

INTRODUCTION

Ellora is the 'art-historical problem' incarnate. It is praised often for its magnificence, grandeur and beauty of sculptural manifestations, but seldom do we speak of its vulnerability as a monument. This vast cave complex was coming into being in an extremely sensitive region and period. The political balance in this region during the period between the fifth to eighth centuries was precarious due to the ephemeral rules of different dynasties from South and North India. Unlike Buddhist art-activity, Brahmanical art-activity is mainly patronized by imperial devotees or at least the elite. It is seldom funded by the laity as is seen in the Buddhist context. Naturally the transfer of power did directly have its repercussions on the art-activity of that period. The cultic faiths of these rulers, their places of origin, their matrimonial relationships and their status in the political hierarchy collectively influenced the plastic manifestations of the psyche of that era. The iconographic programme and features of the art, its stylistic developments and interactions depend on the socio-political milieu to a great extent. Alongwith this transitory political scene, a few other factors too contribute to the complexity

of Ellora. For example, the co-existence of the monuments of different religious faiths that overlap each other chronologically derive possibilities of visual representation from each other causing unanticipated formal developments. The absence of adequate historical references and inscriptional data causes further intrication of the maze, posing a number of challenges to art-historians.

Ellora lends itself to several perspectives, due to which a number of art-historians have elected to write on this topic. A cursory account of these efforts is given in the following chapter. The present dissertation chooses to probe into the stylistic framework not only because the work done on this complex until now has ignored this aspect, but also because it seemed to me of immediate concern as a practising sculptor.

This is an attempt to trace the changing psyche of the artist community of this country, to trace the evolution of different art-traditions prevalent in that era. While evolving independently these traditions also contribute to the evolution of Indian art as a whole since none of them grow in isolation. The influences and the interactions, the diffusions and the parallels enrich the fabric of Indian sculpture giving rise to multifarious visual poetics.

The effort is towards understanding the perseverance of the master-minds who tried to achieve the goal which was repeatedly re-

established, as excellence in art cannot be unquestionable, nor can it be absolutely defined. It is revised and re-defined time and again through generations, resulting in stylistic differences. An intrinsic determinism that has been observed in this continual process impels us towards the conceptualization of evolution in art. Attempts to configure a rational, systematic pattern out of this chaotic picture have been made in Western art-history since several decades. However, Indian art-history in its infancy had been still grappling with the authentication of information gradually coming to light and hence it would have been premature to bring in such concepts into the realm of Indian art. In recent years, as Indian art-historians have been trying to apply this methodology in the Indian context, Indian art-history has been getting a new dimension and an awareness of its existence independent of archaeology and cultural history. Art-history, if it aspires to be established as an autonomous discipline of humanities, cannot afford to dissociate itself with aesthetics and criticism. In a way, it is an endeavour to trace the pattern of altering aesthetic values with the help of existing works of art through the ages. When the pattern is reasonably well-defined, even a stray work of art devoid of any factual references can be placed in its proper date bracket. The pattern, when introduced, was derived from Western prototypes. However now, when a lot of new material has come to light, the accepted pattern, though it helps us to understand a

broad framework, does not seem to cater satisfactorily to an intricate cognition of the evolution of the visual language in India.

In this situation, an alternative methodology, however tentative it may sound, will have to be devised. In this the chronology of works of art will be substantiated with stylistic traits that are known for sure, and the framework of the stylistic evolution will have to be detected using either the known dated landmarks or else the dates of stylistic landmarks will have to be confirmed employing methodologies from analogous disciplines like archaeology, iconography, epigraphy or history, which are considered to be more scientific by conventional art-historians. The insistence of these scholars on objectivity is well-justified, but it usually leads only to a chronicle of facts. To derive a coherent historical picture, the facts will have to be bridged together by using methodologies that may appear subjective. In Leo Steinberg's words, "Though we all hope to reach objectively valid conclusions, this purpose is not served by disguising the subjectivity of interest, method and personal history, which in fact conditions our work"¹.

Norman Bryson, while pleading for a 'new art-history', points out that "The prevailing art-history famously insists on limiting itself to 'what was possible in the period' : its historicism demands a purity or puritanism of perspective in which leakage from the present into

the past is viewed with suspicion and alarm"². The second half of this statement is not of relevance in the Indian context since we have yet to reach the stage where art-history can even think about 'the artistic and critical present it actually inhabits', but the ouritanism of perspective is a strict prerequisite in Indian art-history too. I strongly feel that the lacunae in the available factual data, historical records and also in the configuration of the evolutionary pattern call for a holistic approach, not as a current fashion but as an intrinsic requirement of the subject. Therefore this dissertation has no reservations on relying on the methodologies other than 'stylistics' and also a few facts and concepts from other territories like literature, aesthetics and even science. Still, it claims to inquire predominantly into the problem of style, taking up the stylistic framework of Ellora sculpture as a case study. Ellora probably is the most potential venue for such studies for the reasons mentioned in the beginning. It is doubtlessly the only site in the country where such a stylistic variance and multiformity is divulged. The lineal interaction is another recurring convolution in the evolution of Indian art, restricting the possibility of a rectilinear trail. This feature is observed at its maximum at Ellora, making it an ideal venue for such an enquiry. But then, eventually this dissertation ceases to be an attempt to understand the development of Ellora sculpture in the light of evolutionary determinism and instead converges into an effort to

comprehend the possible configuration of the evolution that is discernible from the corpus of Ellora sculpture.

01. Leo Steinberg - Other Criteria.

Confrontations with twentieth century Art. Oxford, 1972, p.309.

02. Norman Bryson - Calligram.

Essays in New Art History from France. Cambridge, 1988, p.
xvi.