

CUET · FINE ARTS · CLASS XI · CODE 312

Indian Bronze Sculpture

CUET unit: Indian Sculpture — Bronze tradition (Indus Valley to Vijayanagar)

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Snapshot

- Indian bronze sculpture evolved unbroken from the Indus Valley (c. 2500 BCE Dancing Girl) through Chausa/Akota Jain bronzes, Gupta-Vakataka Buddhas, Kashmir/Himachal Vishnu icons, Pala bronzes at Nalanda/Kurkihar, to Pallava-Chola-Vijayanagar masterpieces.
- The core technique is the **cire-perdu** (lost-wax) process, using an alloy of copper-zinc-tin, with a panchaloha variant of five metals.
- Key iconographic vocabulary: **tirthankara**, **Shasanadevi**, **abhaya mudra**, **sanghati**, **tribhanga**, Nataraja's **apasmara**, **bhujangatrasita**, **jvala mala**.
- Chola bronzes (10th–12th c.) are the global benchmark, and Vijayanagar (16th c.) introduced royal portrait bronzes.
- High CUET yield: dates, place-icon pairings, mudras, technical terms.
- Acts as a chronological "spine" chapter connecting Indus Valley sculpture (kefa102) to the late medieval portrait bronzes that precede Mughal painting (lefa103).

Detailed Notes

2.1 Core concepts

Indian bronze casting shows deep technological continuity. The cire-perdu or "lost-wax" process and the bronze alloy of copper, zinc and tin were known as far back as the Indus Valley culture, and the same techniques are still used by tribal communities in many Indian states today (NCERT §Intro, p. 103). Buddhist, Hindu and Jain bronze icons have been found across India dated from the second to the sixteenth century CE; most were cast for ritual worship, but metal casting was also used for ordinary daily utensils.

NCERT then walks chronologically from the earliest survivals. The Dancing Girl from Mohenjodaro (c. 2500 BCE) is perhaps the earliest bronze sculpture in India; its limbs and torso are simplified in tubular form, and the figure is a key artefact for understanding the antiquity of Indian metal-casting. Daimabad in Maharashtra, dated c. 1500 BCE, yielded a remarkable Chariot group with circular wheels, an elongated driver and two sturdy bulls drawing the cart — the date 1500 BCE places it in the late Harappan / Chalcolithic horizon (NCERT §Indus/Daimabad, p. 103).

The Chausa hoard in Bihar represents the next major chapter — a group of Jain tirthankara bronzes belonging to the Kushana period of the second century CE. NCERT singles out Adinath (also called Vrishabh Nath) for his diagnostic long hairlocks that drop to the shoulders; all the other tirthankaras have short curly hair, and CUET examiners often test this single distinction (NCERT §Chausa, p. 103).

The Akota hoard near Vadodara in Gujarat extends the Jain bronze tradition into Western India. Akota bronzes are dated from the end of the fifth to the end of the seventh century CE, and Western Indian bronze casting in general continued through the sixth to the ninth century. Akota figures inlay silver and copper for eyes, crowns and textiles. The tirthankaras are typically shown seated on thrones, either singly, in threes, or as the full pantheon of twenty-four. The Shasanadevis — female attendant goddesses of the tirthankaras, such as Chakreshvari for Adinath and Ambika for Neminath — are also cast at Akota. Stylistically, the hoard shows the influence of the Gupta-Vakataka classical idiom (NCERT §Akota, p. 104).

Gupta and Post-Gupta bronzes of the fifth to seventh centuries — produced in UP and Bihar — are dominated by the standing Buddha image. The standing Buddha wears the sanghati covering both shoulders, with the drapery falling in a wide curve at the ankles. NCERT contrasts two stylistic poles within this tradition: the Dhanesar Khera bronze treats drapery folds in the Mathura style as drooping down-curves, while Sarnath-style bronzes leave the drapery foldless and clinging close to the body. The monumental Sultanganj Buddha from Bihar is the classical hallmark of this phase (NCERT §Gupta Buddhas, pp. 104–105).

Vakataka Buddha bronzes from Phophnar in Maharashtra are contemporary with the Gupta works but stylistically distinct: they show the influence of the Amaravati school of Andhra Pradesh (3rd c. CE), with drapery that clings to the right body contour producing a continuous flowing line and a curvilinear turn at the ankles held by the left hand. One important art-historical point: Gupta and Vakataka bronzes were small and portable, and travelling Buddhist monks carried them across India and overseas to Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia and beyond — spreading the classical Indian style as far as Java and Sumatra (NCERT §Vakataka, pp. 105–106).

Himachal Pradesh and Kashmir produced their own distinctive bronzes in the eighth to tenth centuries. The four-headed Chaturanana or Vaikuntha Vishnu is the defining type: the central face represents Vasudeva, and the two side faces are Narasimha and Varaha (the fourth face, on the back, is rarely shown). Narasimha-avatar and Mahishasuramardini-Durga bronzes from Himachal Pradesh are notably dynamic, with energetic poses and vigorous modelling. A Ganesh from Kashmir (7th c. CE) and a tenth-century Shiva Family group from Bihar are reproduced on pages 104 and 106 of the textbook (NCERT §Kashmir/HP, pp. 106–107).

The Pala bronze school of Nalanda emerged around the ninth century in the Bihar-Bengal region. Sculptors at the village of Kurkihar near Nalanda revived the Gupta classical style; an iconic example is the four-armed Avalokitesvara standing in graceful

tribhanga. With the rise of the Vajrayana phase, the Buddhist female deity Tara — seated on a throne, holding a lotus stalk, and with the right hand in abhaya mudra — became enormously popular (NCERT §Pala, p. 107).

The South Indian bronze tradition is the climax. Pallava-period bronzes of the eighth and ninth centuries include the celebrated Shiva in ardhaparyanka asana with the right hand in achamana mudra — the gesture of being about to drink poison, representing the Halahala-poison legend. The Chola period (10th–12th centuries) in Tamil Nadu produced the finest bronzes in world art. The patronage of the widowed queen Sembiyan Maha Devi in the tenth century was crucial, and the bronze tradition continues to the present day at Kumbakonam in Tamil Nadu, where the same lost-wax process is still practised by sthapathis (NCERT §South India, pp. 107–108).

NCERT devotes a separate box to the Nataraja icon, fully developed in the Chola period and arguably the single most famous Indian sculpture. Shiva balances on his right leg, suppressing the apasmara — the demon of ignorance or forgetfulness — under that foot; his left leg is raised in the bhujangatrasita stance, signifying tirobhava, the act of kicking off illusion or maya. He has four arms: the main right hand in abhaya hasta (fearlessness); the upper right hand holding the damaru (drum) to beat the tala or cosmic rhythm; the upper left hand holding a flame; the main left hand in dola hasta gesturing across the body to the raised foot. His long matted hair locks fly outward in dynamic horizontal lines, framed by the circular jvala mala — a garland of flames — that defines the ring of cosmic fire around the entire figure (NCERT §Nataraja box, p. 107).

The Thanjavur sub-section catalogues several other Chola iconographic types. The ninth-century Kalyanasundara murti shows the Panigrahana (marriage) of Shiva and Parvati in two separate statuettes — Shiva extending his hand to take Parvati's. The Ardhanarisvara murti fuses Shiva and Parvati into a single composite image, split vertically down the centre. Independent Parvati figures stand gracefully in tribhanga, with the weight on one leg and a relaxed elegance descended from earlier Yakshini sculptures (NCERT §Thanjavur, p. 108).

The Vijayanagar period (16th century, Andhra Pradesh) saw sculptors experiment with portrait sculpture for the first time on a major scale. The Tirupati temple complex preserves life-size standing bronze portraits of Krishnadevaraya with his two queens Tirumalamba and Chinnadevi, all in namaskara mudra — the praying gesture — combining recognisable likeness with the requisite religious idealisation (NCERT §Vijayanagar, p. 108).

A separate process box (p. 105) details the lost-wax casting method as practised today in Himachal Pradesh, Odisha, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and West Bengal. Pure beeswax is melted in an iron pan over a fire, strained through a fine cloth into a vessel of cold water, where it resolidifies. The wax is then taken in small quantities and squeezed through a pichki or pharni — a vessel with a small hole at the bottom — producing noodle-like wires that are wound into the desired form. The wax model is then coated with a paste of clay, sand and cow dung, with a clay-pot inlet attached. Molten metal —

typically ten times the weight of the wax, often using scrap metal — is poured into the inlet; the heat melts the wax out and the metal takes its place. The finished cast is then chiselled, filed and burnished. The panchaloha or five-metal variant uses gold, silver, copper, brass and lead.

2.2 Definitions to memorise

Term	Definition	Page
Cire-perdu	Lost-wax casting process known since the Indus Valley culture	103
Bronze	Alloy of copper, zinc and tin	103
Panchaloha	Five-metal alloy: gold, silver, copper, brass, lead	105
Sanghati	Buddhist monk's robe covering shoulders, in Gupta Buddhas	104
Tirthankara	Jain spiritual teacher / ford-maker	103
Shasanadevi	Female attendant goddess of a tirthankara (Chakreshvari/Adinath; Ambika/Neminath)	104
Chaturanana / Vaikuntha Vishnu	Four-headed Vishnu (Vasudeva centre; Narasimha, Varaha sides)	106–107
Tribhanga	Graceful three-bend posture	107–108
Apasmara	Demon of ignorance under Nataraja's right foot	107
Bhujangatrasita	Nataraja's raised-left-leg stance signifying tirobhava	107
Tirobhava	The act of concealment / kicking away maya	107
Jvala mala	Circular garland of flames around Nataraja	107
Damaru	Hour-glass drum in Nataraja's upper right hand	107
Abhaya hasta	Gesture of fearlessness	107
Dola hasta	Gesture across the body	107
Achamana mudra	Pallava Shiva's gesture of about to drink poison	108
Ardhaparyanka asana	Pallava Shiva's seated half-cross-legged pose	108
Kalyanasundara murti	Two-statuettes Panigrahana of Shiva and Parvati	108
Ardhanarisvara murti	Single composite image of Shiva-Parvati	108
Namaskara mudra	Praying gesture, Krishnadevaraya and queens, Tirupati	108
Pichki / Pharni	Vessel with small hole for squeezing wax wires	105
Sthapathi	Hereditary sculptor / metal caster at Kumbakonam	107–108
Kurkihar	Pala bronze workshop near Nalanda	107

Term	Definition	Page
Phophnar	Vakataka bronze site in Maharashtra	105–106
Sultanganj Buddha	Monumental Gupta-period Buddha from Bihar	105

2.3 Diagrams / processes to remember

Several specific bronze plates should be memorised for image-MCQs. The Kaliyadaman Chola bronze (Tamil Nadu, p. 103) shows Krishna dancing on the hood of the serpent Kaliya. The Shiva Family group of the tenth century from Bihar (p. 104) is a Pala-period composition with Shiva, Parvati, Ganesha and Karttikeya in a single ensemble. The Ganesh from Kashmir of the seventh century (pp. 104, 106) demonstrates the early Kashmir style. The Chola Devi (p. 105) is an elegant standing Parvati in tribhanga. The four-headed Chaturanana Vishnu from Himachal Pradesh (p. 106) is the type-example of the Vaikuntha Vishnu icon. The twelfth-century Chola Nataraja (p. 107) should be read in five points: apasmara underfoot, jwala mala ring, four hands with damaru and flame, flying matted hair, dola hasta.

The lost-wax process flow (p. 105 box) is best memorised in nine steps: (1) melt beeswax in iron pan; (2) strain through fine cloth into vessel of cold water; (3) wax resolidifies; (4) squeeze small portions through a pichki/pharni to produce noodle-like wax wires; (5) wind the wires into the desired model shape; (6) coat the wax model with a paste of clay, sand and cow dung, attach a clay-pot inlet; (7) pour molten metal (about ten times the wax weight, often scrap) into the inlet; (8) heat melts the wax out and metal solidifies in its place; (9) break the clay shell and chisel/file/burnish the finished cast. Panchaloha is the five-metal variant.

2.4 Common confusions / NTA trap points

- Daimabad's 'Chariot' is c. 1500 BCE; the Dancing Girl is c. 2500 BCE Mohenjodaro. Do not collapse the two dates.
- Adinath / Vrishabh Nath has long hairlocks; the rest of the tirthankaras have short curly hair.
- Mathura-style drapery (Dhanesar Khera) = drooping curves; Sarnath-style = foldless and clinging. Easy to swap.
- Akota is in Gujarat (near Vadodara), not Rajasthan; Chausa is in Bihar.
- Phophnar bronzes are Vakataka (Maharashtra), influenced by Amaravati (Andhra Pradesh) — not Gupta UP.
- The two side faces of Chaturanana Vishnu are Narasimha and Varaha; do not substitute Vamana or Kalki.
- Nataraja's upper RIGHT hand holds the damaru; the upper LEFT holds the flame.
- The Chola patron Sembian Maha Devi belongs to the tenth century, not the twelfth (Nataraja's century).

- Vijayanagar portrait bronzes of Krishnadevaraya were cast at Tirupati in the 16th century — not at Hampi.
- Kalyanasundara murti = TWO statuettes (Shiva separately, Parvati separately); Ardhanarisvara = ONE composite image.
- Bronze = copper + zinc + tin; panchaloha = gold + silver + copper + brass + lead. Distractors swap iron for brass or omit zinc.
- The Sultanganj Buddha is in Bihar, not Uttar Pradesh.
- Bhujangatrasita is the stance of the raised left leg; not a synonym for tribhanga.

2.5 Key artworks / artists

Artwork or Artist	Period	Significance	NCERT page
Dancing Girl, Mohenjodaro	c. 2500 BCE	Earliest Indian bronze	103
Daimabad Chariot	c. 1500 BCE	Late Harappan / Chalcolithic bronze	103
Chausa Adinath / Vrishabh Nath	2nd c. CE, Kushana, Bihar	Long hairlocks; Jain tirthankara	103
Akota tirthankara bronzes	5th–7th c. CE, Gujarat	Silver-copper inlay, Gupta-Vakataka style	104
Chakreshvari (Adinath Shasanadevi)	Akota	Jain attendant goddess	104
Ambika (Neminath Shasanadevi)	Akota	Jain attendant goddess	104
Dhanesar Khera Buddha	5th–6th c. CE, UP	Mathura-style drooping folds	105
Sarnath-style standing Buddha	5th–7th c. CE	Foldless transparent sanghati	104–105
Sultanganj Buddha	Late 6th c. CE, Bihar	Monumental Gupta bronze	105
Phophnar Vakataka Buddha	5th–6th c. CE, Maharashtra	Amaravati-influenced drapery	105–106
Ganesh, Kashmir	7th c. CE	Early Kashmir bronze	104, 106
Chaturanana Vishnu, HP	8th–10th c. CE	Four-headed Vaikuntha Vishnu	106
Narasimha avatar, HP	8th–10th c. CE	Dynamic HP bronze	106
Mahishasuramardini Durga, HP	8th–10th c. CE	Dynamic HP Durga	106
Shiva Family, Bihar	10th c. CE, Pala	Composite family group	104
Avalokitesvara, Kurkihar	9th c. CE, Pala	Four-armed, tribhanga	107

Artwork or Artist	Period	Significance	NCERT page
Tara	Vajrayana Pala	Throne, lotus stalk, abhaya mudra	107
Pallava Shiva, ardhaparyanka asana	8th–9th c. CE	Achamana mudra, poison-drinking	108
Sembiyan Maha Devi (patron)	10th c. CE, Chola	Widowed queen patron of bronzes	107
Chola Nataraja	12th c. CE	Cosmic dance icon	107
Kalyanasundara murti, Thanjavur	9th c. CE Chola	Panigrahana — Shiva-Parvati marriage	108
Ardhanarisvara, Thanjavur	Chola	Composite Shiva-Parvati image	108
Kaliyadaman Krishna, Chola	11th–12th c. CE	Krishna on Kaliya serpent	103
Krishnadevaraya & queens, Tirupati	16th c. CE, Vijayanagar	Life-size portrait bronzes, namaskara mudra	108

Practice MCQs

PYQ Alignment

This chapter is a steady CUET Fine Arts source, typically yielding 5–7 MCQs per year. Recurring question types include date/place pairings (Mohenjodaro–Daimabad–Chausa–Akota–Phophnar–Kurkihar–Tirupati), iconographic vocabulary (sanghati, tribhanga, abhaya mudra, apasmara, bhujangatrasita, jvala mala, namaskara mudra), and statement-based items on the lost-wax process and Chola Nataraja symbolism. CUET 2024 set a four-statement question on Nataraja iconography; CUET 2025 carried an Assertion-Reason on the Vijayanagar Tirupati portraits.