

# A Study of Buddhist Applied Arts and Visual Communication

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**ABSTRACT:** In 1956, Mr. Charles R. Gerrard, former Director of the Sir J. J. School of Art observes: "Looking back over the years, in fact, as far back as 1935 when as a Deputy Director I introduced the subject of Commercial Art in India, I am glad the subject has been rechristened "Applied Art" which express itself as art applied to everyday life, which I consider to be a very important contribution to the essential requirement of modern India." and "The students realize that in their efforts to create new forms of artistic expressions they should not ignore our past tradition."

"We should study and apply our culture and make presentations of Indian designs on international arena and make "Designed in India" a by-word for quality and utility" This is what today our National Design Policy (NDP) says and the pioneers and experts envisioned when they started applied art education in India in 1935. But there is not a single book or syllabus precisely on 'Indian' History of Applied Arts or Visual Communication which depicts or communicates the Ideals of Constitution of India and its visual imagery. Hence this is my small attempt to study exclusive Indian history of the Buddhist applied arts and visual communication which depicts or communicates the Ideals of Constitution of India and its visual imagery. We will also see whether this study contributes to create a curriculum or syllabus that can be taught to the students of Applied Arts, Visual Communication, Buddhist studies and whether this study creates a visual appeal and constitutional awareness among the citizen of Incredible India.

## 1. Introduction

**Prof. V. N. Ranade** in his book 'ART FORUM', 1970, says:

"Applied arts means art applied for some definite, intentional and planned purpose. Such an application of art could be made to unlimited subjects. It can also be termed as an art applied for the utility purpose of publicity or advertising". Further he says "An applied artist should know, however, the progress made in subjects like history of art, social reforms of your country as well as others. This will serve as a good background to work produced in applied art."



"We should study and apply our culture and make presentations of Indian designs on international arena and make "Designed in India" a by-word for quality and utility" This is what today our National Design Policy (NDP) says and the pioneers and experts like Capt. W.E Gladstone Soloman, Mr. Charles R. Gerard, Padmashri Prof. V. N. Adarkar, Prof. V. N. Ranade, Prof. P. D. Abhyankar envisioned when they started applied art education in India in 1935. The said study is also made in response to our Duties as prescribed by The Constitution of India vide article 51A, fundamental duties, which mentions that the citizen of India should be abide by the Constitution and respect its ideals and institutions, The national flag and National Anthem.

In my observation there are ample of books on Indian art and history right from the prehistoric period and also on modern advertising and visual communication. But there is not a single book or syllabus precisely on 'Indian' History of Applied Arts or Visual Communication which depicts or communicates the said Ideals of Constitution of India and its visual imagery. There is a lack of awareness or studies about these ideals and imagery. Even the students of Applied Arts and Visual Communication are exposed to European histories and western applied art masters with few lessons on modern Indian creative contribution in this field.

(Please note: This observation is based on my teaching experience and the present 'information and syllabus' of applied arts of U.G.C, AICTE, DTE, DOA, UPSC, MPSC, NET, SET and all leading colleges and institutes of applied arts/visual communication design and the syllabus mentioned in their prospectus.)

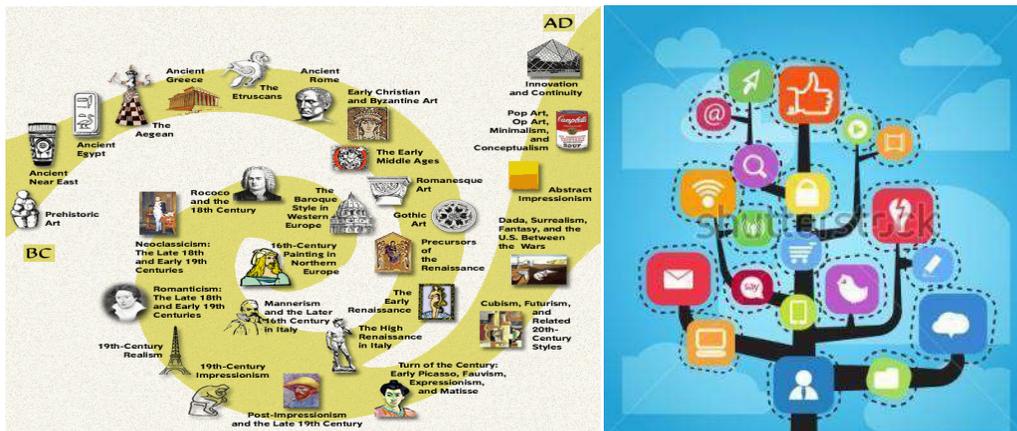
Hence, this is my small attempt to study this exclusively Indian history of the Buddhist applied arts and visual communication which depicts or communicates the said Ideals of Constitution of India and its visual

imagery and to see whether this study contributes to create a curriculum or syllabus that can be taught to the students of Applied Arts, Visual Communication, Buddhist studies and whether this study creates a visual appeal and constitutional awareness among the citizen of Incredible India?

## 2. Applied Arts and Visual Communication

Padmashri, Prof. V. N. Adarkar (Ex-Director of Art. Maharashtra State) In his foreword of the book Art Forum says *“The visual publicity is the most effective medium for mass communication acclaimed by the world for spreading knowledge. And the artist plays a very important role in harnessing this power. However, even though styles may change the principle governing the designing remains the same. Unfortunately, very few books are available on this subject in our country.”*

The Romans, The Greeks, The Egyptians, The Phoenicians, The Assyrians and even prehistoric man had already developed ways of communicating through gestures, signs, writings, paintings, sculpture, Art, and Architecture.



Keeping the universal laws, esthetics and the principles intact, today the modern world communicates through the modern means of communication with effective use of modern Medias such as Outdoor, Indoor, Print, Celluloid, Broadcast, Electronic, and Internet with effective application of Applied artssuch as Illustration, Photography, Calligraphy, Typography, Graphic Design, Animation, UI/UX, Printing and Publishing etc. used in day today life for visual communication.

If we study the Indian art history from the point of view of applied arts, we find the treasure of applied art examples throughout the ages that represents social,religious, political, art and historic India.



Today, we the 'modern India' through our Indian Constitution have adopted the democracy based on the universal values of liberty, Justice, Equality and fraternity. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, The Chief Architect of Indian Constitution, The chairman of drafting committee and Flag committee, clearly mentions in his speech on 26 Nov 1949 that he has borrowed these universal and democratic values from the Buddha and also visually represented it in form of our national symbols. The democratic culture publicized throughout the world 2500 years ago is India's greatest contribution in service and welfare of the mankind. This is the result achieved by the most successful visual communication campaign that used the most appealing and unique Applied Art assignments and Artworks for publicity and thus spread the Buddhism. But many historians and especially the applied artists and experts in visual communication had failed to recognize this achievement as these Art works were buried under the thick layers of social, religious and political historicity. In 18<sup>th</sup> century AD, the British historians conducted the archeological excavations that revealed 'something' that made India an 'Incredible' India.

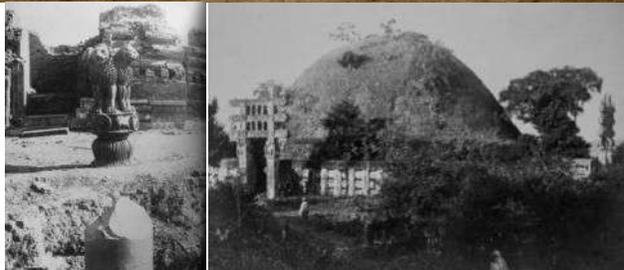
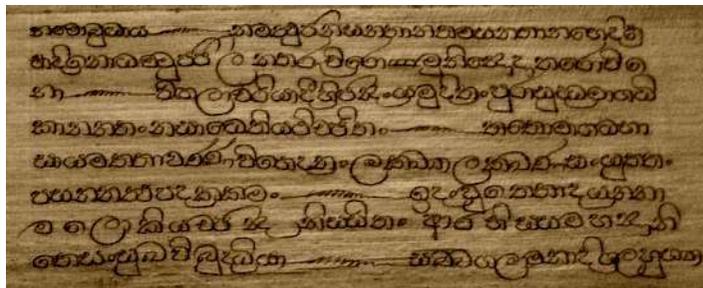
The archeological excavations revealed these ancient Buddhist applied art examples used for visual communication. These Buddhist artworks achieved long lasting, universal, and ultimate success in establishing human welfare. This Buddhist applied art heritage also inspired the future societies to learn from. And this was much before the modern (western or Indian) pioneers, experts of applied art, advertising or visual communication were even born.

### 3. The Buddhist Applied Arts and Visual Communication

One of the greatest disciple of the Buddha, an Emperor, the SamratAshoka made Buddhism his state religion and propagated, preached and publicized it within his domain and worldwide from about 260-64 BC. Emperor Ashoka undoubtedly has to be credited with the first serious attempt to develop a Buddhist polity in the world and undertaking the mission to propagate Dhamma (The Buddha's teachings). His mission and his application of applied arts for effective mass communication can be recognized as the world's most ancient and the first ever 'secular' visual communication and applied art campaign successfully planned and executed for propagation of the Dhamma for the welfare of the mankind.

The SamratAshoka established an empire based on Buddhas teachings and due to royal support, Buddhism flourished in India for some 15 centuries, but disappeared almost completely after the fall started in 185 BC and a complete decline in 12th century AD. The physical remains of Indian Buddhism fell into decay, and there was no interest in their preservation by the rulers who came to dominate India after the Buddhist period of Indian history. Nor was any interest shown by rulers where they exercised local political power.

But by this time the important texts of the major schools of Buddhism had been taken out of India to the places like Sri Lanka, Burma, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Indonesia, China and Tibet where they were preserved, studied and translated.



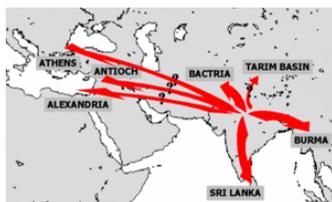
The same could not be said of the Architectural sculptures, caves, chaityas, stupas, monasteries, edicts, ancient Buddhist libraries and universities etc. which slowly perished and overrun by the jungle, and in many cases were destroyed mercilessly.



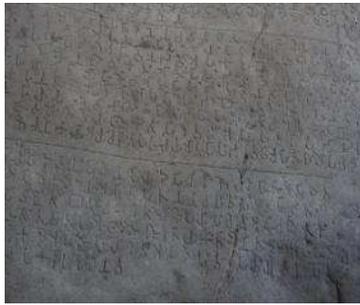
These ancient texts containing the copious references to these places were used together with the accounts left by Chinese pilgrims who visited India when Buddhism was still alive, were used by British archaeologists in 1800<sup>th</sup> century onwards who led the search for India's lost Buddhist heritage depicted, documented in form of Buddhist Applied Arts with a variety of actions and teachings of Buddha wished to be 'promoted and publicized'.

### 4. SamratAshoka and his Communication Campaign

#### 4.1 Global spread of Buddhism:

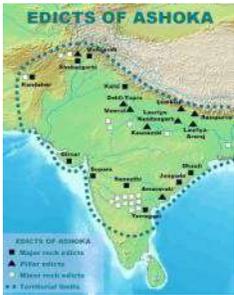


For the propagation, publicity and establishment of Buddhism and for its proper understanding and following, SamratAshoka appointed officials in various countries which can be termed as Brand Ambassadors in modern terminology.



### 4.2 Pillar and rock edicts

His ideas of Buddhist reforms and Buddhist branding was also established and publicized on his rock edicts (the most modern visual media of mass communication) which today we can call it as most ancient form of Hoardings and Posters as an effective outdoor media and effective mode of mass and visual communication.



### 4.3 Ashoka on his Medium and strategy

Ashoka says “This inscription of Dhamma is to be engraved wherever there are stone pillars or stone slabs that it may last long.” This speaks about impact, appeal and durability. The Strategic Geographical Locations of the Rock Edicts can be seen through its deliberate placements at the Buddhist sites of historic importance, important travel routes, or at places of Buddhist/religious interest, thereby ensuring that they would be available to as many people as possible. This shows a perfect media strategy for effective communication.

## 5. Major Buddhist Applied Art sites

**5.1 SANCHI STUPA:** Emperor Asoka built eighty four thousand stupas in Buddha's honour. Stupas at Sanchi are the most magnificent structures of ancient India. UNESCO has included them as one of the world heritage site..



### 5.2 The Unique Applied Art features of sanchi: four gateways (toranas)



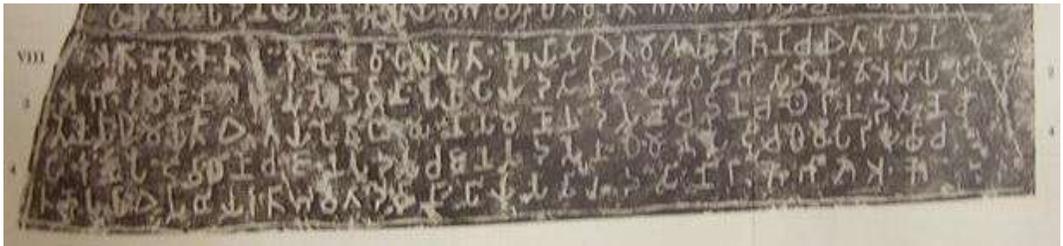
Torana is held up by two square stone columns with three horizontal members (architraves) with ends like rolled up scrolls. The thoranas are intricately carved with Buddhist themes and events of Buddha's life and portray the scenes of the birth, enlightenment, renunciation, MahapariNirvana of the Buddha, the Jataka stories along with miscellaneous scenes and decorations and the most unique composite animals and the rendering of the animated motion sequences etc. These are the most creative depictions of the philosophy, literature and history of Buddhism. In these carvings, the Buddha is always represented by a symbol of Stupa, bodhi-tree, footprint, dhamma chakra, pillar with capital etc.



This testifies to the early date of Theravadic depiction of these carvings. The representation of the Buddha in human form is a later development in Buddhist iconography in Mahayana tradition. These illustrations and symbology are the greatest contribution of ancient Indian Buddhist art to the modern world of Graphic design.



This image, from the lowest *torana* arch of the eastern gateway, depicts the emperor Ashoka's visit to the Bodhi tree in Bodh Gaya, the site of the Buddha's enlightenment. Here the Bodhi tree symbolically representing the Buddha is at the center and SamratAshoka and his court making appropriate reverential gestures. This event is also inscribed on the 8th Major Rock Edict which mentions that;



*"In the past, kings went on pleasure tours, which consisted of hunts and other similar amusements. The Beloved of the Gods, the king Piyadassi, when he had been consecrated ten years, went to the tree of Enlightenment. From that time arose the practice of tours connected with Dhamma"*

The most important places of the Buddhist pilgrimage: 1) The birth place of Siddhartha at Lumbini, 2) The place of enlightenment at Buddha Gaya in Bihar, 3) The place of the first proclamation of the teaching at Sarnath, near Varanasi in UP, and 4) The place of his mahaparinirvana at Kushinara in Bihar.



These places contains monuments dating from the earliest days of Buddhism in India constructed by SamratAshoka in form of sculpture and architectural temple, erected pillar with inscriptions that records important event in Buddhas life and history. These creative memorials are the place of the Buddhist

pilgrimage for followers and tourists around the world. These are the most ancient, well-executed mass events and assignments of Buddhist applied arts, successful in establishing and propagation of Buddhism for welfare of mankind. SamratAshokain his 7<sup>th</sup> Pillar Edict, Delhi-Topra, inscribes;

*"I have done all this so that among my sons and great grandsons and as long as the sun and moon endure, men may follow Dhamma for welfare of mankind"*



### 5.3 Visual Imagery of Modern India

We the 'modern India' through our Indian Constitution have adopted the Democratic culture based on the universal values of liberty, Justice, Equality and fraternity publicized throughout the world 2500 years ago by SamratAshoka. Dr. BabasahebAmbedkar, The Chief Architect of Indian Constitution, The chairman of drafting committee and Flag committee, clearly mentions in his speech on 26 Nov 1949 that he has borrowed these universal and democratic values from the Buddha and also visually represented it in form of visual imagery of Modern India.

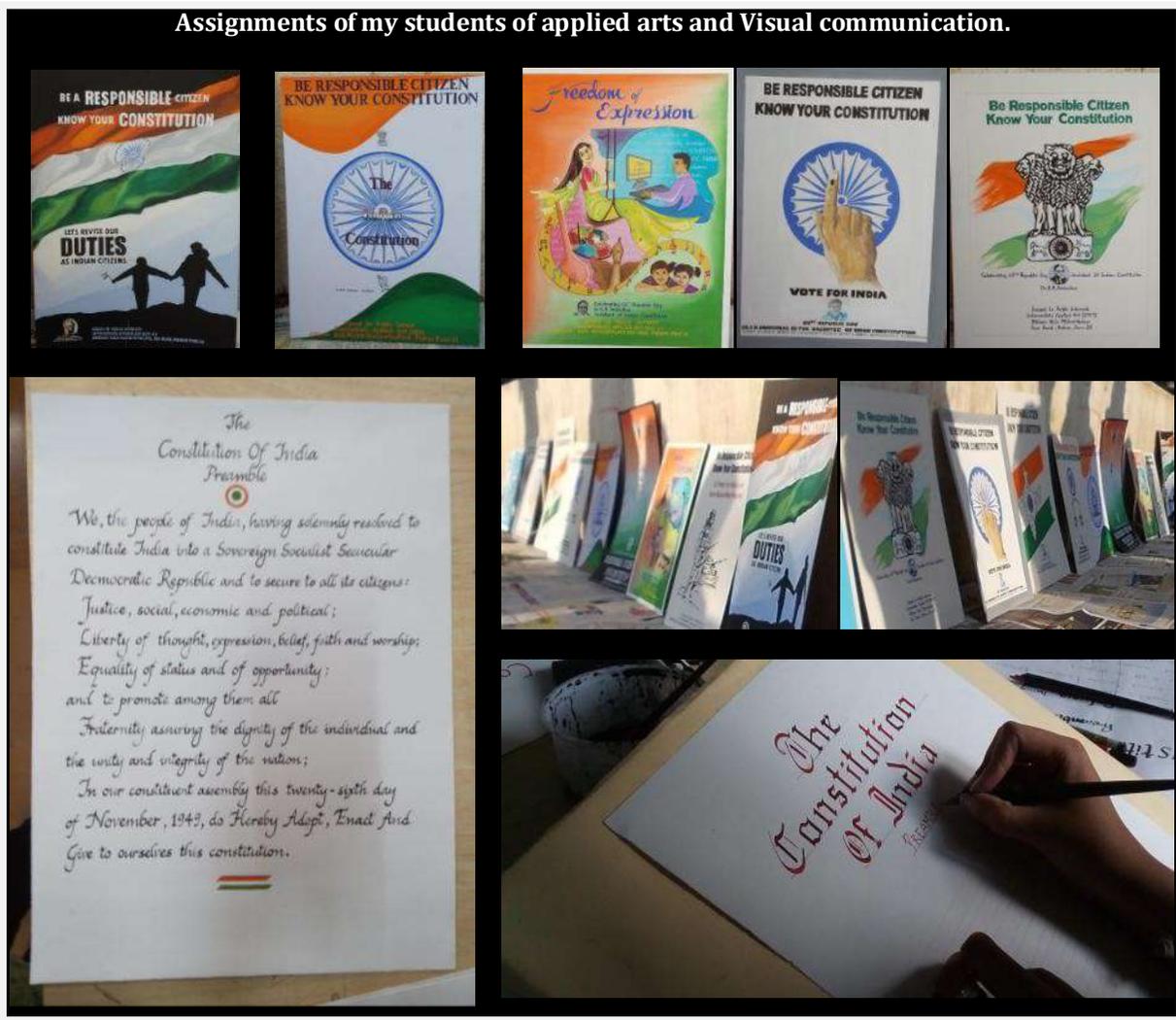


### 6. A gallery of The Buddhist Applied Artsand Visual Branding of Modern India





**Assignments of my students of applied arts and Visual communication.**



**8. Acknowledgment**

*"The Author Wish to express his gratitude to all Scholars, Teachers, Students Organizations and Individuals for their contributions, permissions, guidance, feedbacks and inputs on this research paper."*

**Note:**

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