

### STYLE

'Style' when not pinned down is nebulous, try and catch it, its like chasing rainbows. Yet, we have been doing it all the time. Style in Chōla Art is the rainbow, for every band has emerged, crystallised and dazzled as one brilliant unified light. What are the connotations of style that resulted in its 'emergence'? To understand this our first attempt is to unlearn a few of our beliefs and delimit the term. Aestheticians, historians, social anthropologists and lately art historians have tried to study it in different contexts.

The broad conception of style is its distinctive or characteristic mode of presentation, construction, execution or expression. Its very important quality is that of 'impenetrability and impermeability once it is fully formed. It is descriptive in nature rather than evaluative thus a critical judgement does not fall within its jurisdiction. 'The concept of a particular style is a way of describing and classifying works of art, not of evaluating them.' T. Munro calls it an artistic type, where a group or cluster of recurring and interrelated traits are involved. Their way or means of combining makes them simple or complex. Their involvement is characterised by a choice of selecting rejecting, organising and disseminating, repeating and varying and thus causing altogether different group. Co-related traits build a style and give it a status and identity in history.

Chōla implies a particular style that was and is its chief characteristic. Its historical position is that it belongs to a particular span of time, or period. It is named in this case after a cultural group or race of people. This historic style is a reality, of events that have occurred and the period is the recreation of it for historical purpose.

The period or historic style calls for the study and understanding of that particular phase in all its stages or expressed traits. At the core of all expressions was the human being and so, his thoughts, his behaviour, his success and defeat as a cultural group gains in prominence and importance. The main style or period style is further subdivided into sub-styles. The main style may often be called the official style because of royal patronage. When it is further broken down it is divided into phases. The Chōla style is thus divided into the Early, Middle and Late Chōla Phases. Our concern is related to the emergent trend and thus we are within the Early Chōla Phase.

Furthermore, within this phase itself there is a variance. Traits are observed and the period style is broken into the sub-styles of different personages or rulers. In our context we have the Vijayalaya, Aditya I style divided into Āditya I and Parāntaka I Phases, the Second Phase or transitional phase, the Third or Sembiyan Mahādēvī Phase. Each of these have features that can

be singled out as their very own. A collection of these are traits which build a stylistic phase and a total period style.

The morphology of style also distinguishes between different facets of humanities. Historical style is only one aspect of humanities, it usually means political traits of a period. Within its context it is meaningful, howsoever it incorporates other aspects of man, like his religion, culture and society.

To the more fruitful understanding of an emergence of style in the art historical context, certainly means an interdisciplinary approach. Every great culture is the outcome of various products created, sustained and perpetuated by it. The Chōla period, and the pan-Indian culture by and large are totally interrelated. To study just one aspect or trait can be incomplete and self defeating. Nothing exists in 'isolation'. Thus, style here has a wide connotation.

We deal with the historical-political aspects that caused and generated certain mentality and gave stature to the period in relation to the other contemporary ones. A style to a limited extent emerged due to 'political situations and compromises'. That is not all, style to another extent was guided by religion and mythology. The predilection towards a certain mode of religious worship and secretarian attitudes are also partially responsible for certain

traits in style. The Chōḷa predilection for Saivism saw a style that emerged with major Śaivite temples, iconography and other related forms. Similarly the prolific growth of bronzes and the Naṭarāja Āḍavallan was enhanced by Parāntaka I and Sembiyaṇ Mahādēvī. Bhakti, played a major role, it imbued an attitude in the masses -of fervour, emotionalism and humility. It extolled the supreme and contributed through the Śaiva Siddhānta certain mental traits and affected the psyche.

Mythology and the mythic pattern prompted the memory and ritual came to repeat itself over and over again. Of this emerged 'nit-yavtsavas and mahotsava ' recreating mythic events in the process perpetuating them for future generations. This called for accessories like mandapa in architecture and utsava bera for utsava etc. Iconographic programmes are conventionalised and icons introduced. What may have been a common heritage or phenomenon, turns into something special.

The 'tour de force' for the art historian is the formal and visual aspect of style. Plastic forms offer the cream for analysis and is most satisfying because it is perceptive. It incorporates the visual, the descriptive and the indirect or invisible. Style then is affected partly by the use of or abuse of tools, techniques and medium. Some are transformed, like the medium while others do not appear in the final product. The historic aspect belongs

to a realm of provenance, time and place; the religious belongs to the man's quest for the absolute through manifest and unmanifest forms. When both were combined they penetrated elsewhere or allowed penetration at some early point of time. The geographic barrier is often broken down.

"The formal approach sees form as itself and in itself", according to Focillon, "they are subjected to the principles of metamorphosis by which they are perpetually renewed, as well as to the principle of styles, by which their relationship is as though by no means with any regularity of recurrence, first tested, then made fast and finally disrupted"(1).

Every form is born to change and can never be static, this further leads to other changes. Within the same shape occur many varying ones. Form is mobile and induces metamorphosis. Nature supports this metamorphosis. This changing feature generates style as an absolute and as a variable. "Thus when a coherent grouping of forms united by a reciprocal fitness, whose essential harmony is nevertheless in many ways testing itself, building itself and annihilating itself. Pauses, tensions, relaxations occur in the best defined of styles"(2).

Formal elements are a great guidance to deciphering style because they have certain index value which makes up its repertory,

its vocabulary, the very instrument with which it yields power and system of relationships; its syntax. Such an activity on the part of the style is also 'self defining' it. Once it defines itself it makes its escape. It is evolved and degenerated. Factors that lead to it are proximity of other styles to which it makes way or engulfs, and thus may be a dialectic or an experimental process. The Irrukuvēḷ and Paluvēṭṭaraiyar idioms can be called the dialectics of the Early Chōḷa style.

The study of form further rewards us with its own internal organising logic, a touch of the magic wand and there emerge more than any 'creative conceit' forms which multiply and divide by 'mitosis'. Reconstructing this logical process is unravelling its hidden rule. This aspect certainly balances the excess of the historical statement, that 'influence' is always external and causes changes and admixtures. It is there new innovations that define style. There is a certain wisdom in believing that "forms obey their own rules.... that are inherent in the forms themselves, or better in the regions of the mind, where they are located and centered- and there is no reason why we should not undertake investigation of how these great ensembles united by close reasoning and by coherent experiment, behave throughout the phases which recall their life(3).

Forms are not remote or inaccessible, they are made by man and understood by him. They intermingle with life. The life of

forms gives a definition to what may be called psychological landscapes. They develop in space and exist in a 'highly diversified world'. Man too lives a life of diversity. Cutting beyond the more obvious there is a subtle spiritual ethnography. "It is composed of families of mind, families whose unity is effected by secret ties and who are in faithful communication with one another beyond all restrictions of time and place. Perhaps each style, each state of style, even each technique seeks out by preference a certain state of man's nature, a certain spiritual family"(4).

Style also has two functions, the polytechnical and monotechnical. Chōla would be polytechnical because it extends by cultural extension. Within its appropriate period, place and people, it spreads or diffuses. It is a pervasive and far reaching cultural movement.

The aspect of style thus far not touched, but seem germinally a little before is its 'tradition'. Tradition is, what is transmitted culturally, of time, institutions, values, etc. which also stands for heritage. The Chōla was conservative enough to regard it because it was centuries of heritage and memory. He was also liberal and respectful enough not to merely imitate it. Working within a tradition he did not break away but fully exploited his limitation from within. Within this framework the Chōla artist explored the possibility of mutating forms of lesser prominence. The decorative motifs which helped him in emphasising the visual

qualities helped in the emergence of another stylistic trait.

The more we try to catch style, the more elusive it becomes. For the art historical methodology the humanities approach offered 'maximum breadth and fluidity'. This approach helps in placing under historical heading, religion, literature, architecture, sculpture, polity and culture side by side. Furthermore elements and traits are identified and their repetition noted. A total view of structure culminates into the 'Emergence of a style'. Style comes forth from concealment, obscurity or circumstances into something unique and new. This is its emergence.

Since it incorporates the varied aspects, however, the study of Early Chōla art still lacks in the formal. It is thus made focal and forms the bulk of the exploration, unfolding the visual aspect of style. In the process the Early Chōla psyche and creativity comes to us fresh and fragrant.



**REFERENCES**

1. H. Focillon, The Life of Forms in Art, New York (2nd English ed.), nd, p.6.
2. Ibid, p.7.
3. Ibid, p.10.
4. Ibid, p.15.