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Educating Society Through Moral Instruction: Understanding The Jataka Reliefs Of Sanchi And Bharhut

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Abstract :

The paper explores the role of the Jataka reliefs at Sanchi and Bharhut stupas as the media of visual pedagogy through which moral and ethical values were communicated to society in early historic India. The primary undertaking of this study is to establish the fact that these sculptural narratives served not merely as religious or aesthetic expressions but as conscious visual tools for ethical instruction available to the largely non-literate public. From the methodological perspective, the paper uses an iconographic and visual study of selected reliefs and can be associated with the textual traditions of Jataka stories within their socio-historical and patronage framework. By concentrating on selected and authentic Jataka tales like Vessantara, Mahakapi, Ruru, Chaddanta, Kurunga-Miga and Syama, the study analyses how the core Buddhist values of dana(charity or generosity), karuna(compassion), tyaga(self-sacrifice), satya(truth), putr-rna(parental duty), moral restraint and filial duty were visually communicated. While the Vessantara Jataka focuses on the ideal of generosity itself and Mahakapi and Ruru Jatakas on the ideals of altruism and sympathy for the weak, the Chaddanta Jataka explores the ideals of restraint and ethical consequence, the Kurunga-Miga Jataka on compassion and reciprocal morality and the Syama Jataka on obedience and ethical responsibility. The paper will contend that all of the above reliefs were an active part of the creation of this collective ethical consciousness with the translation of complex ethical ideas into popular picture stories that either resonated or symbolized the ideals of the monastery and the laity. Through the focus on education in images, the study concludes that the early phase of Buddhist art functioned as a dynamic medium of moral communication in early Indian society.

Keywords: Jataka Reliefs, Moral Instruction ,Visual Pedagogy ,Sanchi and Bharhut

Theme: This paper is categorized under Theme 04: Buddhist Art and Iconography.

1.)Introduction(Including Methodology) :

This paper tries to examine the Jataka reliefs of Sanchi and Bharhut as visual narratives that functioned as influential instruments of moral instruction in early historic India. Though the Jataka tales occupy a core place in literary tradition of Buddhism, their sculptural representation has majorly been studied from an archaeological, iconographic or stylistic perspective. That is why the focus is towards understanding selected Jataka reliefs depicted at Sanchi and Bharhut such as the Vessantara, Syama, Kurunga-Miga, Ruru, Mahakapi and Chaddanta Jatakas which embody morals of compassion, truth, generosity, self-sacrifice, parental duty, moral restraint and filial duty and how these reliefs operated as a system through which such ethical values were communicated to a largely non-literate and diverse society within religious and public spaces. It is important to ask ourselves how did the repetitive visibility and placement of these reliefs within the stupa complexes contributed to their role in shaping collective ethical consciousness? What compositional and narrative strategies enabled moral instruction for the lay audience? Though thorough research has been done on Jataka iconography by eminent historians and scholars, but minimal attention has been given by them on the role of these reliefs as a medium of visual pedagogy to a largely non-literate population and this paper tries to address this gap combining socio-historical interpretation, textual comparison and visual analysis. Both primary and secondary scholarly work done by historians and scholars have been consulted as they are significant for connecting the reliefs with their socio-cultural and political purpose **as provided by the Directorate of Archaeology, Archives and Museums in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh.** Though there are some issues as there are different versions of the Jataka tales and lack of inscriptional and textual evidence limit correlation between texts and images, interpretation of visual pedagogy remains inferential as the perspectives of contemporary audiences cannot be directly recovered. The scope of this study is limited to selected Jataka reliefs, but there is probability of further research extending to Buddhist sites across South Asia and beyond.

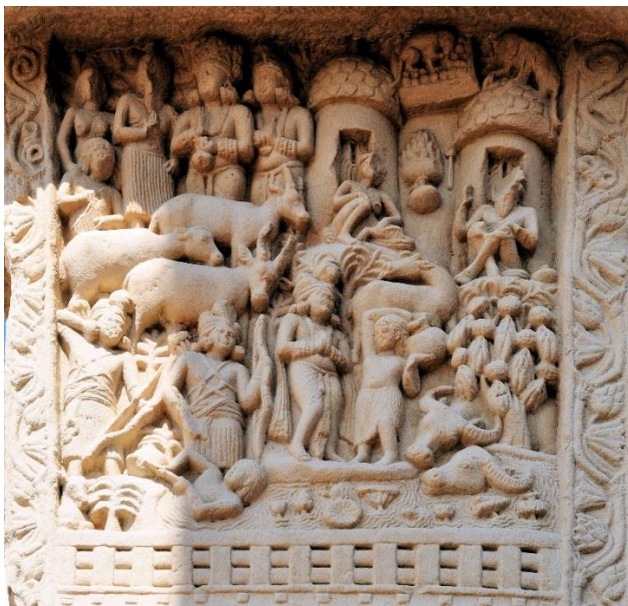
2.)A Historical Background :

The Jataka tales are considered among the richest source of Buddhist canonical literature containing 547 stories dealing with the previous births of the Buddha when he has been a Bodhisattva in both human and animal form during his path to achieve Buddhahood. The largest known collection of the tales is widely considered to be the Jatakathavannana from the Theravada school of the Pali Canon which finds its place in the Khuddaka Nikaya of the Sutta Pitaka which in turn is part of the Tripitaka (widely considered as the most sacred text of Buddhism). It is quite evident that the native passion for storytelling and story-hearing and use of stories for preaching was extensive, the Buddha himself preached his tales in many different ways for his numerous hearers in the native language easily understood by all and recited stories from his past lives to teach his disciples the righteous conduct of life. India has always had a rich tradition of oral storytelling and preachers from various religious sects have made extensive use of moral stories in their preaching's as well. It is stated that both text and commentary were then handed down in the Pali language in which they were composed to the time of the Council of Patna (held in or about the year 250 BC) and they were carried in the following year to Ceylon by the great missionary Mahinda the son of Ashoka. There the commentary was written down in Singhalese and was re-translated into the present form in

the Pali language in the fifth century of the common era as stated by Rhys Davids. It is important to remember that the popularity of the Jatakas occupied an important place due to their depictions as well cause the stories became a favourite subject with artists in Ancient India, Ceylon, China, Nepal, Bhutan and Central Asia and especially in Tibet. The Jataka tales adorn various Ancient India monuments with those most important being Sanchi and Bharhut which provides us the earliest evidence of their monumental art dating back to the 2nd and 1st century BCE. It is interesting to note the fact that the original structure of the stupas were constructed during the period of Ashoka while their elaborate carvings and torana gateways were later added on by the Shungas and the Satvahanas, The Jatakas are not just mere illustrations of some past events to be taken as incidental but as a part of a thoughtful programme of conveying some of the basic, meaningful and humanly practicable religious precepts in which the artist have proved equally efficient as the verbal or literal narrator. The artisan first followed the tradition of oral narration and next he concentrated on visual presentation whereby stories are communicated to an audience in direct terms through two or three dimension figurative sculptures and paintings. The selection and placement of specific Jatakas on stupa railings and gateways suggest an effort to translate moral ideals into visually intelligible forms for the lay audiences.

3.)The Six Selected Jataka Reliefs at Sanchi and Bharhut :

3.1.)Syama Jataka(Sanchi) :



At Sanchi the top panel on the south face of the north pillar of the West Gateway commemorates the story of the **filial love** evinced by the Bodhisattva, born as Syama(Suvannasama) as Debala Mitra mentions. This particular Jataka is of utmost importance as it is often cited as among the Ten Great Birth Stories of the Buddha(Mahanipata Jataka) a set of stories from the Jataka tales describing the ten final lives of the Bodhisattva before he is born as The Buddha, with the tales revolving around the town of Varanasi as stated by Naomi Appleton and Sarah Shaw. As per the description of the story provided by E.B.Cowell, the Bodhisattva is born to two ascetic parents who lived in a forest

near to Varanasi. Due to a serpent's poisonous breath, both parents lost their sight. From that moment onwards, Syama dedicates his entire life to their service. Every day he would fetch fruits, drew water, prepares food and clean the hermitage. He never ate until his parents were full fed and he got up thrice every night to find out "if they were too hot or too cold". One day while fetching water from the river, King Piliyakkha of Varanasi sees Syama, struck by his golden complexion the King got confused whether he is a God or a Naga, out of curiosity he shoots Syama with a poisoned arrow wounding him. The King questioned the young man and he replied without anger describing the condition of his parents. The King, deeply touched, promised the Bodhisattva to devote his life to the old people and to serve them as though he were their own son. Then he went to tell the hermits of Syama's death. In spite of their despair they did not reproach him. Led to the lifeless body of Syama they mourned and lamented. But there is one resource for the sage, the testimony of his virtues. **The mother proclaimed that If it is true that Syama has done none but virtuous acts, has never uttered a lie, and has tended his parents night and day, let his poison be conquered and dispersed and may the merits they have accumulated (his father and her's) triumph over the violence of the poison asking Syama to live again.** This invocation was repeated by the father and moved by their virtue and Syama's merit, a devi Bahusodari intervenes and through the power of truth Syama rose up, his parents recovered their sight and The King after repenting promised to rule righteously. In the relief, Syama's parents can be seen seated in front of their huts and Syama can be seen bringing water for them from the river which presented the laypeople the moral duty towards one's parents.

3.2.) Kurunga-Miga Jataka (Bharhut) :



This Jataka relief mentioned by Alexander Cunningham himself once formed the bosses or medallions of a single bar of the railing of the Bharhut stupa. In this Jataka the Bodhisattva is reborn as an antelope who lives near a forest lake. He becomes close friends with a tortoise who lives in the lake and a woodpecker who lives in a tree nearby. The three **lived in harmony with mutual trust for each other**. One day, a hunter spots the Bodhisattva's

footprints and lays a strong leather trap near the lake. That night, the deer gets caught in the trap. The woodpecker and tortoise rush to rescue him hearing his cries, The tortoise starts chewing through the strong leather cord with his teeth and the woodpecker flies off to the hunter's house to stall him. Every time the hunter tries to go in morning, the woodpecker pecks at his face, which he takes as an ill omen and goes back home. Finally the tortoise gets tired from chewing but manages to chew through the leather cord. Just as the hunter draws near, the deer manages to break free and escape. However, the tired tortoise is caught and bound in a bag. Noticing this the Bodhisattva makes himself known to the hunter and leads him deep into the forest. As the hunter chased after him the deer quickly returns, uses his horns to rip open the bag and sets the tortoise free. Then the Bodhisattva addressed them both that **his life has been saved by them both and they have done a friend's part to him**. He later advised them both to go for their safety and they did so. When the hunter returned and saw none of them, he went back home sorrowful. The three friends lived all their life in **unbroken amity**. In the relief, all the three friends can be seen helping each other simultaneously showcasing the laity the importance of friendship and mutual trust.

3.3.)Ruru Jataka(Bharhut) :



Depicted on one of the medallions of Bharhut, in this Jataka the Bodhisattva is reborn as a beautiful golden Ruru deer living in the vicinity of the Ganges. His skin like burnished gold, horns sparkled like silver and voice as soft and melodious. Unlike other deer's, he had **wisdom, compassion, and moral discernment**. One night, he heard the cry of a man drowning in the river. Feeling **compassion** for the man, he saved him, placed him on his back, and brought him to the forest. For several days, the deer nursed him and fed him fruits. Before returning him to Varanasi, the Bodhisattva cautioned him that he not be led away by greed and tell the king that he dwells here, the man promised to keep the secret. Meanwhile, the Queen of Benares had a dream about a golden deer preaching the Law and became eager to see the golden deer. The King announced that whoever would reveal the whereabouts of the golden deer would achieve a huge reward, a thousand pieces of gold and glory. **Deceived by greed**, the rescued man betrayed the Bodhisattva and told the king. The King, with a great entourage, surrounded the forest. When the Ruru deer saw the army, he did not run away. He

calmly walked towards the king. In a voice **“like the tinkling of a golden bell,”** he asked who brought the news to him? the King indicated the man. The Bodhisattva then said that he saved him when he was likely to drown, and now he’s in peril because of it. **He condemned ingratitude,** showing that **treachery after kindness is the worst kind of moral weakness.** He said worse to have a drowning log than such a one as him. The King, enraged by the man’s treachery, wanted to slay him. But the Bodhisattva stopped him and said that he only blamed human ingratitude, but he did not want revenge. The King, deeply touched by the deer’s kindness and moral excellence, asked for a boon. **The Ruru deer asked not only for himself but for the protection of all beings from harm.** The King declared the protection of all beings in his kingdom. Later, when deer’s were seen eating crops and people complained, the king did not go back on his word, he said be it the people’s wish or no, even if his kingdom cease, **he cannot wrong the deer, to whom he promised life and peace.** The Bodhisattva then counseled the deer not to damage the crops and to live in harmony with humans. Peace was restored. In the relief, the calm composed nature of the Ruru deer sitting without any fear presented the laity the importance and power of truth.

3.4.)Mahakapi Jataka(both Sanchi and Bharhut) :



The Mahakapi Jataka is one of the most famous Buddhist Jataka stories, depicted on the front face of the right pillar of the western gateway at Sanchi as Dhavalikar mentions and also depicted on the medallion of Bharhut. In this story, the Bodhisattva is born as a mighty monkey king who rules over a huge troop of eighty thousand monkeys in a forest along the Ganges. They live in a gigantic mango tree whose fruits are unusually sweet. The monkey king, intelligent and prudent, cautioned his followers that not a single fruit should fall into the river, as it might reach humans and pose a threat to them. Despite the monkey king’s warning, a ripe mango accidentally falls into the river and floats downstream. It reached the King of Varanasi, who was taking a bath in the river. Surprised by its sweetness, the king asked his servants to find the tree. On seeing the tree full of monkeys, the human king asks his soldiers

to capture them. Noticing the danger to his troop, the monkey king takes prompt action. He jumps over the river and, using his own body as a bridge, stretches himself between the tree and the other side of the river so that his followers can cross over by running over his back. Each monkey crosses over safely. But in the process, a jealous monkey (sometimes referred to as Devadatta in later versions) jumps roughly on the back of the monkey king, severely injuring him. The human king, moved by this extraordinary act of sacrifice, halts the attack. He asks the injured monkey king to be brought down carefully and attended to. Before his death, the monkey king gives the human king the lesson of **righteous rule, saying that a king must look after his subjects as unselfishly as he looked after his troop**. Established in the Bodhisattva's teaching, the human king did alms and other good deeds ruling his kingdom righteously. In the reliefs it can clearly be seen the monkey king using his own body as a bridge presented the laity the moral of sacrifice.

3.5.) Chaddanta Jataka (both Sanchi and Bharhut) :



Carved on the top architrave of the back(inner side) of the northern gateway of Sanchi and one of the stone reliefs of Bharhut, As per the description given by Joseph Hackin, once the Bodhisattva was born as the king of Chaddanta elephants(literally “having six tusks”). The body of the elephant king was pure white with red face and feet. He lived in a golden cave on the bank of a lake and had two queens namely Madhusubhadda and Chullasubhadda. Once after bathing in the lake and frolicking in the forest with his queens and attendants he sportingly hit a fully blossomed sal tree. Incidentally,the dry leaves,twigs and red ants fell on Chullasubhadda but the flowers and the pollen of the tree rained on Mahasubhadda. This made Chullasubhadda feel insulted and decided to **take revenge**. A pious offering to an ascetic gave her the opportunity to make a prayer that may she be reborn in a royal family and have him killed. Her wish was fulfilled and she becomes the chief wife of the King of Varanasi. She pretended that she had seen in a dream an elephant so beautiful that she could not live without a pair of his tusks. An unscrupulous hunter set out for the forest. He dug a trench on the edge of the lake and placed himself in ambush in it,bow in hand,disguised as a holy man. The Bodhisattva was struck by a poisoned arrow but he recognized the yellow robe, an emblem of holiness sacred in the eye of the sage. He asked the hunter the explanation of his deed, and at once understood the cause of the queen’s strange desire. He knelt down to let the man saw off his tusks; but the saw could not bite on the ivory. The Bodhisattva had to take the tool with his trunk and **help his slayer**. Then only did he die, the hunter brought the tusks to the queen. **She laid them on her knees and thought of the one she had loved so greatly in her previous existence. Then such grief flooded over her that her heart broke, and she died the same day.**

3.5.)Vessantara Jataka(both Sanchi and Bharhut) :





Prominently carved on the lower architrave of the northern gateway of Sanchi and one of the reliefs of Bharhut, the **generous nature** of Prince Vessantara showed itself on the very day of his birth as discussed by Joseph Hackin. He was born with his eyes open, and immediately stretched forth his hand and declared: **“Mother, I desire to do charity”**. He married the princess Madri, by whom he had a son and a daughter. The Bodhisattva distributed all his goods in alms. **“Those who wished to eat were fed; those who desired clothes were given them; those who wished to have gold, silver, or jewels were given as much as they would; every man was granted according to his desire, and no wish was denied”**. The prosperity of the realm depended upon the possession of a white elephant, born the same day as the prince, and endowed with power to cause rain. The king of Kalinga sent Brahmans to Vessantara to beg the gift of this elephant. Disguised as holy men, they betook themselves to the house of almsgiving, and, holding out their hands, they entreated the prince. At once he had a ewer brought to perform the prescribed rites of donation. The people were indignant, and insisted on the banishment of Vessantara. He went forth accompanied by Madri and his children, not before he had exhausted his wealth by the gift of seven hundred elephants, seven hundred chariots, seven hundred slaves of both sexes. They met four Brahmans who had not been able to get to the city in time for the distribution of alms. To each of them the Bodhisattva gave one of his horses, and he yoked himself to the chariot. Before long he gave this up to another beggar. Madri carrying their daughter and Vessantara their son, they went on toward the forest. They built hermit huts on Mount Vanka, and lived the ascetic life. The Bodhisattva gave himself up to meditation. Madri went out every morning to look for wild fruit and roots, their only food. There was, in the kingdom of Kalinga, an old Brahman afflicted with the twelve kinds of ugliness. He was too poor to buy the slave that his young, lazy, ill-natured wife demanded to help her in the tasks of the household. Knowing Vessantara’s generosity, he set out to find him. Arriving in the forest, he waited for Madri to be away, and approached the Bodhisattva. In barbarous language he asked him to give him his children as servants. Terrified by his brutality, the children fled and took refuge in a lake. But Vessantara called them back. Their entreaties, their rebellion, could not soften him, so supremely did he possess the **“perfection of benevolence.”** He saw the Brahman drag them away, striking them with a withy; and only when they had disappeared from sight he wept bitterly. Madri returned late; the gods, in order to spare her this painful scene, had taken the shapes of lions and tigers and barred the path to the hermitage from her. Huge was her

despair: but another trial awaited her. On the morrow it was she herself that Sakra, disguised as a Brahman, came to ask for, and obtained, from the charitable prince. It would have been cruel to put off till another existence the reward of this incomparable generosity. Hence Sakra, at the moment when he was taking Madri away, disclosed his identity. The children were ransomed by their grandfather; the sentence of banishment was revoked, and Vessantara returned to his kingdom with great state. The relief of Bharhut clearly shows the laity the moral of charity as Vessantara gives away the elephant which is important for his own kingdom, while in case of the Sanchi relief it beautifully depicts the viewer the continuous depictions of charity giving.

4.)The Analysis :

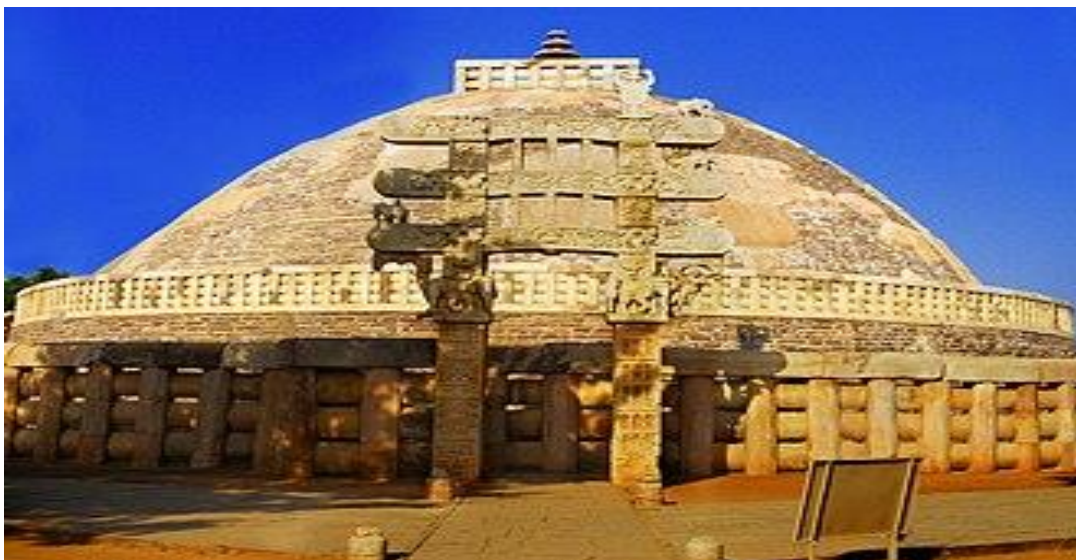
Vidya Dehejia mentions that the carvings of Bharhut were executed at a time when the Pali canon was transmitted as an oral tradition. Literacy could not have been high to the suggestion that every devotee visiting the shrine would have been able to read and understand the rich inscriptions found across the stupa's reliefs and vedika and might be possible that the inscriptions were intended for the literate monks who used them as prompts when they acted as spiritual mentors and guided worshipers for better understanding of the reliefs. But in the case of Sanchi we don't find any identifying labels on the reliefs as might be by that time the tales might have become familiar with the people. It is obvious that these visual narratives were directed towards the many Buddhist pilgrims and a few non-Buddhist visitors attracted to sites of religious and artistic importance. Assuming an audience composed largely of laity, devotees would have practiced the rite of circumambulation, and while following the clockwise circling of the stupa would often look upon the reliefs at random, concentrating on the torana's and medallions pointed out to them by fellow pilgrims or spiritual guides. Various narrative measures have been adopted by artists across Sanchi and Bharhut to describe the tales as Dehejia mentions. In Monoscenic mode, which can be seen more in Bharhut, centers around a single event in a story and is usually an identifiable event from the story and serves as a reference to the narrative, one that is neither the first nor the last and which introduces us to a theme of action. Since people are introduced to the story in the middle of the action, the relation of figures to scenic details must be unmistakable and stimulate viewers in telling the story to themselves. In Synoptic mode, which can be witnessed in the reliefs of both Sanchi and Bharhut, multiple episodes from a story are depicted within a single frame but there is no formal order of presentation. The scant attention paid to the element of time is characteristic of this mode and generally contain repeated figures of the protagonist as can be seen with Mahakapi Jataka. In Sanchi particularly, Continuous narrative in the case of the Vessantara and Chaddanta Jatakas can be seen more prevalent since this kind of narrative depicts successive events of the story within a single enframed unit, repeating the figure of the protagonist in the course of the narrative. Now if we look upon the morality these tales conveyed in the form of a visual pedagogy, the Syama Jataka, naturally taught the moral teachings of karuna (compassion), putr-rna (parental duty) and filial love towards one's parents instructing the laity that **spiritual merit is cultivated not only through ritual practices but by serving the same people who give you life and brought you up**, the importance can be highlighted in Ahoka's Dhamma policy as well where "Dutifulness to parents" has been the most mentioned virtue (five times: in four rock and one pillar edict) as Dikshitar states. Similarly, the Kurunga-Miga Jataka taught the moral beauty of friendship

and trust for each other, but it might also would have conveyed the moral of **“United we stand, divided we fall”** as the three species hailed from different ecological niches. It would have taught the laity **that morality is located not in birth, power or status, but in mutual nurturing and transformation of identity based in action rather than birthright.** The Ruru Jataka highlights the importance of truthfulness (satya) and morality over anger and fear. For the masses the act of betrayal would have been self-explanatory, a weakness of humanity fueled by greed. The reaction of the Bodhisattva on the other hand taught the laity the importance of controlling one’s emotions and speaking in a dignified manner, connected with the Buddhist principles of **right speech and right intention.** As a visual teaching element the relief reiterated the need for ethical character to be tested by adversity conveying that truth builds social trust while ingratitude breaks it. If we look upon the case of the Mahakapi and the Vessantara Jataka, there might be a probability that these reliefs were directed towards the contemporary rulers and political elites as well since they provide a moral visual pedagogy on governance that legitimacy is established not by conquest but by the readiness to suffer for the sake of one’s dependents and that sovereignty must be rooted in self-sacrifice (tyaga) and generosity. **Power unmoored from moral control is precarious while power embedded in generosity and protection is harmonious.** In Mahakapi Jataka, the monkey king uses his own body as a bridge to save his people without caring for his life and in the end sacrificing himself. In the Vessantara Jataka, the emphasis on charity (dana) clearly explains to us the importance of selfless giving pointed both towards the laity and the rulers, being the last Jataka it holds immense significance as one of the ten great Jatakas and is often referred as the “Great Birth Sermon” (Maha Jataka). Finally if we look upon the Chaddanta Jataka, the moral quality of ksanti (patient endurance) comes to the forefront and suffering is converted into moral triumph. The queen faced with the reality of her jealousy is overcome with remorse at the realization of the magnitude of her deed and dies shortly unable to withstand **the burden of guilt.** For the laity, especially in a social setting characterized by rivalry, wounded pride and spirit of vengeance (revenge), the story serves as a strong cautionary narrative about the **self-destructive nature of unchecked emotions and when jealousy is nurtured, it undermines sound judgement and results only in self-destruction.** It encouraged the viewer to acknowledge the fact that the real battlefield is in the mind, non-retaliation is not weakness, but the greatest strength .

5.) Conclusion :

The study tried to reveal how morality in early Buddhist thought was represented not as a result of power, status or birth, but as something that had to be developed through deliberate action and moral training. While The Mahakapi and Vessantara Jatakas promoted the ideal of righteous rule through self-sacrifice and generosity, the Ruru and Chaddanta Jatakas cautioned against the dangers of jealousy, treachery, and anger with moral self-control as the foundation for social harmony, Syama Jataka expressed to us the spiritual and philosophical importance of the people who give life to us and Kurunga-Miga Jataka conveys us the ideal society we all shall live in with mutual trust, unity and friendship irrespective of our differences. Through these visual stories, ethical conduct was normalized, internalized, and collectively reinforced in the public religious domain. Although direct access to the responses of viewers is of course unavailable, the architectural setting, narrative approaches, and thematic unity of these relief panels do however, suggest a definite pedagogical purpose.

These reliefs did help to create a collective ethical consciousness transforming sacred architecture into a pedagogical space. The early Buddhist art of Sanchi and Bharhut therefore must be acknowledged as a living force in ethical communication, an eternal testament to the power of visual culture to promote social cohesion, create collective values and represent the ethical ideals of a civilization. Analysis of the Jataka reliefs reveals that early Buddhist art was much more than a commemorative activity and aesthetic practice, it was an important tool of moral teaching. The reliefs were placed along the circumambulatory paths of the stupa and directly related to ritual practice. As the devotees circumambulated the stupa in a clockwise direction, the visual narratives were presented episodically, repeating their message of moral reflection through space and symbolism. Whether in monoscenic, synoptic or continuous narrative form, these sculptural presentations of the Jatakas rendered the complex moral teachings of dana (generosity), karuṇa (compassion), satya (truthfulness), tyaga (self-sacrifice), filial piety and moral restraint in visual terms. From this perspective, then, it would be fair to suggest that the visual programs at such sites were not only representational but experiential as well, helping to facilitate the experience of ethical contemplation for the devoted through physical and psychological immersion into a certain process. Thus, it could be argued that viewing became learning here when the process of recognition turned into the process of ethical realization. Additionally, it should be mentioned that the fact that such narrative images were understandable because they utilized human and animal characters made them more widely accessible as compared with literary sources. As a result, ethical lessons conveyed by means of these images were available even to those who were unable to read texts or study ethics in scholarly environments. In addition, it should be stressed that the use of relief panels within sacred architecture could indicate the intention of bringing this aspect of spiritual practice out into everyday life, which makes it possible to interpret the presence of narratives on such sites as evidence of democracy in terms of morality. Finally, the variety of themes present in the Jatakas reveals the complexity of morality implied by them. As such, early Buddhist art is not only a vehicle for devotion but a means by which social ethics were shaped through the cultivation of compassion, discipline, and thoughtfulness, thereby creating a shared consciousness rooted in these values and one that continues to inform ethical discourse and promote harmony in society today.



(the stupa of Sanchi)



(the railings of the stupa of Bharhut as preserved in the Indian Museum, Kolkata)

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- 19.) The photograph credits goes to Wikimedia Commons for allowing me to access the photos of majority of the Jatakas, The photo of the Vessantara relief of Bharhut was taken by me at the light and the lotus: relics of the awakened one” exhibition in Delhi where the relics of the piprahwa stupa have been kept for display. The Chaddanta relief photo of Bharhut goes to IGNCA.