Photo-Exhibition

Kēśa-vīnyās
Hair-styles in Indian Art

Archaeological Survey of India
The ‘Kēśa-vinyās’ or beautification of hair is innate in human nature which is conditioned by the aesthetic consciousness of the people. It is not just a physical attribute of human body, rather it reflects statement of personality, ideas, taste and creativity of the people. A perfect hair-style balances the face, gives suitable look and enhances the beauty of an individual. Since time immemorial, Indians have taken tremendous interest to exhibit their hair in various styles. Probably, in no other country has so much imagination, thought and artistic genius been applied to the art of hair dressing. Not only the common man, but the cosmic or divine figures (Gods and Goddess), semi-divine figures, nayikas have also been identified with their peculiar type of hair-do. Siva and Paravti wore matted hair or jata while Karttikeya has tri-sikha kind of coiffure. Buddha himself is signified by curly hair in the early arts while wavy hair is an speciality of Gandharan School of Art.

Usually, hair-dressing was a part of a daily life to look joyous and attractive. On special occasions like social gathering and functions, men and women both wore elaborate hair-do, often decorated with flowers, various gems, gold ornaments, etc. Ancient texts have enumerated exuberant forms of hair-styles and coiffure. Vedas connote various kinds of hair-styles viz. opasa, kaparda, kurira, kumba, siman, pulasti, stuka, kesa, sikhandha, sikha, etc., showing the importance of hair-dressing. These hair tufts were adorned with several kinds of jewels, diadems or tiaras and fillets. Satpatha Brahmana and Asvalyana Grihyasutra mention that the loose top knot was sign of mourning in the case of both women and men. Sikha had begun to assume importance in the age of the Sutras. In Katyayana Grihyasutra, it is said that on the occasion of sacrifice, hair and beard excluding sikha should be shaved. Razors (Ksura) were used for depilating purpose.

The Buddhist literature viz. Chullavagga Jataka and Milindapanho narrates fine description of toilet procedure. In dressing the hair, it was first smoothened (asanhiti) by a comb (koccha or phanaka) and hand comb, then putting promade (sittha tela) and beeswax (udaka tela) or scented oil. Mention of special barber (mangala nahapita) is also found in Jatakas who looked after king’s toilet and dressed his hair. Besides above, Natyasasstra also mentions that women were adopting hairstyles according to diverse geographical regions. The young women of Malwa wore curled locks (sirahsalaka kuntalam), women from Gauda tied their locks in a top knot (sikha), braided or plaited the hair (pasa venikam) while Abhira women dressed their hair in two plaits (dvi-veni dharam) which sometime would round the head (siraha parigama prayaha). The women of north-eastern region of the country arranged the tufts in a well drawn up position and women of peninsular India wore their hair
arranged in the shape of a water vessel held together by an ornament, or the locks of their hair were turned backwards from the over-head, known as **avart lalatikam**.

The Tamil Sangam literature gave a description of women who were dividing the hair into five parts, twisted or plaited separately, and tied up five tufts allowing the ends to sling down the back in a graceful manner. The boys wore *sikhanda* while the sages had a crown of matted-hair (*jata-mukuta*). Patanjali in his *Mahabhashya* mentioned the words *munda*, *jata* and *sikha*. The hair was parted in the middle (*simanta*) and pleated at the back and plaited into one or two long rolls dangling as low as the waist, that could be seen in the several sculptures. Most of the hair-styles described by Kalidasa are found in the early Indian sculptures, mural paintings of Ajanta and coins of Gupta period.

In the realm of creative art, coiffure is well delineated in stone terracottas, sculptures, paintings, and coins as well. Hair-dressing was common in both elite and peasants, while some scholars believe that only elite class arranged their hair in various types of coiffure to differentiate them. The exhibition highlights important hair-styles of different periods ranging from Harappan to medieval period as represented in various art forms described below.

### Proto Historic Period

During the Harappan civilisation, the practice of hair-dressing was in vogue as is evident from the antiquities unearthed at various Harappan sites viz. Mohenjo-daro, Harappa, Kalibangan, Dholavira, Rakhigarhi, Banawali, etc. The Harappans were very fascinated towards the hair-style and using comb for the making their hair-do with the help of mirrors. Such type of combs have been reported from Kalibangan and Mohenjo-daro. An oval-shaped copper mirror with a tanged-handle have also been reported from Kalibangan and Rakhigarhi.
The men are shown with their hair back from the forehead which was either cut-short behind or coiled in a knot or chignon at the back with a fillet to support it. Sometimes, a part was knotted and a part was allowed to hang freely. In some cases, part of hair was knotted and a part of hair was curled. They used to part hair in the middle and tied it with a fillet. Sometimes, the hair was gathered up in a bun or coiled in a ring on top of the head. A crawling child made of clay from Mohenjo-daro shows that curly hair was also in vogue.

The women took more care of their head coiffure. They wore hair arranged in plait tied with a bow at the end. This style of hair-dressing has close resemblance with the modern style. Some of the terracottas show the women hair arranged in a curl or knotted at the back and carried in a thick lock from one side to the other. Besides, few terracotta female figurines are even seen in a fan-shaped head-dress wherein hair is stretched over a bamboo or some other material. Hair of some of the figurines is seen to be decorated with flowers or flower-shaped ornaments. The famous ‘Dancing Girl’ from Mohenjo-daro shows that her hair was coiled in a heavy mass which starts from above the left ear and falls over the right shoulder, while in the terracottas, it is generally hidden beneath more or less an elaborate coiffure.

The steatite ‘Priest King’ of Mohenjo-daro is shown with elaborate clothing, ornamentation and coiffure. He is shown with trimmed beard and hair parted in the middle and tied with fillet on forehead.

The Mauryan terracottas give a much better picture than the stone sculptures for the study of hair-dressing of the period. In terracotta male figurine from Patna, the hair has been shown brushed back, which appear to be streaked and a fillet seems to have been affixed on the head. There is a horn-like arrangement on the left side of the head and a knot on the right. Likewise, if the horn has been made on the right of the head, the knot is shown on the left side. A terracotta male figure from Buxar is of great interest for the simple reason that the
hair has been shown parted in the middle, as in the case of hair-dressing by women, and a lateral chignon with a band appears to be affixed on the parting of the hair.

The Mauryan women were very fond of hair-dressing as seen in the stone and terracotta arts. *Arthasastra* has mentioned that two styles of hair dressing by women were prevalent in the society, the hair arranged in braids or shaven heads. It is believed that Mauryan women were more fond of head-dress rather than making coiffure. But terracottas reported from the north-eastern India suggest that head-dress was more popular than the practice of arranging the hair among the female-folk. The hair was generally arranged in top-knot, but in some cases, it was neatly brushed and parted in the middle which is still prevalent in the modern days.

The zenith of Mauryan art could be seen in stone sculptures. A *yakshi* from Didarganj is one of the finest pieces delineated full of spirit and sensuous charm with a beautiful hair-do. Her hair is combed and tied in a knot with a loop on the back while the tail is dangling on the back.

Sunga-Satavahana Period

Sunga art is characterised by simplicity and indigenous character. The sculptural art is specially associated with massive structures like stupa and its railings as at Sanchi, Bharhut, Amaravati, etc. and the rock-cut caves specially in western India, like Karla, Bhaja, Kanheri, Ajanta, etc. The early phase of mural paintings in Ajanta caves are testimony of high skills achieved in a finer medium like painting.
The women depicted in Sanchi relief no way lagged behind in exhibiting their variety of hair-styles. In the sculptures of Sanchi, the women either plait their hair as at Bharhut or they coil the hair round the head, this mode of wearing the hair being specially favourite with the ascetic women. The hair is coiled in a top-knot which reminds us of the coiffure of Burmese women. Certain women wear looped and knotted hair at the back as at Bharhut. While in a few cases, the loose hair is fastened together by an ornament. These two styles are specially favoured by the village women. The men generally wear their hair in top-knot and are clean-shaven. The ascetics, however, wear beards and their long hair is wound round the crown in a cone-like fashion or allowed to hang loose. Generally, long hair were combed and allowed to fall on the shoulders and in another case, hair combed side-wards and secured in a roundish bun with knot close to the nape.

The hair of the female head is combed back at the forehead and bound by a wreath gracefully by a medallion in front. A lady figure of Sanchi appears with a prominent bun. Her curly hair is combed back and terminated into prominent roundish bun. No parting line can be seen.

The women in the Bharhut sculptures arranged their hair in various styles. The hair is arranged in a top-knot when the women wear a turban.
A panel is illustrating worship of Bodhi-Tree by a group of women wearing a particular type of coiffure. In this panel, female hair is looped and knotted loosely. This hair-do is further embellished with flower wreaths and in another case, hairs are further added with a spherical knot over the head.

Another panel is showing women who has secured the hair to fall back, and divided further in two or four plaits. This hair-do is very much akin to the Iranian hair-style. The hair falling down the back is divided into two equal halves and then each half is further sub-divided into two parts and plaited. The men invariably wore long hair and tied in a top-knot around which the folds of the turban were arranged.

Amaravati (Andhra Pradesh) sculptures reveal variety of hair-styles known to Satavahana period. Both men and women appear in the reliefs with different kinds of hair-do. The male has arranged his hair short and curly which give appearance of a wig. Sometimes, a bow knot is arranged over the head and in some cases, these curly-hair dangled on to the nape. Stupa at Kanganahalli (Karnakata) has depicted many scenes of worship wherein a diverse type of hair-do is delineated.

Kushan period

The Kushan period saw the emergence of different sculptural art traditions like at Mathura and Gandhara School of Art which spread over particular areas. The Gandhara art of north-western India had an exotic element possibly from the Greek tradition. The proliferation of sculptural art was witnessed in this period due to emergence of Mahayana phase of Buddhism which initiated depiction of human form for representing the gods and divinities.
Mathura was a flourishing art centre in north India from the beginning of the Christian era up to about the seventh century CE. Apart from the Gods and Goddesses, the folk-art of Mathura is very rich and vivid in showing the hair-do. The stupa-railing pillars are depicting figures of Yakshis and nayikas with beautiful gestures and elaborated coiffure. A woman after bath is shown standing with her back towards visitor and drying her hair by squeezing out water from her locks and the drops being swallowed by a hansa.

Another railing pillar of the same period carved in bold reliefs, portrays a female standing gracefully, resting her left leg on the trunk of a tree by gently pushing it which is popularly known as Ashoka-dohada. She has been identified as Yakshi and characterized with lean and slender body with beautiful coiffure in which hair is tied up in conical coiled knot.

Besides, a fine piece of Kushan art reported from Sringaverpura (Dist. Allahabad) is worth mentioning which shows a head of Siva with third-eye. It is depicted with artistically delineated vertical jatas of twelve bands which are tied round by four bands of hair itself.

The Gandhara art was characterized by curly hair-do which was rather sparse in early Indian art, though, it becomes prolific in Gandhara art. All the Buddha and Bodhisattva images are shown with curly hair-do or the hair is arranged in wavy pattern as is seen in Greco-Roman art. A figure of Bodhisattva has calm features shown half-closed eyes, wearing moustache and a round urna on his forehead. His wavy hairs are tied in beautiful and naturalistic manner decorated with beaded chain. Further, a head of a young boy having beautiful wavy hair combed from forehead to backward is one of the master pieces.

Generally, women hair was combed back and tied into loose knot forming into a loop at the top. In some cases, hair is combed back in tiaras into a loose knot allowing lock of hair dangling on the back from the nape. Sometimes, hair-style is braided into two plaits leaving no tussles.
Sometimes, a part of the hair was arranged in a top-knot and the rest of it in schematic curls and in other cases, curled locks fell on the forehead.

Generally, women hair was combed back and tied into loose knot forming into a loop at the top. In some cases, hair is combed back in tiaras into a loose knot allowing lock of hair dangling on the back from the nape. Sometimes, hair-style is braided into two plaits leaving no tussles. Sometimes, a part of the hair was arranged in a top-knot and the rest of it in schematic curls and in other cases, curled locks fell on the forehead.

The women in Gandhara wore their hair in the shape of a spiral at the top of their head or in top-knot. In some cases, a part of the hair was arranged in a top-knot and a few curled locks were allowed to fall on the back. The hair was also plaited in single pigtail and allowed to fall on the back or braided into a looped knot. This pigtail was often decorated with a net made of pearls and rosettes.

The Gupta-Vakataka rule in north India between 4th to 7th century C.E. is possibly the best phase of Indian art which is marked for artistic genius with indigenous fervor. Some of the excellent examples of hair-style are noticed in the terracotta and stucco figures produced during Gupta period, such as the head of Parvati from Ahichchhatra. The gold coins of Gupta period show that women generally wore long hair tied into a knot, either at the back or at the top of the head. These kinds of hair-styles appear to have been common among the female peasants during this period. The elaborate head coiffure was prepared with the
help of maid-servants who were expert in hair-dressing. The hair-do of Gupta period can be classified into two types, one of foreign origin and the second indigenous style which became extremely popular during this period. Of foreign origin, was the short hair which was sometimes frizzed in front with luxuriant ringlets quite unlike anything seen today, or just left hanging loose on to the shoulder or further lower, held by fillet or a chaplet of flowers.

The indigenous style showed itself in long hair worn in a bun either high or low on the neck or knotted at the side of the head, or with the coil wound on the left on top of the head. The bun itself was sometimes a simple tight knot, at other times in the shape of the figure eight, or large and loosely wound, but almost always surrounded by flowers or had large lotus blossoms tucked into it. The bun of hair is usually decorated with jewels, pearls, flowers and tiaras.

The Vakataka sculptures and paintings clearly indicate that they derived their inspiration and artistic traditions from Amaravati and later from the Satavahanas.

The Ajanta murals delineated a large variety of hair-do. The royals, peasants, warriors and foreigners have different kinds of hair-do. However, most of the Gupta hair-styles are seen in Ajanta.

A terracotta head of Parvati from Ahichchhatra wore alaka (curled locks) type of coiffure which was tied behind and decked with round jewel. A stone slab of Nachna-Kuthara (Madhya Pradesh) is depicting a couple seated firmly with bent legs and playing musical instruments.
The hair of the male figure are arranged in a series of locks falling on either side of the head while female musician wore a matted coiffure which is tied like a bun with dangling curls on either side while the lower end of the hair is dangling on the shoulder with coiled end. Front of the head-dress is decked with twisted strings falling on either side of the shoulders.

Another terracotta plaque from Ahichchhatra is depicting Krishna and Balarama killing the demon Pralambha. The hair of Balarama is divided into two plaits fluttering on either side while part of the hair is tied on the top with ribbon. The demon hair is simply combed backward from forehead.

Medieval Period

The Medieval period has witnessed great sculptural resurgence with numerous regional idioms of highly ornate workmanship under the Palas and Senas of eastern India, the Pratiharas and Parmaras of western and northern India, the Chandellas in central India and the dynasties like Chalukyas, Pallavas, Rashtrakutas and Hoysalas in the Peninsular India. During Pratihara period (8th-10th century CE), most of the Gupta hair-styles were continued and delineated in the stone medium at various art centres like Osian, Abhaneri (Rajasthan), Teli-ka-Mandir, Gawlior, Badoh-Pathari, Vidisha, Gyaraspur (Madhya Pradesh), Deogarh (Uttar Pradesh), etc. The sculptural art of Abhaneri, Dist. Dausa (Rajasthan) has delineated several hairstyles but curly ringlets secured with beaded or jeweled string over head and parting on forehead seems to be most favourite hair-do of females. Some of the hair-styles are very common in this period viz. dhammilla and its variants, hair with central parting, hair combed with parting on forehead and plaits on the back.
During the Chandella period, men and women both wore long hair arranged in a number of ways. The coiffures of the ladies are naturally more elaborate, attractive and varied, while the hair-styles of men are limited.

The ladies of the Chandella society always preferred to make buns, chignons, coils, doughnuts and loose knots, rather than intersecting in *veni*. In most of the cases, the elaboration to the coiffure was made near the nape of the neck. The women worn their hair combed back, neatly turned halfway twisted, thus making a short tail resting at the back of the neck.

The loose ends of the hair have been carefully placed below the tail and tied with a ribbon with flowing sashes. In some cases, in place of ribbon, beaded strings were used to tie the hair. The coiffure of nayikas are more elaborate and decorated than the folk peasants. The nayika’s hair is divided into two or three strands, twisted and rolled around the remaining strands with loose ends stuck below and sometimes it making a loop.

Some of the females wore long tresses which have been done up into an elongated chignon at the back, decorated with *veni* of flowers of a chain which invariably encircles the chignon and is suspended from it. Occasionally, the chignon is also embellished with beaded strings and there is a small coronet at the top of the head. It is observed that in the Chandella as well as in the Gahadavala sculptures, there is great stress laid on the *chikura*, the *churnakuntalas*, the *alakas*, the soft and small curls forming the boundary of the forehead. The Solankis of western India also patronised the art and craft and several hair-styles have been depicted in their sculptural art particularly at Rani-ki-Vav, Patan, Modhera (Gujarat).
In Deccan, the women were very fond of hair-styles. The hair-style of women of the lower class (even those belonging to the menial orders) or the peasant women could be as elaborate as those of the higher class women.

A royal couple have *dakshinavarta* chignon tied with beaded strings, but the female consort has parting on forehead, while the hair of male counterpart is simply combed backward. The ministers were often from elite or priest class, all their shorn keeping only the ritual top knot. Generally, hair was worn loose by men, shoulder length and curled, in the *gurnakuntala* style, sometimes with a head band to hold it in place, or adorned with a strand of pearls. Very short hair was also fairly common and looked much like the hair worn today except that a clear parting in the hair was seldom visible.

The Tamil women divided their hair into five parts twisted or plaited separately and tied up the five tufts allowing the ends to hang down the back in a graceful manner. Such was the preference for this kind of coiffure that the young girls allowed their hair to be closely cropped leaving five tufts with a good space in between each other; later on, when the girls grew up they extended the tufts till they covered the whole surface of the head. Further, hair of some of the women are arranged in some more common styles viz. *dhammilla* and *veni* decked with jeweled strings, golden beads, etc.

For men, a tiara or crown with a band inset with pearls and sometimes festooned with garlands replaced the turban. This slowly became more common for the king when informally dressed in indigenous garments; attendants wore this as well with shoulder length hair. It seems that during Chola and Pandya period, both men and women wore same type of chignon either shown on the right or left and beautifully adorned with beaded strings, jewels and ornaments.
During the Vijayanagara period, there is decline in art, though it is full of exuberance. The very artificial pose of the figure and the heavy ornaments speak of artistic decadences. Aesthetics of the long braided traditional South Indian lady sculpture will amaze us in every perspective. The posture, feather style braid, rich ornamentations, frills and tatting were sculpted exquisitely. Many of the hair-styles are still in vogue and practiced in the urban and rural India.

The practice of making coiffure and art of hair-dressing did not find much favour in later periods in India due to practice of keeping the head covered.

The art of making head coiffure almost vanished in the coming three-four centuries. It is now again reviving after a lapse of several centuries. Many of the old hair-dos are worn by the modern ladies on special occasions.
Venue
Quarters Guard, Red Fort
Delhi-110006
(Monday Closed)

Timings: 1000 to 1700 hours
Entry free