

## **Plants in Stone : Cultural and Religious Significance of Vegetal Imagery in Buddhist Sculptural Art of Bharhut**

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**Abstract:** Throughout history, plants and vegetation have held a profound place in human consciousness, often perceived as an earth's vibrant and mysterious green covering. Since ancient times this living mantle has regarded as a sacred offerings of nature and inspired to spiritual reverence. Various religious traditions including Hinduism and Buddhism, incorporated plant worship into their belief system. In Buddhist tradition, certain tress, such as Bodhi tree under which the Siddhartha Gautama attained enlightenment, were considered sacred and deeply revered. Thus cultural and religious significance is prominently reflected in Buddhist art botanical element not only enhance the aesthetic value of artwork but also serve as a potent symbols of enlightenment , purity, and the interconnectedness of life. Bharhut holds a prominent place in the development of early Buddhist art in India, distinguished by it's relief panels that intricately portray a diverse array of botanical elements, including trees. Creepers, flowers, and fruits. This present paper intense to highlight the vegetal world in the art of Bharhut and assess it's cultural-religious significance on the life of the contemporary people of ancient India.

**Key words :** Ancient India, Buddhist Art, Bharhut, Culture, Plants, Religion etc.

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### **Introduction**

The oldest example of Sunga period's architecture is the Bharhut, which is located in a village named Uchera, Satna districts of Madhya Pradesh. In ancient India Bharhut had a important

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geographical significance. It was the main gateway in the Sone valley that regulated the path that connects Kaushambi on the Yamuna to Mahishmati on the Narmada. This appeared to be an integral part of a sub-continental architectural plan by religious authorities during the Sunga Period.<sup>1</sup> Alexandar Cunningham first discovered the remains of Bharhut Stupa in November, 1873. It was fully exposed in 1874. The remains of the great stupa was collected and preserved in the Indian Museum Kolkata and 54 pieces were preserved in the Allahabad Municipal museum. There are a much debate among the scholars about the exact date of the stupas and the railings surrounded it. It is believed that Ashoka likely constructed the Stupa around 250 BCE. However, numerous pieces of art, especially the railings and entrances, were reportedly erected during the Sunga era. In contrast to the Mauryan's imperial art, the inscriptions engraved on the Bharhut railing pillar indicate that the reliefs and the figures were donated by the monks, nuns and lay people of that period. The Bharhut sculptures predominantly depict themes related to the life and teachings of the Buddha, depicted predominantly through symbolic representations. Thus B.M Barua rightly regarded that "The monument of Bharhut as a whole is nothing but a grand symbolical expression of the Buddhist devotional piety". The Bharhut sculptures depict a wide range of motifs, including the Bodhi tree, empty thrones, and numerous life-sized figures of male and female devotees, kings, soldiers, dancers, yakshas, yakshinis, nagas, as well as various animals, trees, flowers, fruits, rivers, buildings and house. Among these, the representation of trees hold a significant place, as trees have been regarded as sacred in Indian culture and society since ancient times.

## **Plants in Bharhut Sculptures : An Analysis**

Trees holds profound religious significance in Buddhism, as they closely associated with important events in the life of Buddha. Significant events such as the birth of prince Siddhartha under a Sal tree in Lumbini, the seven steps he took immediately beneath the Bodhi tree in Bodhi Gaya, the delivery of first sermon in Sarnath and his death or mahaparinirvana—all occurred in the presence of trees or groves. Furthermore, the Buddha consistently chose to observed the varsavasa or rainy season retreat in areas surrounded by natural vegetation (vana), emphasizing his enduring connection to nature as an integral part of his spiritual life and teachings.

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Furthermore, trees also hold significant importance in the lives of the earlier legendary Buddhas, particularly among the last seven Buddhas of the past, each of whom associated with a specific tree under which they attained enlightenment.<sup>2</sup>

Like other centers of Buddhist art trees shown are either celestial or terrestrial in Bharhut sculptures and rail pillars. Two celestial trees, the Parichhatra (Parijata) and Mandara, are depicted, with the former appearing in a panel illustrating a scene from the 'Heaven of Thirty-Three (Trayastrimsa), and the latter featured as an architectural ornament.<sup>3</sup> The most prominently depicted terrestrial trees at Bharhut are those venerated as sacred, mainly due to their symbolic association with the significant events in the lives of the Buddha. Among the depicted trees, six Bodhi trees associated with six Buddhas can be distinctly identified, primarily through the inscriptional evidence and references found in literary tradition. The trees represented in Bharhut sculptures are Patali, Sala, Udumbara, Nyagrodha and Asvattha in a stylized manner which influenced by artistic convention and tradition but their conceptual origin are grounded in natural forms.

From an artistic perspective, the most refined representation is that of the Banian tree (*Ficus Indica*), which regarded as the Bodhi tree of Kasyapa Buddha. According to Buddhist tradition, following his enlightenment, the Buddha spent seven days seated beneath the Nyagrodha, or Banyan tree, absorbed in the bliss of his illumination.<sup>4</sup> Among numerous examples of Banian tree from Bharhut mention may be made of the scene of Chhadantiya Jataka. In this scene the tree is recognized by its pendent roots. Its identification is further corroborated by Jataka literature,<sup>5</sup> which describes the famous Chaddanta elephant as habitually standing beneath a large Bayan tree.<sup>6</sup> A further significant representation of this tree is found on the Prasenjit Pillar,<sup>7</sup> depicting a scene in which several elephants are offering a garland at the foot of a tree. The tree is identified by its pendent roots.

The Pipal tree or Ashvattha (*Ficus Religiosa*) is considered as the Bodhi tree which holds great significance as Gautama Buddha attained enlightenment under this tree. The depiction of Pipal tree (*Ficus Religiosa*) appears in two bas-relief of Bharhut sculptures.<sup>8</sup> In these sculptures the tree is identified by its long pointed single leaves.<sup>9</sup>

The birth and death of Buddha occurred under the Sala tree (*Shorea Robusta*) and it was also the Bodhi tree of the Buddha Viswabhu. Hence it is considered as sacred and the Sala tree is

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frequently represented in Buddhist sculptures.<sup>10</sup> One of the sculptures depicted the Sala tree with elaborate branches. Here one can see the throne under the tree. It should be mentioned that the presence of Buddha is represented by the throne below the tree. Both side of the tree there are two devotees are depicted one male and another female. The female devotee holding a garland in her hand. On either side of the empty throne, two devotees are seated in a kneeling posture with hands folded in reverence.

The Udumbara tree (*Ficus Glomerata*) is identified through an inscription on a sculpture bearing the name of the Buddha Kanakamuni, under which he attained enlightenment.<sup>11</sup> In this sculpture, Bodhi tree is depicted with an empty seat beneath it, symbolizing the Buddha's presence through absence. On either side of the throne, four devotees are portrayed, among them two standing figure holding garlands and two kneeling female figures positioned in front of the throne, shown with folded hand in an attitude with devotion.

The Patali tree (*Bignonia Suaveolens*), is depicted on one of Bharhut railing pillar, which is identified as the Bodhi tree of Buddha Vipassi, is recognized by an inscription above the medallion as "*Bhagavato Vipasino Bodhi.*"<sup>12</sup> Although the tree is depicted in bloom, the characteristic trumpet-like form that gives the Patali its name is not visible as the flower is shown in full frontal view.

Another sculpture from Bharhut depicted the Sirisa or Acacia sirisa tree, Which was the Bodhi tree of Buddha Krakuchanda.<sup>13</sup> Although the lower portion of the sculpture is missing, the tree itself remains well-preserved. The small leaves and prominent clusters of flowers are characteristic features of the Acacia Sirisa tree.

In addition to the Bodhi trees associated with Buddhas, the sculptors of Bharhut also depicted a variety of other trees, including mango, jackfruit, bamboo, date, palm, custard apple as well as several species of lotus flowers, creepers etc. These representation reflect both their artistic skill and deep association with nature. Among these trees the mango tree is represented in the sculptures several times. In few cases the mango only represented for decorative impulse. In one example from the bas-relief of the Jetavana Monastery, a sacred Mango tree is depicted enclosed by a railing, narrating a story<sup>14</sup>. In this context, the mango tree serves a symbolic representation of the Buddha's presence. Another depiction of mango groves appears on the railing pillar illustrating the visit of Ajatsatru to the Buddha, an event took place in the Mango

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grove of Jivaka at Rajagriha. Apart from the mango grove in the Jetavana monastery there are three sandal wood trees standing separately. A further representation of the Mango tree appears in the scene depicting the descent at Sankasya. The fourth example is found in the bas-relief illustrating the Asadrisa Jataka. Several coping stone of the bas-reliefs represented the Mangoes and Jackfruits depicted both as trees and as ornamental motifs. (Fig-1,2)

Fig-1

The representation of Bamboo tree is also found in Bharhut art. One of the finest depictions of the Bamboo tree is found on the central beam of the eastern gateway. A depiction of the Bamboo tree appears in a bas-relief on a coping stone, where three elephants standing before a cluster of Bamboo trees. As bamboo is favorite food of elephant, it's inclusion in this scene is both contextually appropriate and symbolically meaningful.

Fig-2

A bas relief of Bharhut bears the relief of two big custard apple fruits hanging from it's brunch with three prominent leaves. In Hindi this fruit is commonly known as Ata or simply At, a name that traces it's origin from the sanskrit word Atripya. In another sculpture the monkey is depicted seated on a branch of a custard apple tree, eating one of it's fruit. Another broken medallion depicted a lion standing on the branch of a custard apple tree's branch.<sup>15</sup> In this sculpture the fruit with leaves is finely carved by the artist. In some cases the This tree is often carved a decorative impulse.

One of the broken medallion of Bharhut represented the Tar tree. In this sculpture, two Palm trees are depicted, with their spreading, pointed leaves intricately carved by the artists. Above the medallion a male and female figure are shown looking outward through a window.(Fig -3)

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Fig-3

The depiction of Khajur or date tree appears in a fragment on the Prosenjit Pillar. The sculptors have intricately carved both the leaves and fruits. <sup>16</sup>Another interesting scene is depicted in a relief where wheat is shown standing on the coping, being cut by a female figure. <sup>17</sup>(Fig-4)

Fig-4

In addition to trees, the art of Bharhut frequently depicts scenes where flowers are portrayed both stylized and natural forms. These flowers exhibit a wide range of design, including honeysuckle, acanthus and lotus. Bharhut is richly adorned with numerous varieties of Lotus flowers, among which water-lilies represent a distinct type. The flower held by the Srimala devi is identified as a Dhatura,<sup>18</sup> while Mandara flowers are considered as celestial in nature. One of the coping stones is depicted with the Dhatura flower among the Bharhut Sculptures. <sup>19</sup>The blooming flowers of the Patali, Sala, and Asoka tree also significantly important.

Lotus occupied a prominent place in Bharhut art. In Buddhist literature, the Lotus is frequently employed as a symbolic motif, generally conveyed through indirect references and similes involving the lotus flower or leaf. These literary expressions present the Lotus flowers as various spiritual and aesthetic qualities, such as beauty, purity, ethical sensitivity and paradox of

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emerging from impure origin into elevated states.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, the Lotus regarded as a symbol to delineated progressive stage of spiritual development. These lotus motifs express the Buddha's life experiences, and ideals as well as those of her followers.<sup>21</sup> The Buddhist literature primarily mentioned three types of Lotus flowers such as the Utpala, the Padma, the Pundarika. The Jataka stories mentioned seven species of Lotus flowers. In the relief carving at Bharhut, Lotus motifs are frequently arranged into two or three concentric zones. The central zone typically features the floral stalk accompanied by stamens, while the outer zone depict either sixteen petals<sup>22</sup> in fully bloomed Lotus forms or eight petals in half-medallion compositions. This structural design is emblematic of the stylized floral representations characteristic of early Buddhist art.<sup>23</sup> In Bharhut art Lotus is generally seen growing either water or arrange in Kalasa,<sup>24</sup> which symbolizing abundance. The Lotus flower often depicted to decorate the railing pillars of the Stupa of Bharhut.

The 'Women and Tree' motif is a prominent theme in Indian sculpture, often interpreted as symbolic fertility and abundance. Dr. J. Ph. Vogel identified these figures as '*Salabhanjikas*', based on the references in Sanskrit literature. The Mahavamsa further describes such figures with the term '*puppha-sakha-dhara*'<sup>25</sup> or one who holds flowering branches, underscoring their connection to natural vitality and auspiciousness. In the Bharhut sculptures there are two prominent. The symbolic association between women and trees is evident in various socio-religious customs and fertility rituals, often represented through graceful and captivating artistic motifs. One such nature related fertility rituals involved visits to forest groves, pleasure gardens, or outskirts of cities, where women would engaged playfully with trees and flowers. Among trees Shala tree was prominent. These women would delight in bending it's branches, plucking it's blossoms, and playfully throwing flowers at one another in a sprit of festivity and fertility.<sup>26</sup> Such activities are frequently described in classical Sanskrit literature. In the Bharhut sculptures, four prominent life-size figures such as Chanda Yakshi (fig-5), Sudarsana Yakshi, Chulakoka Devta and Mahakoka Devta are depicted holding a branches of trees. Among them the Chanda Yakshi is depicted in the tribhanga posture holding a flowering tree branch with her left hand gently touches another branch that appears to emerge symbolically from the region of her pelvis.<sup>27</sup> Ancient literature also highlights the cultural significance of the Mango tree. The *Kamasutra*, a classical text on Indian erotica, refers to custom *Sahakarbhajika*, which was a

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ceremonial plucking of mangoes during spring festival of *vasantotsava*.<sup>28</sup>In Bharhut sculptures the smaller figures of women holding branches of mango trees are significant. (fig-6)

Fig-5

Fig-6

## Conclusion

In comparison to the depiction of the vegetal world at Bodhgaya, Amaravati, Sanchi and Mathura, it is noteworthy that in Bharhut the plants worlds are rich and diverse. The abundance may reflect a broader cosmological vision, wherein flora and fauna represented as integral components of a harmonious natural world. Such representation not only underscores the artist's sensitivity to their environment but also mirrors the philosophical and spiritual inclinations of the period. The deliberate inclusion of the specific plants, many of which held deep religious significance which suggest a conscious effort by artists to imbue the Buddhist monuments with symbolic meaning as well as aesthetic refinement. These depictions, therefore, serve both decorative and didactic purposes, revealing the intertwined relationship between religious believe, ecological awareness and artistic expression in early Buddhist visual culture.

In conclusion, Bharhut artists effectively captured a rich and diverse world of flora, reflecting a naturalistic expression in their sculptural work. The selection of plant motifs carved at Bharhut corresponds closely with the narrative contexts of the Jataka tales and life stories from the Buddha's life. Moreover, the inclusion of these specific botanical forms likely reflects the actual vegetation of the region during that period.



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## Notes and References

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- <sup>7</sup> Canningham *ibid* plate-XV, Fig. 3
- <sup>8</sup> Canningham *ibid* plate-XXX, Fig-3
- <sup>9</sup> Canningham, *ibid*, plate –XIII fig-1, Plate-XXX fig-3
- <sup>10</sup> Canningham, *ibid*, plate-XXIX, Fig-2
- <sup>11</sup> Canningham, *ibid*, plate-XXIX, Fig-4
- <sup>12</sup> Canningham, *ibid*, plate-XXIX, Fig-1
- <sup>13</sup> Canningham, *ibid*, Pate-XXIX, Fig-3
- <sup>14</sup> Canningham, *ibid*, Plate-XXVII, Fig-XXVII, Fig-3
- <sup>15</sup> Canningham, *ibid*, Plate-XLLV, 10, Plate-XLV, Fig-10
- <sup>16</sup> Canningham, *ibid*, plate- XV. Fig.3
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