

Art And Architecture In The Rgvedasamhita - A Note

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India has a rich art and architectural legacy dating to an ancient past. Indian art embodies the artist's vision of reality which represents an unbroken series of traditions underlying its religious motif and historic continuity. India is said to be the galaxy of cultural traditions. Its turbulent history, song and dance, indigenous crafts, dress and ornaments, myth and legends are an intrinsic part of the warp and weft of its tradition. It is seen that every settled culture has felt an urge to perpetuate its existence, either in art or in the construction of fine buildings, monuments, palaces, temples and even private houses and indeed those first cultures made certain of their places in history. From a study of such buildings we can gain insight into our past civilization. Similarly India is able to build up a great traditions in its art and architecture. The history of various arts begin with the Vedas which have been venerated as the fountain head of the history of Indian culture, since times immemorial. Everything relating to the Indian way of life has its roots in the Vedic lore. It is a treasure-trove of diversity and ancient traditions moulded by its geographical setting. Among these Vedas Aryan culture is preserved in the hymns of the Rgvedasamhita which is valuable for a student of history and culture. The Rgvedasamhita nurtures in its pages history, a breath of harmony and a showcase of exquisite art and architecture. Such art and architecture speaks volume of by gone age when culture flowered and which offers an insight into one of the richest emerging culture and civilization of ancient India. Apart from religious knowledge the Rgvedasamhita contains in itself the knowledge of various arts. The Rgvedic Aryans have made considerable technical progress in the arts and amenities of life.

Various scholars have commented on our age old past, though much emphasis is not given on the art-side. So, in this paper an attempt have been made to highlight the various aspects of art and architecture contained in the hymns of the Rgvedasamhita.

Taking a peep into the hymns of the Rgvedasamhita it can be said that among the various arts of life such as music, dance and playing on musical

instruments occupied an important place in the life of the Rgvedic Aryans. Though Samaveda laid the foundations of the musical traditions, it too had advanced at the Rgvedic period. Singing was highly esteemed. In the Vedas the songs are noted as rising spontaneously from the heart, the critical sensibility consciously evaluates them and finds them aesthetically satisfying. The Vedic Aryans with their poetic sensibility felt that the song was the best offering to the creator of the grace of this world. People set their heart and mind on music which was a very important art as well as the source of recreation. We have reference to singing song in praise of Soma.² The Samans were divine songs sung and set to music. In the Purusa Sukta of the Rgvedasamhita it is said that Samagana or Sama hymns were originated from Purusa- the Great Primeval Being.³ The gathas were also songs in verse.³ We have the term gathapati- the lord of hymns or songs⁴. Sayana in his commentary of the verse 1.43.4 explains the term as 'gathapatim stutipalakam'. The term Gathin is also related to music.⁴ Sayana in his commentary of the R.V., 1.7.1 interprets it as-'gathinah giyamanasamayuktaudgatarah'. Similarly gathani also indicates the leader of the song in R.V., 1.190.1. In the Rgvedic verse 10.18.3 allusion is made to the living going forth to dance and to laugh after a funeral. The Danastutis were also the songs sung in praise of kings and nobles.⁵ These were probably like ballads. Frog hymns also refer to the musical chanting of the Brahmanas.⁶ At that period song was sung in the accompaniment of dance and instruments.

The Vedic people were familiar with vocal and instrumental music. There are three types of instruments, viz. percussion, string and wind. Among these percussion instrument like Dundubhi or drum⁶, wind instrument like flute made of bamboo⁷, and stringed instrument like Vina or lute⁸ are mentioned. Among these the most popular musical instrument called Vina is mentioned in

² samutvadhikirsirasvaranhinvatih saptajamayah/vipramajavivasvatah // R.V., 9.66.8

³ Ibid., 10.90.9

³ Ibid., 1.167.6, 8.32.1

⁴ Ibid., 1.43.4

⁴ Ibid., 1.7.1

⁵ Ibid., 10.107

⁶ Ibid., 7.103

⁶ Ibid., 1.28.5,6

⁷ Ibid., 8.135.7

⁸ ksonibhah sabdakarihvirvinakhyairvinavisesaih/ Sayana, Ibid., 2.34.13

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later Samhitas also. The Atharvaveda invokes a war drum.^{??} The Yajurveda also distinguished the musical instruments.^{??} Besides, the Rgvedasamhita also mentions other instruments like Karkari,^{??} Satatantri, Vana^{??}, Nadi^{??}, Gargada^{??} and Aghati^{??} etc.

Like music the art of dancing also developed. It is said to be the graceful and rhythmic movement of the body in accompaniment of music. Rgvedic hymns preserved some accounts of dancing prevalent in the contemporary Indian society. The art of dancing starts with the Vedic age which had been the popular pastime of both men and women. The Rgvedasamhita refers to the dancing of the gods which caused clouds of dust to rise.^{??} It indicates the Vedic people's love and fondness for dancing in open air. Even goddess Usas is presented well decked like a dancer, appearing in the east.^{??} Her dancing figure and pause gives us the idea of Vedic aesthetic sensibility. The Rgvedasamhita also mentions one kind of dance with bamboo sticks.^{??} There were professional female dancers called nrtu who danced with embroidered garment and bared their breast for attraction.^{??} It is likely that such female dancers had a community of their own. In the Gautama Dharmasutra (15.18) it is clear that some people earned their livelihood by singing and dancing. We have references also to swings in the Rgvedasamhita (7.87.5, 7.88.3)

Sculpture and painting :-

We find no distinct mention of sculpture either of human or animal forms. The religion of the Aryans which was not idolatrous, did not foster that art. Scholars like Prof. Max Muller remarks – “The religion of the Veda knows of no idols. The worship of idols in India is a secondary formation, a later degradation

^{??} A.V., 5.200

^{??} Y.V., 30.19

^{??} R.V., 2.43.3

^{??} Ibid., 10.32.4

^{??} Ibid., 10.135.7

^{??} Ibid., 8.58.9

^{??} Ibid., 10.146.2

^{??} yaddevaadahasalilesusamrabdhaatisthata/ atravonrtyatamivativrorenurapayata// Ibid., 10.72.6

^{??} Ibid., 1.92.4

^{??} Ibid., 1.10.1

^{??} Ibid., 1.92.4, 6.29.3

of the more primitive worship of ideal gods".^{३३} So, we can say that there was no idol worship in those days. Most of the objects of devotion were from the natural phenomena. But the concept of saguna murti was in the mind of the Rgvedic seers. In the Rgvedic hymn 1.35.9,10 use of the epithets hiranyapani, hiranya-hastah, sunitha etc. clearly proves the fact. There is also reference to bartering, selling and purchasing of the image of Indra in the exchange of ten milch cows.^{३३} It is probable that like Indra's image the artists made other images made of stone or clay in the Rgvedic period. Some images of the gods are mentioned in the Rgvedic hymns.^{३४} In 2.33.9, a painted image of Rudra is described. Rgvedic verse 1.25.13 appears also to refer to a sensible representation. The seers of the Rgvedasamhita urges living presence of the divine in the beauty and nobility. They glorifies the surrounding, highlights the flora and fauna of the environment which we see in ample set of paintings. Various colours mentioned in this Veda such as Rohita, Krsna, Sukla etc. perhaps may be used in paintings.^{३५} From all such reasons it can be inferred that there existed the art of painting in the Rgvedic society.

Poetic art :-

The art of poetry had full bloom. Of this art we have the most convincing evidence in the collection of the Rgvedic hymns. It can be said that the literary achievements of the poets of the Vedic age were commendable. The hymns of the Rgvedasamhita comprised the spontaneous outpourings of the surroundings splendour and grandeur. A. Kaegi has rightly said "The great majority of the hymns are invocations and adoration of the gods respectively addressed; their key note is a simple outpouring of the heart..."^{३६} As the gods are mostly connected with the natural phenomena, the hymns consist of verses in metrical form addressed to them give rise to noble imageries describing the aspects of nature. The Rgvedic Aryans lived a life of beauty in an environment of art and beauty. They had the art of beautifying themselves and describes the beautiful gods. The Vedic seers convert storms into handsome bridegrooms called Maruts. Rudras description is creative and vital in RV., 2.33.3, 5,7,10,11.

^{३३} Vide, S.N. Sharma, A History of Vedic Literature, p.26, Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series, Varanasi, 1973

^{३३} kaimamdasabhirnamendramkrnatidhenubhih/ R.V., 4.24.10

^{३४} Indra in Ibid., 6.17.2, 8.58.16; Pusan in Ibid., 6.55.2; Rudra in Ibid., 1.114.5; Savitr in Ibid., 6.71.4

^{३५} Ibid., 3.8.9, 3.45.1, 10.96.3, 10.96.8,

^{३६} Adolf Kaegi, Life in Ancient India, trans. by R.Arrowsmith, p.35, Calcutta, 1950

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The beautiful picture of the environment is presented in the Nadisukta (R.V., 3.33.1-13), Dialogue hymn of Pururava and Urvasi (RV., 10.95), Usas sukta (RV., 3.61.3, 7.75.1-8, 4.51.1-6), sukta to the god Parjanya (RV., 7.102. 1-3, 5.83.1-8) etc. In the Rgvedasamhita all the elements of poetry are mentioned. The songs of Surya, Parjanya, Savitr, Maruts and above all the Usas are being valued as fine specimens of poetic art. Their praise often bring out the marvellous sentiment. Hymns to Usas have passages of real poetic beauty, while dialogue of Agastya and Lopamudra, Pururava and Urvasi are considered as erotic poetry. For Pathos there is nothing to rival the Gambler's lament. Hymns to Indra depict the heroic sentiment where the verses to Rudra and Parjanya give examples of the furious and terrible sentiment. Streaks of humour occurs in the frog hymn which is considered as a satire. The frog hymn is said to be a magic charm resembles the croaking of frogs with the reciting Brahmanas. There are elements of both ballad and drama in the dialogue hymns specially in 10.95 and 10.10 of the Rgvedasamhita. Similarly the hymns of Grtsamada, Vasistha, Visvamitra and Vamadeva have poetic value. Beautiful similies are found here and there in this Veda.³⁹ Vedic poetry is also replete with mystic experiences. The source of beauty couched in the concept of Rta^{3c} the eternal law which manifests itself in nature and which makes its beauty and glory rich.

Architecture :-

Architecture which in India is still a living art had made some advance in the Rgvedic period which represents the creative and originative faculties of the human mind. The art of making house developed during that period. In the earlier part of the Rgvedic age city life was completely absent and people used to dwell in villages. The word grama has been used in the sense of village³⁸ which denotes a settled state of existence. Such villages were a group of houses built near each other for the purpose of safety. As the joint family system was in vogue, the houses were so large enough to contain not only the family but also the cattle at night.³⁹ In the Vedic age the building of a house or other construction formed a part of religious ceremony. So, in the hymn attributed to seer Vasistha innumerable prayers offered to god Vastospati the presiding deity

³⁹ R.V., 1.1.9, 2.62.8, 5.13.6, 5.29.75, 5.41.11, 5.80.5, 10.142.4

^{3c} Ibid., 2.13.7

³⁸ Ibid., 1.44.10, 10.146.1

³⁹ Ibid., 7.56.13

over house or Vastu for the safety of the house and the prosperity of its dwellers.³² In accordance to their characteristics the Vedic houses were variously designated as Grha (R.V., 3.53.3, 4.49.6, 6.2.8), Sadma (R.V., 7.8.22) Prasadma (R.V., 8.10.1) Chardis (R.V., 6.15.3) Sarma (R.V., 8.40.12), Vesma (R.V., 10.146.3), Harmya (R.V., 7.55.6, 8.5.23, 10.73.10) etc. was constructed as to suit the needs of the people. It also indicates the construction of the house from small to big ones. Among these Sadma seems to be a kind of house where sacrifices took place. Sayana in his commentary interprets the term as 'sadma yajnyagrham...'³³ 'Prasadma' kind of houses also reveal the same meaning.³³ Chardis seems to be a wealthy home with a covering³⁴ or a home with triple guard which protects one from heat, cold and wet or three storeyed abode.³⁴ In the Rgvedasamhita the term Chadis also used (R.V., 10.85.10). Sarma indicates the house with three storeyed or consists of three rooms.³⁵ Vesma is the dwelling place or natural bower of branches and creepers in the middle of the forest or Aranya.³⁶ On the other hand Harmya means big houses or palaces consist of so many rooms which can closely be shut up.³⁶ It also hints at substantial structure. Rgvedic verses indicates the considerable height of the building of the harmya or its position on the top of a house. The term is also used to denote a dark pit or heated pit (R.V., 5.32.5). Indra is said to be the destroyer of harmyas of the Asuras.

At that period physical features, soil and climate effected much in making the houses. Houses were made of clay (R.V., 7.89.1), stone (R.V., 2.14.6, 2.20.5) mud-bricks and wood. We have reference to house with mud walls and thatched roof (R.V., 7.89.1). The roofs of the houses were made of long bamboos laid on rafters supported by pillars. According to appropriate measurement the plans of the construction were worked out which indicates the systematic construction of building. We have instances of hundred doors (R.V., 7.88.5) and

³² Ibid., 7.54

³³ Sayana, Ibid., 7.8.22

³³ prasadmanoyajnyagrahah dirghaayatah prasadmanoyasmin/ Sayana, Ibid., 8.10.1

³⁴ avinasayuktam chardih chadismat acchadanayuktam evamgunavisistam saranamgrham./ Sayana, Ibid., 6.15.3

³⁴ trivarutham trayanam sitatapavarsa nivarakam yadva tribhumikam chardigrham./ Sayana, Ibid., 8.18.21

³⁵ ... tridhatuna triparvana sarmana grhena../ Sayana, Ibid., 8.40.12

³⁶ latagulmadikam vesmeva grhamiva../ Sayana, Ibid., 10.146.3

³⁶ harmyam prasadadisthavaratmakam vastujatam/ Sayana, Ibid., 7.55.6

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thousand pillars (R.V., 5.62.6), house with several rooms, house of tridhatu and trivaruth (R.V., 6.46.9). According to Sayana, the world trivarutha in the verse 8.18.21 means a shelter that protects against cold, heat and rain or a three storeyed abode.³⁹ Similarly the word tridhatu means three courtyards.⁴⁰ The word tridhatu is also mentioned in the Silpasastra which indicates building either in the sense of seven parts or the materials.⁴¹ According to many scholars, the Vedic houses were consisted of three parts, viz. agnisala or fireplace, sadas or sitting room and patnisadanam or female apartment, so also grhadvara. Taittiriya Aranyaka also mentions the existence of Kosagara. In the later Vedic age an advanced stage of construction is exhibited in the various shapes of Vedic altars. In the Rgvedic hymns the construction of well decorated parts of home like gods palace or Vitana was not unknown.⁴² It was an exquisite type of a building. Similarly we get a good description of the Vedic house from the Atharvaveda (8.8.5; 10.1.30) which glorifies a dwelling house. The Rgvedasamhita also indicates the strength and stability of the houses which is indicated by the term Druva.⁴³ Silpasastra describes a special class of building called Druva.⁴⁴

Besides the construction of houses there were ramparts and ditches to protect the villages from enemies or from natural calamities. For these the Rgvedasamhita mentions the term Pur (R.V., 1.103.3) which are sometimes as big as a town. Fortified palaces were also called Pur. The term Purpati (R.V., 1.173.10) is used to indicate the leader or owner of it. The non-Aryans possessed more number of such Pura in comparison with the Aryans. We have reference to Sambara who had hundred stone made forts⁴⁵ or stronghold. The art of construction was so popular that the architects easily made iron forts or cities (R.V., 1.53.7, 10.58.8, 2.20.8, 4.27.1)⁴⁶, cities with hundred fortifications (R.V., 7.15.14) or forts consist of a series of concentric walls, forts made of stone

³⁹ trivarutham trayanam sitatapavarsanam nivarakam yadva tribhumikam chardigrham/
Sayana, Ibid., 8.18.21

⁴⁰ tridhatu triprakaramtribhumikam/ Sayana, Ibid., 6.46.9

⁴¹ Silparatna., 16.121.23

⁴² tatha bhojasya datureva hrdayahladakaram vesmagrham bhavati/ kidrsam puskariniva puskarani
padmani yasyah santiti puskarini sarasi sa yatha padmahamsadibhiralamkrta bhavati tadvat
pariskrtam vitanadibhiralamkrtam // Sayana, R.V., 10.107.10

⁴³ Ibid., 2.41.5, 3.54.20

⁴⁴ Samarangana Sutradhara, 23.6

⁴⁵ R.V., 4.30.20

⁴⁶ .. purbhirayasibhi.. / Ibid., 7.3.7

or other hard materials.⁸⁹ Purs or forts called satabhuji with hundred concentric walls,⁹⁰ Autumnal forts (R.V., 1.174.2, 6.20.10) which may refer to the forts in that season being occupied against the attack of enemies or against inundations caused by overflowing rivers or in some places refers to as a fort belongs to the demon named Sarat.⁹¹

So, we can say that architecture was of high standard at that period.

Besides the art of making houses we have the development of other arts like the construction of roads, lake, dam, well, tubewell, canal, construction of big tanks for preservation of drinking water for human and smaller tanks for animals, artificial irrigation, bridge construction, construction of ports, strongly built sea bound ships with hundred ores. Simultaneously with the transition from pastoral to agricultural economy there arose several new arts and crafts. Mention may be made of weaving⁹² which mostly confined to women, leather working⁹³ includes skin clothing and utensils made of animal skin; jewellery making⁹⁴, decoration of stage with toys or dolls⁹⁵, garland making⁹⁶, art of Pottery⁹⁷ which includes pots and vessels made of clay or wood; tanning, sewing, plaiting, embroidery⁹⁸ etc. Connected with the art of weaving was the subsidiary art of washing⁹⁹ and dying. Art of working of metals of gold, silver and iron also developed. It includes the art of making weapons of war¹⁰⁰ manufactured of metal as well as bone and wood, so also the art of making instruments of agriculture¹⁰¹, of hunting, various domestic utensils¹⁰² etc. The art of carpentry also developed during the Rgvedic age. The carpenter or coach –

⁸⁹ satamasmanmayinam puramindrovasyat/ Ibid., 4.30.20

⁹⁰ Ibid., 1.166.8

⁹¹ saradih sarannamosurasyasambandhinh sapta saptasamkhyakah purah puri../ Sayana, Ibid., 6.20.10

⁹² Ibid., 2.3.6, 2.38.4, 5.47.6, 6.9.2,3, 7.33.9,12

⁹³ Ibid., 5.85.1, 6.8.3

⁹⁴ Ibid., 8.47.15, 8.67.3, 10.85.8

⁹⁵ Ibid., 4.32.23

⁹⁶ Ibid., 5.53.4, 8.47.15

⁹⁷ Ibid., 1.117.12, 1.162.13, 15, 7.33.13, 10.89.7

⁹⁸ Ibid., 2.3.6, 7.34.11, 7.42.1

⁹⁹ Ibid., 10.26.6

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 3.53.22, 6.75.15, 8.29.3

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 10.117.7

¹⁰² Ibid., 3.32.15, 4.32.19, 9.1.2, 9.80.2

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builders were well known to the Rgvedic society^{११} who easily made things like chariots, wagon, boats, implements for household purposes, e.g. Bed or couch called Talpa (R.V., 7.55.8), wooden vessel called drona (R.V., 6.2.8) etc. and utensils for religious rituals or sacrifices like spoon called chalice (R.V., 4.35.2,3), sruc – a sacrificial ladle (R.V., 1.84.18) etc. At that period every useful work of art was appreciated. The prime artisan of the Rgvedic period from which the seers seek favour^{१२} is Tvastr- the giver of shapes who was also called rupakrt in the Taittiriya Brahmana (T.B., 2.5.7.4). As an artisan he is famous for making sacrificial cups, Indra's golden thunder weapon^{१३}, copper or iron thunderbolt^{१४}. Silpasastra also describes him as the master architect. The Rbhus were also celebrated as skillful workman. They made into four a single sacrificial ladle which Tvastr had formed^{१५}. These Artisan Gods are credited with having shaped the heaven and earth (R.V., 4.34.9). But the Rgvedasamhita is silent about the Visvakarma's special association with structural activity.

So, from direct or indirect evidences widely available in the hymns of the Rgvedasamhita we have the idea of the development of various arts during that period. From the Rgvedic art and architecture we can gain insight into our past civilization which was culturally much developed. There fore, it can be summed up that Rgvedic architecture, magnificent crafts and various fine arts, are the splendid example of ancient art which offers a kaleidoscopic fiesta that lures one with its magical richness and stunning variety. The hymns of the Rgvedasamhita also unfold the hidden miracles in the history of art and architecture.

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^{११} Ibid., 1.105.18

^{१२} Ibid., 1.13.10

^{१३} Ibid., 1.32.2

^{१४} Ibid., 10.48.3

^{१५} Ibid., 1.20.6
