

An Essay on Spirituality in Indian Sacred Art: Some Perspectives

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Abstract

Original Research Article

This essay describes some of the fundamental ideas that make Indian sacred art unique, namely the interconnection between the spiritual and technical aspects present in several sacred artistic works carried out by various artists over time. Thus, some practical applications of the “theory of the evolution of consciousness” in Indian sacred art will be discussed, including the role played by the human body, as a fundamental “instrument” for expressing the devotion of Indians.

Keywords: Fundamental concepts of Indian sacred art, theory of evolution and consciousness, human body and devotion.

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INTRODUCTION

Generally speaking, the link between spirituality and art has existed since time immemorial in various cultures, as a way of expressing the essence of all human beings. For example, Indian sacred art has presented a remarkable plurality and diversity with influences from different philosophies and religions, such as, Buddhism Hinduism, Islam, Mongol, Christianity; also it has been expressed in Elephanta Caves (extolling Shiva cult of Hinduism), the Vimala Temple (highlighting the Shakti of Hinduism), the Taj-Mahal (from Mongolism) and the Church of St. John (from Christianity) [1]. On the other hand, in Western culture, the fresco called “Final Judgment” by Michelangelo on the ceiling of Sistine Chapel and the work called “Last Supper” by Leonardo da Vinci are also examples that show the connection between art and spirituality [2].

In this regard, an exchange between Eastern and Western art has been sought by Martin Gurvich [3], founder of the Indian Sacred Art Museum (MOSA), in Belgium. He revealed Indian Sacred Art in Western culture with works characterized by fundamental concepts such as, truth (in Sanskrit, satyam), prosperity (in Sanskrit, shivam) and beauty (in Sanskrit, sundaram).

Studies carried on the intersection of Science and Art have proposed that the “Reality in an artistic work” [4] is created by the “conscience or the mind of

the observer”. Thus, it is the “mind of the artist” (observer) that determines the work of art that will be manifested [5]. In this sense, Einstein said that Science and Art have a common source of inquiry which is the search for the “Mystery of Life” [6]. So, both the scientist and the artist seek to describe the “Beauty” that underlies all visible manifestation [7].

This essay aims to present some Indian sacred art works [8], which Sushma Bahl [9] illustrated through different artistic images to promote the “psychic unity” of the conscious and unconscious aspects of human beings for us to know our true Self and the “Beauty” of our soul.

METHODS

In this essay, 24 main articles and books in this area of research, that is available in libraries, were collected and analyzed. They were collected, based on their “impact factor” and that of the “reference” books on this theme. This was considered for the books and articles to be useful to readers who want to greatly understand this subject.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In Western and Eastern spirituality, it is admitted that the Divine or God is one entity who constitutes the base of all beings and the source of their Life. This Entity expresses Himself through three dynamic aspects called “Trimurti”, namely the creation aspect (in Sanskrit, Brahma), preservation aspect (in

Sanskrit, Vishnu) and renewal aspect (in Sanskrit, Shiva) that are painted according to culture itself. The sculpture of Shiva Lingam (symbol of Shiva) is associated with the primordial energy (currently referred to as nuclear energy) that represents the destruction and renewal process for the true creation of the human Being or Sacred Art might occur (symbolized by Brahma), so to perpetuate a new life on Earth (symbolized by Vishnu). In Western spirituality, this aspect of creation is described by the “Tree of Science” in Genesis (in the Bible of Christians) and in Kabbalah (in Judaism). For its part, another aspect of creation is expressed in Indian sacred art work called “Tree of Life” [10].

Different cultures have also tried to express the “Divine on Earth” or “avatar” through the sacred temples where the deities’ images of their devotion appear on an altar, and it is linked to the experience of Darshan (in Sanskrit, see the Divine) in Indian culture. The manifestation of the Divine on earth also has a human side, expressed through paintings and sculptures, such as the figure of Ganesha (half-human and half-elephant) [11]. However, in Western culture, the mind and the body are presented in an antagonistic way, perhaps as an expression of the Cartesian mind-body separation. On the contrary, in Indian culture, the mind-body is seen as being interconnected with each other; the main objective is to expand the mind of the conscious being (in Sanskrit, brah-manas), so that it can express its spiritual side on Earth. This is described by the “theory of evolution of consciousness” through various forms of manifestations from the simplest to the most complex, expressed in Indian sacred work designated by “Vishnu’s ten main avatars” or “Dashavataras” [12].

In this regard, Indian sacred art highlights Mother Earth (in Sanskrit, Bhudevi) [13] that is painted as a great spiritual entity with a Yoni (in Sanskrit, womb), the female sexual organ – counterpart of the male sexual organ designated by Linga - that “gives birth” to the spiritual and physical body of all beings in the Universe. Therefore, it has a central role to play for the survival of species in Nature (cereals from earth, water from rivers, fish from sea, fruit from trees, meat from animals). It must be taken with care and in a symbiotic way, in order to allow a sustainable development and balanced life between the mundane and the sacred [14]. It is necessary to mention that the union of Yoni with Linga is called Shiva Lingam mentioned earlier.

Furthermore, the human body [15] has played an important role in Indian sacred art, reflecting the cultural and philosophical diversity that India has had over the centuries, where the spiritual and sensual facets of the body are interconnected in a harmonious way. However, in Western culture, the body (particularly of a woman) is associated with temptation and sin; while in

Indian culture, the body (namely of a woman) is linked to abundance and fertility, constituting an inspiring source of positive values.

For example, the painting called “Woman Holding a Fan” (symbol of the sensuality of Indian women) by Raja Ravi Varma and the painting called “Mother India” (symbol of the virtues of Indian women) by Abanindranath Tagore show the complementary facets of the Indian woman’s body [16]. In fact, in Indian sacred art, the human body is seen as an “instrument” that connects the “inner psychic world” with the “physical outer world” through the Yantras [17]. From the earliest time to modernity, this important aesthetic component [18] has been used in Indian sacred art in different ways by various Indian artists [19], where the death of the body and reincarnation of the soul in another body make us to become aware of our true Being [20].

In this regard, in Indian sacred art, the word “devotion” (in Sanskrit, bhakti) could have several meanings based on the context in which is applied. For example, the sacred Indian art called “Radha and Krishna” describes the conjugal love, in an equity relationship where each person completes the other one [21]; while in the sacred Hindu text called “Bhagavad-Gita”, this devotional aspect is expressed between Krishna (the spiritual master) and the disciple Arjuna, who is encouraged to conquer his soul (in Sanskrit, Atman) [22]. Thus, the Hindu god called Ardhanarishavara, whose left side is feminine and the right side masculine (also known as the union between Shakti and Shiva or Prakriti and Purusha) shows the harmony and balance in human beings.



Fig-1: Ma Durga Mahishasur Vadh
Photo Source: Courtesy of Eesha Jayaweera

CONCLUSIONS

In summary, Indian sacred art has particular characteristics which distinguish it from all others, namely the emphasis on focusing simultaneously on the “conscience” (which is the “essence” of artwork) and “technical” aspects (which is the “physical” aspect of artwork). Some examples of these characteristics are expressed through the well-known figure called Durga (in Sanskrit, invincible) and the sculpture called Nataraja (in Sanskrit, dancing of Shiva). Durga is riding a lion or tiger (the wife of Shiva and the mother of Ganesha), and represents the goodness Shakti that destroys Mahishasur (symbol of evil), as drawn in Figure 1. Nataraja represents the god Shiva (the renovator aspect of Divine) stepping on Apasmara (symbol of ignorance). These are useful for the conscience of all beings of the Universe to expand and progress cyclically [23] in order to manifest the Divine qualities of love, light and grace on Earth [24].

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