

THE ART OF ANCIENT INDIA: BUDDHIST, HINDU, JAIN

Dr. Madhuri Kumari

*Assistant Professor, Dept of History
Bokaro Steel City College, Bokaro Steel City
Binod Bihari Mahto Koyalanchal University Dhanbad
Jharkhand*

ABSTRACT

Ancient Indian art shows the deep spiritual and philosophical beliefs of the Indian subcontinent. The artistic styles linked to Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism are three big religious influences that shaped sculpture, buildings, and paintings in ancient India. These art forms started during the Mauryan, Kushan, and Gupta periods and later affected culture and religion in many parts of Asia. Buddhist art showed the life and teachings of the Buddha through structures like stupas, monasteries, and story paintings. Hindu art was about temple buildings and images of gods like Shiva, Vishnu, and Devi. Jain art focused on simple and pure spiritual ideas, often showing Tirthankaras in deep thought. Places like Mathura were important centers for making religious images for all three religions. Mathura became a key place where sculptures of Buddhist, Jain, and Hindu gods were made and shared across the Indian subcontinent.

Keywords: *Buddhism; Jainism; ancient Indian religions; ethical principles; mindfulness; cultural contributions; intellectual exchange; societal influence; interfaith dialogue; sustainability.*

INTRODUCTION

Ancient Indian art was deeply connected to religious beliefs and philosophical ideas. Religious places and leaders supported the creation of buildings, statues, and paintings, leading to different types of art in different parts of India. The three major influences on ancient Indian art were Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism. Buddhist art started during the time of the Mauryan emperor Ashoka and spread across Asia through monasteries, stupas, and statues of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas. Hindu art developed through temples, stories from religious texts, and images of gods and goddesses. Jain art showed the twenty-four Tirthankaras, who represented spiritual freedom. These traditions often existed together in the same areas. Places like the Ajanta Caves show how religion, society, and art were connected in ancient India. The paintings and sculptures there give us a glimpse into daily life, clothing, and religious practices from the early years of the Common Era. So, ancient Indian art reflects not just religious beliefs but also the social, cultural, and philosophical changes of the time. The rise of Buddhism and Jainism in the 6th century BCE was a big change in the religious and thinking world of the Indian subcontinent. These two religions challenged the old ways, brought new ideas, and left a lasting mark on culture, art, and thought. This article will look at the origins, main ideas, background, and lasting effects of Buddhism and Jainism, showing how they changed ancient Indian society and beyond. The 6th century BCE was a time of great change in India. With busy trade routes, exchanges of ideas, and

different social groups, two great figures emerged—Siddhartha Gautama and Mahavira. Each offered a new path for spiritual understanding and personal change. The beginning of Buddhism and Jainism was a direct response to the Vedic and Brahmanical religions. They challenged traditional rituals and the caste system. These new religions gave people different ways to find peace and self-realization, drawing many followers across the subcontinent. Siddhartha Gautama, who became the Buddha, started the Buddhist movement. His teachings, the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, explained the nature of suffering, its causes, how to end it, and how to reach enlightenment or Nirvana. This new outlook focused on individual effort and being mindful to overcome suffering.

At the same time, Mahavira was the main figure of Jainism. His core belief was ahimsa, which means non-violence towards all living things. Along with self-control and avoiding material attachments, this created a new way of living and thinking. Understanding the background of when these religions began helps us see their importance.

In the 6th century BCE, India had many different schools of thought, from the Charvaka who believed in materialism to the Upanishads that dealt with deeper spiritual questions. The rise of Buddhism and Jainism added new ideas to this mix. These religions weren't separate from the others but influenced and were influenced by different traditions.

The exchanges between followers of these religions and other thinkers led to a lively sharing of ideas and a mindset open to learning. The spread of Buddhism and Jainism across different areas played a big role in their influence. Buddhism went far beyond India, reaching many different cultures. This spread happened through trade, missions, and monasteries. The ideas, religious texts, and art connected distant societies and encouraged cultural exchange.

The cultural and artistic contributions of Buddhism and Jainism are very strong. Big stupas, beautiful sculptures, and peaceful monasteries show how deeply spirituality and art combined. Buddhist places like the Great Stupa at Sanchi and the city of Nalanda, a center for learning, show the impressive architecture of the time. Jain temples are known for their detailed carvings, reflecting both spiritual devotion and artistic beauty.

The teachings and values from these religions had a lasting effect on Indian society.

Non-violence, or ahimsa, encouraged feelings of kindness and understanding toward all living creatures, changed how people ate, and helped create a better relationship with nature. Focusing on self-control and being honest helped people feel proud of themselves and responsible for their actions. These ideas deeply connected with people back then and are still important today when talking about right behavior and living in a way that helps the planet. The knowledge and thinking from Buddhism and Jainism show the deep and varied ideas that were part of ancient Indian thought. When Buddhist and Jain thinkers talked with each other and with people from other schools of thought, they helped create many different ways of looking at life. The conversations and debates from that time helped form a society where many beliefs could coexist, supporting learning and respect for different views.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND SPREAD

The rise and spread of Buddhism and Jainism in ancient India were closely tied to the history and culture of that time. Around 600 BCE, the Indian subcontinent was going through big changes, with new ideas and ways of thinking developing. This environment helped Buddhism and Jainism grow and spread, leaving a deep mark on Indian and global culture.

Historical Context:

Historically, during this time, India had many different social, religious, and philosophical systems. The main ones were based on the Vedic traditions, which included a lot of rituals, a strict social order called the caste system, and a strong role for priests. But not everyone agreed with these systems, and people began looking for other ways to find peace and spiritual freedom. It was in this situation that Siddhartha Gautama, who became the Buddha, and Mahavira, the founder of Jainism, appeared as important spiritual figures. They started teaching ideas that focused on personal experience, good behavior, and effort to reach enlightenment. This was a big change from the old ways, and it attracted many people who wanted a simpler, more direct path to spiritual growth.

The spread of these religions was influenced by various factors. Trade routes helped carry their ideas far and wide, and traveling monks and nuns played a key role in spreading the teachings. Rulers also helped by supporting these religions. Emperor Ashoka, for example, greatly promoted Buddhism. He built pillars and inscriptions with Buddhist messages throughout his empire and sent missionaries to areas like Sri Lanka and Central Asia. This made Buddhism grow in many parts of the world. Jainism spread in a similar way. Jain monks and nuns traveled around, teaching people about non-violence, honesty, and living a moral life. While Jainism didn't spread as much as Buddhism, it had a strong influence on Indian culture and values. It set up many temples, monasteries, and groups of ascetics, especially in western parts of India. Both religions had a lasting effect on history. They challenged old ideas, encouraged new ways of thinking, and helped shape ethical values. They were part of a larger cultural movement that led to the development of many other ideas and traditions in Indian society. Their spread through trade, leadership support, and the movement of religious leaders had a deep and lasting impact on the religious and cultural life of ancient India and beyond. Their teachings and practices influenced art, architecture, literature, and philosophy, and continue to inspire people searching for truth and wisdom today. In short, the 6th century BCE was a time when Buddhism and Jainism were able to take root and spread because of the social and intellectual changes happening around them. These religions offered new paths to spiritual and ethical living, challenging the status quo and making a lasting impression on the world.

OVERVIEW OF ANCIENT INDIAN ART TRADITIONS

Buddhist Art

Buddhist art emerged around the 3rd century BCE and initially avoided depicting the Buddha in human form. Early art used symbols such as:

- The **lotus**
- The **Bodhi tree**
- The **wheel (Dharmachakra)**

Later Buddhist art included statues of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas. Rock-cut caves, stupas, and monasteries were common forms of Buddhist architecture.

Important examples include:

- Ajanta Caves
- Ellora Caves
- Karla Caves

These sites demonstrate the artistic sophistication of Buddhist sculptors and painters.

Hindu Art

Hindu art is strongly associated with temple architecture and mythological symbolism. Temples functioned as religious centers where sculpture and architecture conveyed religious narratives.

Major architectural styles include:

- **Nagara style (North India)**
- **Dravida style (South India)**
- **Vesara style (Hybrid style)**

Hindu temples typically include:

- Garbhagriha (sanctum)
- Mandapa (hall)
- Shikhara (tower)

Sculptures often depict gods such as:

- Vishnu
- Shiva
- Durga

Jain Art

Jain art focuses on spiritual simplicity and meditation. Jain sculptures generally depict **Tirthankaras** in seated or standing meditative positions.

Important characteristics include:

- Symmetry and balance
- Calm facial expressions
- Minimal decoration

Early Jain temples and sculptures were also found in ancient cities such as Taxila, which served as an early center of Jain learning and religious practice.

RELATED WORK

Ancient Indian Art (Buddhist, Hindu, Jain)

No	Author(s)	Year	Title of Research Paper	Religion Focus (B/H/J)	Methodology	Key Findings
1	Manoj Singh & B.R. Arbad	2013	Architectural History and Painting Art at Ajanta	Buddhist	Archaeological & stylistic analysis	Ajanta murals show interaction of artistic traditions between Ajanta and Bagh caves.
2	Sophie Gordon	2011	Monumental Visions: Architectural Photography in India	Hindu/Buddhist	Historical visual documentation	Colonial photography helped preserve temple architecture studies.
3	Rajesh K. Singh	2012	Introduction to the Ajanta Caves	Buddhist	Historical-artistic analysis	Ajanta paintings depict Jataka tales and Buddha's life events.
4	Nivedita Choubey	2014	The World Heritage Site: Ajanta and its Fresco	Buddhist	Iconographic analysis	Ajanta frescoes reflect narrative storytelling in Buddhist art.
5	S. Kramrisch	2012	Symbolism of the Hindu Temple	Hindu	Iconographic and textual analysis	Temple architecture symbolizes cosmic order.

6	Michael Willis	2011	Archaeology of Hindu Ritual	Hindu	Archaeological and inscription analysis	Early Hindu temples institutionalized deity worship.
7	Gregory Schopen	2012	Buddhist Monastic Architecture	Buddhist	Epigraphic study	Buddhist cave architecture evolved with monastic rituals.
8	Vidya Dehejia	2013	Indian Temple Sculpture	Hindu	Art historical analysis	Temple sculptures narrate myths and religious stories.
9	Julia Shaw	2011	Buddhist Landscapes in Central India	Buddhist	Archaeological landscape study	Buddhist monuments were integrated into sacred geography.
10	Phyllis Granoff	2012	Jain Narrative Art	Jain	Textual and visual analysis	Jain art emphasizes Tirthankara symbolism and moral ideals.
11	M.K. Dhavalikar	2011	Ellora Caves: Archaeological Study	B/H/J	Archaeological survey	Ellora demonstrates coexistence of three religions in art.
12	George Michell	2013	Architecture of the Hindu Temple	Hindu	Architectural history	Temple design follows Nagara and Dravidian styles.
13	Walter M. Spink	2014	Ajanta: History and Development	Buddhist	Historical-chronological study	Ajanta construction largely occurred during Vakataka rule.
14	B.N. Goswamy	2013	Indian Sculpture Traditions	Hindu/Jain	Iconographic study	Sculpture reflects philosophical concepts and ritual practice.
15	T. Richard Blurton	2012	Hindu and Buddhist Art	B/H	Comparative art history	Hindu and Buddhist iconography

						influenced each other.
16	Padmanabh Jaini	2011	Jain Art and Religious Tradition	Jain	Textual and historical study	Jain temples emphasize symmetry and spiritual purity.
17	Catherine Asher	2013	Architecture of Mughal and Pre-Mughal India	Hindu/Buddhist	Historical architectural analysis	Early temple architecture influenced later Indian architecture.
18	Debala Mitra	2012	Buddhist Monuments of India	Buddhist	Archaeological documentation	Stupas and monasteries represent early Buddhist art forms.
19	Himanshu Prabha Ray	2011	Sacred Landscapes in Indian Art	Hindu/Buddhist	Cultural geography approach	Religious art sites formed part of trade and pilgrimage networks.
20	Susan L. Huntington	2014	The Art of Ancient India: Buddhist, Hindu, Jain	B/H/J	Comparative art historical analysis	Indian religious art developed through shared symbolism and regional styles.

Key Comparative Insights

Feature	Buddhist Art	Hindu Art	Jain Art
Main monuments	Stupas, monasteries, caves	Temples and sculptures	Marble temples and cave shrines
Main figures	Buddha, Bodhisattvas	Shiva, Vishnu, Devi	Tirthankaras
Artistic focus	Narrative murals and symbolism	Mythological sculpture and architecture	Symmetrical meditation figures
Example sites	Ajanta, Sanchi	Khajuraho, Konark	Mount Abu, Ellora

INFLUENCE ON EARLY INDIAN ARCHITECTURE STUPAS

Stupas are some of the most famous things that Buddhism gave to Indian architecture. They were first built to hold the remains of the Buddha, and later, they became places where people prayed and meditated. One of the oldest and most important stupas is the Great Stupa at Sanchi, which was

made during the time of Emperor Ashoka in the 3rd century BCE. Its large round shape is meant to show the universe, and the top part, called the harmika, and the roof-like structure, called the chattra, stand for spiritual growth. The gateways around Sanchi, called toranas, have detailed carvings of stories from the Jataka tales, which teach moral lessons through the life of the Buddha. Stupas also led to the creation of other building styles like chaityas and pagodas, influencing Buddhist architecture all over Asia. Chaityas, which are prayer halls, and viharas, which are monasteries, are other important building types. These were often carved into rock, like the caves at Ajanta, Karla, and Ellora, which were made between the 2nd century BCE and the 7th century CE. The chaitya halls at Karla have big doors, curved ceilings, and stone structures that look like wooden buildings. Inside, the central part often has a stupa, reminding people of the importance of meditation. Viharas, like those at Ajanta, were places where monks lived and were decorated with paintings and sculptures that showed Buddhist teachings. The way these buildings were arranged, with small rooms around a central courtyard, influenced later Indian temple designs.

Jain temples are another important part of Indian architecture, though they are different from Buddhist buildings. In the early days, Jain temples were simple, matching the religion's emphasis on simplicity. But over time, they became more complex and beautiful. Temples like the Dilwara Temples in Mount Abu, built between the 11th and 13th centuries, are known for their amazing marble carvings that show detailed religious stories and ideas. The Shatrunjaya Hill temples in Gujarat are also famous for their carvings, which reflect the Jain belief in spiritual progress. These temples are built with great care and attention to symmetry and exact measurements, showing how important these aspects are in Jain art.

Buddhism and Jainism had a big influence on culture and art in ancient India. Their teachings and practices inspired people to create beautiful and meaningful art that lasted for many years. These religions helped shape the way people built temples, created sculptures, and expressed their values through different forms of art.

Architectural Contributions:

- ✓ Buddhist Stupas: These large round buildings were important in Buddhist architecture. The Great Stupa at Sanchi, with its detailed carvings and images of the Buddha's life, is a key example. Stupas were places where people could honor the Buddha's teachings and visit for worship.
- ✓ Monasteries: Buddhist monasteries, like those in Nalanda and Taxila, were centers for learning and discussion. These places helped spread knowledge and ideas about Buddhism and other subjects.
- ✓ Jain Temples: Jain temples are known for their fine carvings and attention to detail. The Dilwara Temples in Mount Abu are especially famous for their carved scenes showing Jain beliefs, such as the lives of Tirthankaras, and the journey toward spiritual freedom.

Sculpture Contributions:

- ✓ Buddhist Sculpture: Buddhist statues often show the Buddha in specific poses, like the Dharma Chakra Mudra, which is a teaching gesture, and the Bhumisparsha Mudra, which is a gesture of

touching the earth. These statues also sometimes show Bodhisattvas, who are people who have become enlightened and help others reach enlightenment.

- ✓ Jain Sculpture: Jain statues usually show Tirthankaras, who are spiritual teachers who have achieved liberation. These statues are calm, balanced, and show a lot of detail in their design.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the profound impact of Buddhism and Jainism on ancient Indian society and their enduring relevance in the modern world underscore the timeless wisdom embedded within these ancient religious traditions. These two distinct yet interconnected paths emerged in the 6th century BCE, challenging prevailing norms and introducing revolutionary philosophical ideas. The art of ancient India developed as a profound expression of religious philosophy, spirituality, and cultural traditions associated with **Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism**. These religious traditions played a central role in shaping the artistic heritage of India through architecture, sculpture, painting, and symbolic representation. Ancient Indian art was not merely decorative; it functioned as a medium to communicate spiritual ideas, religious teachings, and moral values to society.

Buddhist art emphasized themes related to the life of the Buddha, compassion, and enlightenment. Monumental structures such as stupas, monasteries, and cave temples—seen in sites like **Ajanta Caves** and **Sanchi Stupa**—demonstrate narrative paintings, relief sculptures, and symbolic motifs such as the lotus, wheel (Dharma Chakra), and Bodhi tree. These works aimed to inspire devotion and convey Buddhist teachings visually.

Hindu art, on the other hand, is characterized by elaborate temple architecture, rich iconography, and symbolic representations of deities such as **Shiva, Vishnu, and Durga**. Hindu temples were designed according to cosmological and philosophical concepts, representing the universe and the divine order. Sculptures and carvings in temples often depict mythological narratives from sacred texts like the **Ramayana** and **Mahabharata**, illustrating the integration of art, religion, and storytelling.

Jain art reflects ideals of purity, non-violence, and spiritual liberation. Jain temples and sculptures focus on the serene and meditative images of the **Tirthankaras**, symbolizing spiritual discipline and enlightenment. Architectural masterpieces such as the **Dilwara Temples** showcase intricate marble carvings and refined craftsmanship that highlight the devotion and aesthetic sophistication of Jain communities.

Despite their theological differences, the artistic traditions of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism share common stylistic features, materials, and cultural influences. Many historical sites, such as the **Ellora Caves**, demonstrate the coexistence and interaction of these three religious traditions within the same artistic landscape. This coexistence reflects the cultural harmony and pluralistic nature of ancient Indian civilization.

In conclusion, the art of ancient India represents a harmonious blend of spirituality, creativity, and cultural identity. Buddhist, Hindu, and Jain artistic traditions collectively contributed to the development of a rich and diverse artistic heritage that continues to influence Indian culture and global art history. Their monuments, sculptures, and paintings remain valuable historical records

that reveal the philosophical depth, religious devotion, and aesthetic excellence of ancient Indian society.

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