the earth.

**17.4 THE GUPTA PERIOD**

With the rise of the Gupta dynasty in the fourth century A.D., the Indian sculpture entered a new epoch. During this period, Buddhism was still influential and inspired images, which must be recognized as outstanding works of art as well as powerful expressions of faith. But Hindu places of worship were increasing in number and needed images. Mathura, for centuries a major centre for the sculpture of Buddhist icons, now started providing images of Hindu deities. The forms were different but the high standards of sculpture were maintained.

The Gupta sculpture is at its best both in Buddhist and Hindu images. Preaching Buddha at Sarnath is the peak of perfection where he is represented seated in a yoga posture, his hands on the wheel turning the preaching. The elegant image of Vishnu, too, has the perfection of form and of the techniques of carving stone expected from Mathura. In the characteristic red sandstone of the region, sensitively fashioned, it remains imposing despite the damage it has sustained. The image wears a cloven profusely ornamented. The torso is bare and a lower garment textured with tucks, falls from the belt. Long earrings and two necklaces frame the face which reveals a serene spiritual beauty.
The Gupta age also embodies cave temples at Udayagiri hills, one of which bears an inscription of 401 A.D. and has vigorous sculptures representing the incarnation of Vishnu as Varaha and also goddesses Ganga and Yamuna. However, the style reached its culmination in a temple of early sixth century at Deogarh in the Jhansi district. It is adorned with sculptures of exceptionally good quality, full of voluptuous grace and easy linear movement. Panels of this temple show the Bhagavata and Ramayana and also Nanda and Yasoda with Balrama and Krishna.

During the Gupta period terracotta objects and figures unmatched in their size and technique have been found. A large amount of ornamental terracotta as well as numerous Buddha figures are found at the stupa at Devnimori in Gujrat.

Sites in the neighborhood of Bikaner in Rajasthan have produced a number of interesting terracotta plaques of this period, now in the Bikaner Museum. Excavations at Ahichchhatra reveal a large collection of terracotta plaques and large relief figures from a no longer extant site.

Shiva is the symbol of sexual bi-unity, and therefore beyond the duality of Shiva and Shakti, corresponding to man and nature (purusha and prakriti), for both are within him.
temple dating mid or late fifth century. A considerable number of terracotta heads, in most distinctive style come from Akhnur in Kashmir. Numerous fine terracottas of this period have been found at Bhita. A poignant seated figure of a girl and Siva from Sahet - Mahet have also been found that are unparalleled in style.

Gupta sculpture in stone consists of a small but important number of rock carvings in central and eastern India and a very considerable number of individual images, Buddhist or/and Hindu, installed in shrines. The first large sculptural compositions, a feature of the later Indian sculpture, appear in the Gupta period. Bronze images were made but very few have survived which can be unquestionably assigned to the Gupta period.

Check Your Progress-

1) What are the various types and forms of sculpture?

2) Describe Harappan sculpture.

3) What was distinctive about Mauryan sculptures?

4) Did the Gupta period mark the classical phase of the art of sculpting?
The ruined Buddhist stupa near Gyaraspur (Vidisha) in Malwa has four majestic Buddhas and can be dated to the eighth century. The Buddha on the southern side is accompanied by the bodhisattvas Avalokiteswara and Vajrapani.

The surviving structural temples of the eighth and the ninth centuries in Central India and Rajasthan belong to the Pratihara style. This style is derived from the Gupta style albeit with some regional variations. The Pratihara temple walls are decorated with a single band of sculpted niches, pillars with lotus designs and elephants on walls carved beneath luxuriant scroll work.
The late ninth and the early tenth century saw the Mahagurjara style with tall shikharas, sparsely decorated door frames and mandapas. The mandapas, shikharas and the aisles are extensively sculpted.

During the tenth and eleventh centuries, the Chandellas were the greatest power in Central India. They were great builders of temples and tanks, forts and palaces etc. The capital Khajuraho was a principal site of sculptural activity and was a high point of building activity. The Khajuraho temples are famous for their erotic relief panels which may illustrate the tantrik practices of certain medieval cults. In these temples the many charms of the female body are revealed in most contorted and provocative poses. Geometric and floral designs, too, are abundant.

With the coming of the Turks the sculptural activity, atleast that carried on by the rulers and nobles, came to a temporary halt. Keeping in view the Islamic ruling on not indulging in replicating animate objects, there was a sudden decline in sculptured artifacts. The walls of tombs and palaces, if at all decorated, were by calligraphy or by geometrical, denaturalized vegetal ornamentation called arabesque.

It was, however, different with the Mughals, particularly, as far as Akbar was concerned. He invited guilds (salats) of indigenous artisans and gave them freedom to experiment. It is in this way that a unity and continuity in the art of India was maintained.

The depiction of animate motifs - birds, beasts, human or celestial beings - constituted the chief mode of the art of ancient Hindus as well as Jainas and Buddhists. Similar animate motifs in carved and sculpturesque decor in red sandstone are found in within large numbers in the monuments of Akbar at Agra and Fatehpur Sikri. Beautiful brackets having elephant mouths with unmistakable tusks and trunk are used in the dalans of the Delhi gate of the Agra fort. The Hehangiri mahal in the same fort has a large number of carved elephants, parrots, makara, hamsa and peacock.

Apart from these motifs, the Mayura - Mandapa of the Agra fort is treated with essentially Hindu designs and motifs like the chakra, svastika, svrivalsa, lotus, hamsa and parrot.

The subsequent Mughal emperors, though using all these motifs in one way or another did not try and improve upon them as the stress was on paintings during the time of Jahangir and on architecture during the time of Shahjahan. However, from the time of Shahjahan onwards, sculpted pieces of marble in the shape of mini-monuments, jalis and miniature animals do appear, though they are not prolific.

With the coming of Aurangzeb, this whole activity saw a reversal of sorts with the emperor enforcing prohibition on image making - carving or otherwise.

17.6 SOUTH INDIAN STREAM

The art of South India got a new impetus in the hands of the Pallavas who ruled for a fairly long period starting from the 4th century A.D. to the 9th century A.D. The Pallava artists used metal as a medium of expression and this period is remarkable for excellent sculptures in bronze. The subject matter is mainly saivite. Over thirty - five bronzes of the Pallava age and idiom are now identified in various temples. Siva has been shown in various moods, somewhere he appears in the act of granting, somewhere destroying and in others caressing his consort. In the Nataraja images of Siva which is the most famous form we find some of the best examples of South Indian metal art.
Sculpture

Penance of Arjun

Pallava - Chola Transition
The Cholas were the much celebrated rulers of the Sangam age who gave extensive patronage to arts. Nearly 23 Chola rulers reigned for over 400 years from 850 A.D. to 1275 A.D. The Pallava images have their characteristic features in ornamentation and drapery while in the hands of the Chola artists there is a roundness of form and a disciplined strength about these figures. The image of Parvati from Tanjavur now is Tanjavur Art Gallery is an example of classical Chola art. The artistic ideal of the classical Chola art of the eleventh century finds fullest expression in the Nataraja image from Triuvalangadu now in the Government Museum, Madras.

The movement in art under the Cholas continued for a longer period through fruitful pursuit of experimentation. Some of the late Chola images are equally remarkable like the Ralakrishnan in the Prince of Wales Museum and the Kankala Murti from Tirukkalar now in the Government Museum, Madras.

Metal art in the south is not confined to the depiction of gods and goddesses only. Numerous sculptures appear which display Saiva and Vaishnava saints, kings and queens, lamp bearers, animal figures, metal boxes etc. They give an idea of the secular art form. Thus, the Sundararamurti from Kilayar datable to 12th century A.D. now in the Tanjavur Art Gallery closely resembles the figures of the Chola deities. The Aiyar on elephant from Togur datable to 12th century A.D. now in Government Museum Madras, also helps to form an idea of the human as well as animal figures of the Chola period.

Check Your Progress - 2

1) What were the various sculptural forms in medieval India?

2) Compare Chola bronzes with Pallava bronzes.

17.7 LET US SUM UP

The rich cultural heritage of India manifested through its sculptural forms is unparalleled. The sculptures begin very early in the Harappan period and continue till very late. In fact the sculptures of India are so prolific and widespread throughout the parameters of the country that it would require a lifetime to study them.
### 17.8 KEYWORDS

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<tr>
<th>Connoisseurs</th>
<th>an expert in matters of taste</th>
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<tr>
<td>Malleable</td>
<td>adaptable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carving</td>
<td>giving shape to stone</td>
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<tr>
<td>Casting</td>
<td>giving shape through moulds</td>
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<tr>
<td>Modelling</td>
<td>giving shape to clay</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ivory</td>
<td>made of the tusks of elephants</td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-architectonic</td>
<td>not relating to architecture</td>
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<tr>
<td>Terracotta</td>
<td>unglazed earthenware</td>
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<tr>
<td>Figurines</td>
<td>a small statue</td>
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<tr>
<td>Consummate</td>
<td>make perfect</td>
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<td>Ponderous</td>
<td>heavy</td>
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<td>Efflorescence</td>
<td>flowering</td>
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<tr>
<td>Monolithic</td>
<td>made of one piece</td>
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<td>Abacus</td>
<td>calculation frame</td>
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<td>Lustrous</td>
<td>with a shine</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yaksha</td>
<td>mythological figure of a male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yakshi</td>
<td>mythological figure of a female</td>
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<tr>
<td>Centaurs</td>
<td>Greek mythological figures with head, arms and torso of a man and the body and legs of a horse</td>
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<td>Devtas</td>
<td>the gods</td>
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<td>Rajas</td>
<td>the kings</td>
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<tr>
<td>Makara</td>
<td>the fish</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jataka</td>
<td>the stories of several birth of the Buddha</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chakra</td>
<td>a wheel</td>
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<tr>
<td>Svastika and Srivatsa</td>
<td>a propitious signs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Voluptuous</td>
<td>occupied with sensual pleasure</td>
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### 17.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

1) See Sec.17.2.
2) See Sub.Sec.17.3.1.
3) See Sub.Sec.17.3.2.
4) See Sec.17.4.
1) See Sec. 17.5.

2) See Sec. 17.6.