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## PHASES IN EARLY INDIAN ART HISTORIOGRAPHY: AN ANALYTICAL REVIEW

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### ABSTRACT

*The paper seeks to shed light on the phase by phase progress of study of early Indian art. According to the nature of writings, this progress may be divided into four important phases. At the initial stage, the Indian art was understood by the British scholars as carrying mystery, beauty, and romance of Indian's past. This phase (1800-1850 A.D) was focused on only documentation, archiving and reporting of Indian art objects. In the second phase (1850-1900), first methodical approach starts with James Fergusson in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. But this phase was biased by British scholars they attempted to study Indian art objects from global perspective and western idea. But some Indian scholars like Ram Raz, Rajendralala Mitra have already started the text-based analysis of Indian art which was neglected by British scholars in this phase. The third phase (1900-1950) is important for native perspective which is already started by Rajendralala Mitra much earlier. This native perspective was continued by many Indian scholars. Most of them attempted to establish Indianness or Indian origin of Indian art. They also tried to place Indian art within the cultural context of India. This kind of native work is continued in the 4<sup>th</sup> phase of Indian art history. This phase is a stage of great revolution with a drastic change in perspective. Indian art as the reflection of its contemporary political, economic and social life received greater acceptance during this phase. Indian art history has been studied factually, analytically, critically, technically, philosophically, socially and theologically. The paper will focus on understanding and be interpreting Indian art by art historians since early 18<sup>th</sup> century till present.*



**KEYWORDS:** *phase progress of study , British scholars , Indian origin of Indian art.*

### INTRODUCTION

"Architecture is a non-verbal evidence of their own time and communicates contemporary time to the later people. For this purpose, the scholars give their interest in the study of Art and Architecture of a country".<sup>1</sup> Art history of a country represents the cultural value of that country and various cultural aspects are also presented through art materials of a country. Mostly we evaluate the value of art in a particular parameter. But we should have to mention that by whom and which context we do this evaluation; and it must be written in all work which is related to the art history of a country, otherwise true evaluation become discriminated. Already established knowledge about a nation or race may be biased and the source of negligence or exaggeration of that nation's culture. Sometimes the culture of that nation or race is also given more or less value rather than their exact value, for example, many times occident uses their established knowledge and makes a biased description about orient and vice versa. We have to keep in mind that all the nations or races or cultures have their own theory and display some cultural uniqueness through their cultural symbols like art, architecture, paintings, festivals, and rituals etc., which represent particularly that nation or race or culture. If we compare a culture of a country with other countries then it may have some

differences but we never say that it is more or less valuable for other countries because it represents that particular country, not the other countries.

Indian art was a mystery for western understanding. Travellers from the west have long been visiting Indian historical monuments, which they scrutinized with great care. But they were unable to define the multi-limbed purposes of Indian art. 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century brought about an informational study of Indian art by British, French and Danish colonizers. These investigations have been done in the fields of Indian languages, Indian mythology, and philosophy, Indian art and architecture etc. without being Indian they only wanted to know the Indian tradition with their western knowledge. They analyse India as the literary text showed. They have no practical knowledge of Indian complex society. So after the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, the European scholars realized that they have to develop their studying methods. Especially the British scholars wanted to know India much better for their own purpose. For this, they gave emphasis on the translation of religious texts, the collecting of documentary drawings of the archaeological remains of temples, accounts by travellers and speculations about dating and chronology. With the coming of Sir William Jones (a British scholar) to India in 1783 and establishment of the Asiatic society in 1784, these kinds of works have been going on. But after the establishment of the Archaeological Survey of India in 1861 by the efforts of Alexander Cunningham, the study of Indian architecture got a smooth way. So, from the beginning of 19<sup>th</sup> century to the last phase of 20<sup>th</sup>-century various types of study on Indian art have been continuing. The present paper gives light on the methodological progress of the study on Indian art in various phases since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. From time to time how the perspectives of study have been changed and how the documentation method gradually transformed into the analytical method with various dimension, being discussed.

The present work gives light on the phase by phase progress of study of Indian art. For the better understanding of Indian art history, this progress has divided into four important phases as follows:

- Phase I-1800-1850 A.D
- Phase II-1850-1900 A.D
- Phase III-1900-1950 A.D
- Phase IV-1950- Present time

At the initial stage, the Indian art was understood by the British scholars as the mystery, beauty, and romance of Indian's past. They documented Indian art objects and displayed at exhibitions in Europe. They did not use any historical methods of analyzing Indian art objects. The 1st phase was mostly dominated by the antiquarian scholars who wanted to investigate the Indian passed through literature, inscription and mainly through monuments of ancient people. Though Scholars did not find any signature of the past society on the monument and they thought it as mere buildings not the artistic representation of past people. But some Scholars like McKenzie, Hamilton realized the historical value of the monumental evidence and wanted to preserve them for knowledge of past people of India. This idea was forwarded a big step by the activities of James Prinsep. He was the first who helped archaeology to free itself from its antiquarian and literary affiliations. He was mostly busy to work on the inscription and his great achievement is to decipher the Ashokan script in 1837. He was among the first to visualize the great significance of the excavation carried out by generals Ventura and court in the Manikiyala stupa in 1830.

The great importance was the operations which Alexander Cunnigham undertook at the Dhamek Stupa at Sarnath in 1834 -1835 and the complex of ruins surrounding it in 1834 to 1836. This was the first excavation of an ancient site to have been attempted in India as part of an Archaeological investigation. Prinsep equally directed his attention to the conservation of antiquities and developed the position of National Museum. In this context, the first known Indian Scholar who worked in this field very seriously and make a different way of interpreting Indian architecture was Ram Raz. Ram Raz's 'essay on the architecture of Hindus' was published by the Royal Asiatic Society in 1834. He unearthed a traditional Shilpa text of South

India, A fragment of the Manasara. He took help of a traditionally trained Sanskrit scholar and a good sculptor of the Cammatra community for understanding this text.<sup>ii</sup>

This antiquarian phase was ended by the interpretative and analytical researches of Prinsep and a big change have done with the establishment of ASI. Antiquarians only discovered the objects for displaying in Museums rather than to use as the shreds of evidence of Civilization. This initial stage developed further and the study of past became more systematic during the time of James Ferguson and Alexander Cunningham and they introduced a new phase of monuments' study which continued for a long time in India. So the first phase (1800-1850 A.D.) was focused on only documentation, archiving and reporting of Indian art objects.

In the second phase (1850-1900), first methodical approach starts with James Fergusson in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Fergusson's work is now largely overtaken for his clear assumption of the basic qualities of Indian architecture in spite of the general concept in which Indian art as a whole was held in Europe at that time.<sup>iii</sup> But this phase was biased by British scholars they attempted to study Indian art objects from global perspective and western idea. They used a comparative method and focused on the artistic and technical process of its making. They emphasized the racial elements of society and its connection to art. But some Indian scholars like Ram Raz, Rajendralala Mitra have already started a text-based analysis of Indian art which was neglected by British scholars in this phase. "Rajendralala was trying to excavate a past for the nation and fabricate a cultural agenda contesting a number of paradigms of colonialist historical writing".<sup>iv</sup> Stylistic interpretation of Indian art was the main objective of colonial scholars. They believed in derivative nature of Indian art and found the absence of originality. They also boldly mention the progressive degeneration of Indian art. So in this way of writing, they actually misinterpreted Indian art and failed to connect Indian culture with its history. During the second phase (1850-1900), the study of ancient monuments of India became most important part of archaeological findings. The factual study of Indian art by British Scholars mainly dominated in this phase but an initial study of the traditional text of Indian art continued during this phase which was started earlier by Ram Raz. Most important scholars of this phase were James Fergusson, Alexander Cunningham, James Burgess, A.A. Mc. Donnell, A.H. Longhurst, Henry Cousens, Alexander Rea (European scholars) and Rajendralala Mitra (Indian scholar), who shifted the tradition of documenting and tried to focus on the interpretation of monuments by the traditional text and artist. So this phase will be discussed by dividing two groups of western group and Indian group and tried to understand the viewpoint of both the groups.

The third phase (1900-1950) is important for native perspective which is already started by Rajendralala Mitra much earlier. This native perspective was continued by many Indian scholars. Most of them attempted to establish Indianness or Indian origin of Indian art. They also tried to place Indian art within the cultural context of India. The textual relation of Indian art and influence of local culture was discussed in their works<sup>v</sup>. They gave more emphasis on finding the philosophy behind the art form, images, symbols and other art objects. They tried to understand the inter-relationship of myth, religion, philosophy, and art. They tried to establish a disciplinary method to analyse Indian art; text-based analysis took more importance for this method. This phase is remarkable for the study of Indian art through native perspectives. The origin of Indian art from Egypt theory of Fergusson and the derivative nature of Indian art showed by A. Cunningham and their follower consisted first by the Indian scholars at the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> Century and later accepted by some European scholars also. Though some of the European scholars continued their work through the Fergusson's way but this kind of work becoming less successively. Some initial European scholars like A. Foucher, Jouveau Dubreuil started to analyze Indian art from a different view of Fergusson and they tried to emphasis on Indian sculpture also for the cultural understanding of Indian past. But it was during the time of publishing those great works by A. K. Coomaraswamy and E. B. Havell, who harmonize the study of Indian art by using both the Indian tradition and European factual description of Indian monuments. E. B. "Havell was one of those Europeans who believed that the salvation of Indian art could be only be achieved by the Indian artists going back to their own traditions".<sup>vi</sup> Moreover, this phase is

monumental for the Nationalist approach on the study of Indian art and other studies and more or less influenced by the European positivism and romanticism.

Many Indian scholars of the 3<sup>rd</sup> phase also had some bias of nativeness. Always they tried to oppose the western view and sometimes made exaggeration of Indian culture. This kind of native work is continued in the 4<sup>th</sup> phase of Indian art history. This phase is a stage of great revolution with a drastic change in perspective. Art historian of this period focused on different aspects of Indian art. In 1955 Archaeological Survey of India started the Temple Survey Project<sup>vii</sup> by which they collected and recorded data about major and minor temples. Mainly the work of this phase took notice of Indian art forms from all nooks and corners. They studied Indian temples in detail with the help of Silpasashtra and modern techniques. Indian art as a reflection of its contemporary political, economic and social life received greater acceptance during this phase. More scientific and analytical methods were used by art historians.

So, as the study of Indian art history, this phase (1950-2000) is engaged in the different aspects of studies in Indian art history with the influence of modernization like other fields of studies. But like the other discipline of study, Indian art history was not influenced by the contemporary situation. A large development is done during the last two decades of 20<sup>th</sup> century and the 1<sup>st</sup> decade of 21<sup>st</sup> centuries that art and visual culture is studying with their social and economic context. Though the narratives in history writing, and the issues and debates around it, is an established branch of investigation in the west (Haskell 1993 and Burke 2001) but the mainstream of history writing in India rarely engages seriously with art or visual culture in the case of ancient and medieval Indian history writing. However, recently, art history gradually evolved into an independent disciplinary practice in India. Indian art history is developing nowadays with the assimilation of archaeology, history, anthropology, art conservation, archival and museum studies, film, theatre and performance studies.

Indian art history has been studied factually, analytically, critically, technically, philosophically, socially and theologically. This article proposes to conduct a study of these diverse ways of studying, understanding and interpreting Indian temples by art historians from early 19<sup>th</sup> century till present.

So, it is clear that the nature of Indian historical source necessitates writing in the ground of political history of India which reflects of early in the writing of early Indian historians. After some decades, mainly from the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century great changes in the use of historical writings have been made. The scholarly interpretation of evidence for history writing was influenced by the enlightenment, romanticism, positivism, nationalism, Marxism, relativism and postmodern approach in Indian historiography also. Recently the multi-dimensional use of historical evidence has enlarged the scope of various perspectives of historical writings. Indian art history also started myth a particular ideology but not political history, the factual documentation was its main focusing subject in the initial stage mainly in the writing of European travelers of eight century. They documented what they had seen. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, changes came in the writing of art scholars but they misinterpreted the appeal of Indian art objects. Unlike the political history writings, Indian art historical writing also changed ideologically during the very late 19<sup>th</sup> century which was led by some Indian art historians. Indian art scholars were quite able to understand the traditional appeal of Indian art. But the development of writing on Indian art history was not stopped with this traditional ideology only. Large ideological and methodological changes took place during the post-independent India. New trends have emerged in Indian art historiography with the development of general historical writing simultaneously. Social, Philosophical, aesthetic, artistic, regional, sub-regional, gender, economical, dynastical, religious and evidential approaches have started with a new interpretation of art objects for writing art history. "Encyclopedia of Indian Temple Architecture" (1983)<sup>viii</sup> is a big example in this context.

Along with the individual works, some Indian universities also have done good works on Indian art. Ancient and medieval art was mainly taught under the Department of History, Archaeology and Ancient Indian Culture as well as Art History and Aesthetics. In recent times, miniature painting, tribal, folk, popular and modern art have found a place in the curriculum, while ancient art and architecture have lost their earlier importance. In this context art history and aesthetics department of the MS University of Baroda in

Western India is doing a great job. Some other universities in India teach the Indian art, including the Punjab University at Chandigarh, Chitrakala Parishad, Bangalore, Chamaraja University, Mysore the National Museum Institute, New Delhi, Calcutta University, Banaras Hindu University, Visva Bharati University, West Bengal and Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

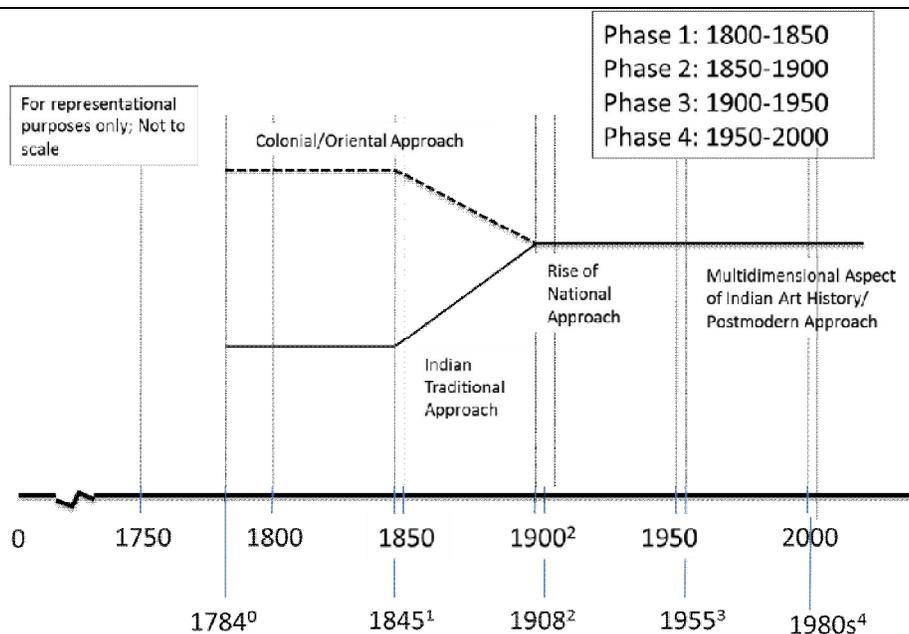
In recent studies of Indian art history, some technology like Satellite Photography of monuments is a helpful tool for the study of architectural monuments. Digital photographs are also used to show details of facial features, ornaments, drapery<sup>ix</sup> of sculpture in some universities. Presentation of art models is also used by the students of Adam Hardy's class in Leicester, now in Cardiff. So, all the recent trends discussed above and the technology used by the universities push forward the study of Indian art into a New Art History mentioned by the 21st century's art scholars like Shivaji Panikkar, Parul Dave Mukherji, Deeptha Achar, Devangana Desai, Parul Pandya Dhar, Tapati Guha Thakurta, Gautam Sengupta and other.

The historical writings on ancient and modern period were largely started by the Nationalist historians in the first half of the twenty century. Against the British imperialism, Nationalism was cultivated. The European portrays Indian civilization as Barbaric and Backward. Against this theory, the twenty-century Native historians wrote the glorious history of Indian past. A great influence of Romanticism was there behind the Nationalist writings. Indian people need to love their own country and unify the people for the political purpose. Not only had this, but a true kind of Nationalism also grew up during this time for the great unity to protest against the British. Mainly these two trends- Imperialist history and nationalist history was continuing simultaneously till the second half of the twentieth century of India. But during the second half of the twentieth century, the notorious Second World War made a great change in world polity as well as in the other fields like science, art, technology, literature and mostly the thoughts of people. After Second World War, most of the countries culturally intermingled with each other and for that the ideas of them got mixed. So, indirectly the influence of postmodernism did not only spread to the European countries but impacted the Asian and African countries as well. Unlike the others fields, the way of writing history was also influenced by post-modernistic ideas largely in Europe and quite less in Asian and African countries. Indian historiography also influenced by this postmodernism and various schools of thought emerged in its history writing.

Indian art history starts with the factual studies by some European scholars and travelers. They just mention the Art component in their accounts and not interpreted the monuments with their social view. They did not follow any chronology also for mentioning the Art objects. It was from the coming of Fergusson and later the establishment of ASI by A. Cunningham the study of Indian art stands with organized way. They also make only a descriptive study of Indian ancient monuments and fail to understand the cultural meaning of these monuments. They mainly biased with the Orientalize view, which always keeps them to focus on the guardianship nature of imperialist rulers over Eastern countries like India. Though from 1857 (V.D. Savarkar called it the first war of independence), Indian people were being conscious about the guardianship nature of British rules and scholars and Indian people were starting to oppose the British view of politics as well as education like history, philosophy, literature but not so large in Art historical writing. Hence some Indian people started to write with the native view but it was largely started from the beginning of the twentieth century when Ananda K. Coomaraswamy was making a new path to analysis Indian art through its symbolic meaning. Many Indian scholars also started to find the meaning of Indian art in an organized way and try to understand the different aspect of Indian art. But it was truly organized and established Indian domination on writing from 1955 when ASI started the Temples Survey Project by M.W Meister and Krishna Deva. From this time the study of Indian art got it smooth way for writing. So the study of Indian art started with imperialism followed by the Orientalist scholars and continued their writing through a long time but during the late 19th century or the beginning and of the 20th century there was a challenge with the native view by the Indian Scholars. Nationalism and regionalism in the study of Indian art were grown during this time. European Scholars tried to follow the universalism but the Indian Scholars followed the traditionalism. After independence mostly the Indian Scholars followed by the traditionalism. Through postmodernism influenced

every sphere of the Indian culture but the study of Indian art not followed as much as followed the other discipline of study. They continued with the postmodern hands but with the traditional heart.

The development of Indian art historiography through the stages, like documentation, exhibition, factual description, traditional approach, regional approach, dynastic approach, subaltern approach, social approach and the stage of critical interpretation is now shifted toward the new critically interpretative art historical writing. A key feature of 'New' art history is auto-criticism, in the sense that it is self-reflexive about its own practices. It challenges the prevalent opposition of popular or mass visual cultures within dynamics of historical processes.<sup>x</sup> It questions about the meaning of art, representation of art, artistic and historical approaches. It also raises questions about the economic, political and social implication of art that enable the resituating of art history among the social sciences. New art history surely sees art and its history as intimately linked to the societies that produce and consume it and in the process makes newer and newer meanings. It examines the relationship between art, its institutions, and the nation-state as well as the relational dynamics of the local and the global.<sup>xi</sup>



- 0: Establishment of Asiatic Society (Bengal) by William Jones in 1784 and the start of the study of Indian past in a concise way. Indian art was exhibited by colonial artists.
- 1: the First book of James Fergusson 'Rock-cut Temples of India' appeared and introduced a disciplinary study of Indian Art (Architectural remains).
- 2: First work on Indian art by Ananda Coomaraswamy 'Aims of Indian Art' was published and introduced a new method of study of Indian Art history. He combined the technical and traditional methods in studying Indian Art.
- 3: Started Indian Temple Survey Project and the study of Indian Art became more scientific.
- 4: Influenced by the Post-modern approaches, the study of Indian Art History shifted towards multidimensional outlook of art objects.

**FEATURES:**

Colonial/Oriental Approach: Survey, documentation, drawing, archiving, and exhibition.

Indian Traditional Approach: Use of indigenous architectural text and living tradition of architects- sculptors (Rise of text and tradition based method).

Phase 1 (1800-1850): Documentation, museum show, collecting information, private collection (Exception- Ram Raz).

Phase 2 (1850-1900): Description, form and stylistic analysis, use of Art material for writing history, colonial bias, comparative method.

Phase 3 (1900-1950): Understanding Indian culture with myth, religion, traditional texts and architectural remains. Search for an Indian origin of Indian Art, the nationalist approach in Art History.

Phase 4 (1950-present): Emphasis on regional variations, the colonial aspect was mixed up with the Indian tradition, post-modern approaches including the social value of art material, gender issue, the symbolic meaning of art objects, subaltern studies.

<sup>i</sup>Jon Lang et.al, *Architecture and Independence: The search for Identity- India 1880-1980*, Oxford university press,1997, pp. 1

<sup>ii</sup> From a letter to Ram Raz, *Essay on the architecture of Hindus*, 1834, pp. x

<sup>iii</sup>Chandra, Pramod, *The Study Of Indian Temple Architecture*, in *Studies In Indian Temple Architecture*, Ed. Pramod Chandra, New Delhi: American Institute Of Indian Studies (AIIS),1975, p. 5

<sup>iv</sup> Parul Pandya Dhar, ed., *Indian art History: Changing Perspectives*, 2011, p. 66.

<sup>v</sup> Further details see Chandra, Pramod, 1975: 24-29.

<sup>vi</sup>Mukul Dey, *Which way Indian Art* (article from the centenary volume of the Govt. College of art & craft, Calcutta; 1966- ed.)

<sup>vii</sup> Temple survey project started in 1955 under the supervision of Krishna Deva (north India) and K.R. Shrinivasan (south India).

<sup>viii</sup>"*Encyclopedia of Indian Temple Architecture* "(1983) under the editorship of M.A. Dhaky and M.W Meister. The efforts of M.A. Dhaky, Pramod Chandra, M.W. Meister, K.V. Sundararajan, G. Mitchell and others regulated the publication of these large volumes which sheds light on all possible aspects of the study of Indian temple architecture. They planned to publish two volumes of work, one for South India and other for north India. Every volume contained 5 parts and each part is divided into 2 books- one for text and other for plates.

<sup>ix</sup>In art history, drapery refers to any cloth or textile depicted, which is usually clothing.

<sup>x</sup> Deeptha Achar et.al. (ed.), *Toward new art history: Studies in Indian Art*, 2003, p. 51.

<sup>xi</sup> Ibid

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