



An Examination of the Function of Painting in Indian Spiritual Traditions: Visual Spirituality

Sunil Sagar¹, Dr. Mohanrao B Panchal²

¹Research Scholar Department of visual art Kannada University Hampi Vidyaranya- 583276

²Assistant Professor Department of visual art Kannada University Hampi Vidyaranya-583276

Abstract- This essay explores the complex connection between painting and spirituality in India. Indian art has employed visual language to convey inner truths, divine visions, and sacred philosophies since the earliest cave murals and continues to do so in modern spiritual abstractions. This research examines how spiritual themes are portrayed in Indian painting traditions and how viewers experience transcendence through visual narratives using a multidisciplinary lens that includes aesthetics, iconography, and cultural studies. The study also looks at how artists of today reinterpret spirituality in ways that transcend religious boundaries. with an examination of how sacred shapes, hues, and symbols promote sahridayata—a mutual spiritual-emotional resonance between the artist and the viewer—and induce contemplative states. The paper illustrates how spiritual painting can serve as a visual mantra, a tool for introspection, and a cultural storehouse of philosophical ideas through compelling case studies like S.H. Raza's Bindu. In the end, the study emphasises how painting has always been used in India's artistic and cultural traditions as a means of spiritual inquiry.

Keywords- Spiritual painting, Indian art, divine iconography, sacred geometry, meditative art, Tantric art, miniature painting, transcendence.

I. Introduction

Painting has long been considered a sacred form of spiritual communication in India, rather than merely being used for decoration or aesthetic pleasure. Indian painting, which has its roots in the Vedic, Buddhist, Jainist, and Bhakti traditions, reflects the idea that transcendence can be accessed through visual forms. From the Tanjore paintings and Chola bronzes that represent Bhakti devotion to the Ajanta murals that tell the Jataka stories as visual scriptures, art has served as a spiritual tool, assisting the devotee in meditating, reflecting, and experiencing the divine. The use of colour theory, rasa aesthetics, sacred geometry, and symbolism—all of which combine to make painting a medium for metaphysical investigation—are essential components of this tradition.

This tradition has been continued in the present by artists such as Rabindranath Tagore, S.H. Raza, G.R. Santosh, Arpana Kaur, and Anjolie Ela Menon, who have reinterpreted spirituality through feminist viewpoints, mystic symbolism, and abstraction. Their creations show how spiritual art adapts to its surroundings while maintaining its fundamental goal of arousing inner awareness. This essay aims to investigate the

evolution and continuity of spiritual painting in India, looking at how it influences the discourse between the artist, the divine, and the audience throughout time and culture.



Rabindranath Tagore



Anjali Ela Menon



G.R. Santosh



S.H. Raza



Arpana Kaur

1. India's Spiritual Paintings' Historical Origins

Religion, philosophy, and cultural practice are all intricately entwined with India's spiritual painting tradition. Art has been viewed by painters and patrons for centuries as a means of transcendence, devotion, and storytelling in addition to being a form of aesthetic beauty. The changing relationship between the sacred and the visual has been reflected in spiritual paintings, which range from cave murals to courtly miniatures.

Ajanta and Ellora Murals: Buddhist Visual Texts



Some of the oldest and most profound examples of Indian spiritual painting can be found in the Ajanta and Ellora caves, which date from the second century BCE to the sixth century CE. In addition to Bodhisattva icons like Avalokiteshvara and Padmapani, the murals show stories from the Jataka that describe the Buddha's previous incarnations. These pieces serve as visual scriptures that encourage moral introspection and meditative awareness by fusing spirituality and narrative. They turn the cave walls into hallowed places for group devotion and are full of symbolism.

Tanjore Painting and Chola Bronze: Expressions of Bhakti and Devotion

In South India, the Tanjore painting tradition flourished from the 16th century onwards as an expression of Bhakti (devotional) spirituality, while the Chola period (9th–13th century CE) produced amazing bronzes of deities like Nataraja. Tanjore paintings' jewel-like hues, gold leaf, and holy imagery allowed devotees to experience darshan, or seeing and being seen by the divine, by bringing gods and goddesses into private temple and home worship.

Miniatures of the Mughals and Rajputs: Spirituality in Courtly Beauty

Deeply spiritual elements were also present in Mughal and Rajput miniature paintings, despite their frequent associations with romance and courtly life. While Rajput schools like Mewar and Kangra added bhakti rasa (emotion of devotion) to Krishna-Radha stories, Mughal painters depicted Sufi mysticism, Quranic calligraphy, and allegories of divine love. These paintings are both works of art and expressions of spiritual imagination because they combined secular elegance with religious overtones.

II. Symbolism and Sacred Geometry

Geometry and symbolism are potent visual languages that transcend aesthetics in Indian spiritual painting, acting as instruments for transcendence, ritual, and meditation. Cosmic truths are embodied by sacred forms, mathematical accuracy, and symbolic colour, which lead to spiritual awareness for both the artist and the audience.

Use of Mandalas, Yantras, and Chakra Systems in Visual Compositions

Mandalas and yantras are visual depictions of the universe and inner awareness rather than just ornamental designs. While a yantra, such as the Sri Yantra, uses exact geometry to embody divine energy, a mandala represents wholeness and spiritual order. With their concentric structures and lotus forms, chakra diagrams act as spiritual ascent maps, assisting practitioners in concentrating on the body's energy centres. Artists create compositions that serve as meditative diagrams of the divine by combining these elements.

Tantric Art's Influence: Colour and Abstraction as Spiritual Mediums

Tantric art channels spiritual energy through symbolic colour and abstraction. While colours like red, yellow, blue, and black represent elemental energies and divine qualities, circles, triangles, and grids stand for cosmic forces. Tantric paintings, in contrast to figurative traditions, invite the observer to engage in a contemplative relationship with formless divinity by transforming pure geometry and colour into spiritual vehicles. Later, this abstraction served as an inspiration for contemporary Indian artists such as S.H. Raza and G.R. Santosh, who modernised Tantric geometry.



Using symmetrical arrangements, halos, and gold leaf to evoke divinity

Gold leaf and glowing halos are used to represent divine light and transcendental presence in traditions such as Buddhist thangka art and Tanjore painting. Cosmological harmony is strengthened by symmetry, which guarantees that the artwork reflects the universe's equilibrium. These components not only enhance the painting's aesthetic appeal but also turn it into a ceremonial object that inspires wonder, respect, and a feeling of being in the presence of the sacred.

III. Rasa Theory and Spiritual Aesthetics

The aesthetic philosophy of rasa, as expounded by Abhinavagupta and first expressed by Bharata in the *Natyashastra*, has a profound impact on Indian spiritual painting. Artistic experience is transformed into aesthetic bliss (*ananda*) by rasa, the condensed essence of emotion. This framework enables painting to evoke transcendental and devotional states in addition to beauty within the context of spiritual art.

Painting Spiritual Experiences with the Navarasa (Santhata Rasa in Particular)

Visual art is one way that the Navarasa, or nine aesthetic essences, are expressed, but Shanta Rasa, or peace and tranquilly, is a key component of spiritual traditions. Calmness is evoked by paintings of placid Buddhas, meditating yogis, or the cosmic stillness of mandalas, which invite viewers to achieve inner balance. Shanta offers the basis for spiritual absorption, but other rasas also play a role, such as Bhakti-bhava (devotional love), which is depicted in Krishna-Radha paintings. Philosophical calm is translated into visual form by artists through composition, colour harmony, and symbolic stillness.

Achieving Sahridayata (Shared Emotion Between Artist and Viewer) through Spiritual Painting

Spiritual aesthetics is based on the idea of Sahridayata, which is a shared resonance of feeling between the artist and the audience. This shared emotion in sacred painting transcends empathy and encompasses spiritual communion. A bond of transcendence is formed when a devotee ponders a deity's image, as the artist's devotion is visually conveyed. Through the use of rasa, sacred geometry, and symbolic cues, the artwork transforms into a bridge that lets the audience share in the artist's inner vision and feel a sense of unity with the divine.

IV. Contemporary and Modern Interpretations

Despite having its roots in classical traditions, modern and contemporary Indian artists have consistently reinterpreted the concept of visual spirituality. Their creations show how spiritual expression maintains its fundamental goal of evoking transcendence while adjusting to shifting social, cultural, and technological contexts.

Rabindranath Tagore: Paintings with Mystic Symbolism

The quest for inner truth is embodied by human figures, dreamlike shapes, and abstract motifs in Rabindranath Tagore's paintings, which reveal a mystic and introspective spirituality. Beyond strict religious frameworks, his use of lyrical symbolism evokes a



profoundly personal sense of the divine by translating the inexpressible into visual poetry.

Tantric and Geometric Abstraction by G.R. Santosh and S.H. Raza

Tantric philosophy and sacred geometry served as sources of inspiration for both G.R. Santosh and S.H. Raza. While Raza's famous Bindu symbolises the cosmic source of creation, Santosh's works use vibrant abstraction to explore yantric diagrams and chakra systems. Their paintings bridge the gap between modern abstraction and tradition by transforming colour and geometry into meditative vehicles.

Spiritual Feminism and Individual Divinity by Arpana Caur and Anjolie Ela Menon
Spirituality is reinterpreted by Arpana Caur and Anjolie Ela Menon from a feminine perspective. While Menon's paintings emphasise sacred intimacy and individual divinity, Caur's works represent compassion, suffering, and resiliency. By emphasising the female subject as a conduit for transcendence, both artists broaden the spiritual conversation.

Spiritual Themes in Digital Art and Installations Are Growing

In modern practice, immersive environments, video installations, and digital art are also used to explore spiritual themes. By reimagining mandalas, yantras, and sacred forms in virtual space, artists use light, sound, and interaction to induce meditative states. These pieces offer fresh avenues for transcendence in a cultural landscape that is changing quickly, reflecting the evolution of spiritual painting in the digital age.

V. The Transcendence Experience of the Viewer

The viewer's role is essential to comprehending Indian paintings' visual spirituality. Spiritual painting, as opposed to purely decorative art, aims to elevate the act of seeing into a sacred and contemplative experience. Such works' impact is contingent upon the context in which they are encountered in addition to their aesthetic and symbolic qualities.

Meditation Techniques for Viewing: The Impact of Spiritual Painting on the Viewer
In spiritual traditions, looking at a painting is a contemplative activity rather than a passive one. In order to cultivate stillness and concentration, elements like mandalas, yantras, divine icons, and harmonious colours direct the gaze inward. For instance, concentrating on a mandala's focal point or a deity's eyes promotes meditation and enables the observer to feel devotional feelings or Shanta rasa, or peace. By this process, the painting draws the viewer into states of transcendence and inner awakening, functioning as a visual mantra.

Sacredness in Context: The Gallery vs. Temple Space Debate

Spiritual paintings' sanctity is closely linked to their surroundings. Together with ritual, music, and group devotion, paintings serve as active worship tools in temples and monasteries. However, these pieces are reframed as art in galleries or museums, where they are valued more for their beauty, historical significance, or symbolic meaning than for their lived spirituality. Critics contend that removing paintings from their ritual space may lessen their transcendental essence, even though galleries increase access



and preserve heritage. The delicate balance between preservation, scholarship, and sacred practice is highlighted by this tension, which also emphasises how context affects the viewer's spiritual experience.

VI. Case Study: Form, Colour, and Symbolism in S.H. Raza's "Bindu"

The "Bindu" series by S.H. Raza, which transforms old metaphysical concepts into abstract, meditative art, is a prime example of contemporary Indian involvement with visual spirituality. The Sanskrit word bindu, which means "point" or "dot," represents the cosmic seed, the origin of creation, and the unity of all things.

Form

The central bindu, frequently surrounded by geometric shapes like triangles, squares, and concentric circles, is at the centre of Raza's compositions. Geometry directs the eye inward towards the spiritual centre in this arrangement, which is based on mandala and yantra principles. The canvas is transformed into a meditative field by the symmetrical and exact layouts, which evoke balance and cosmic harmony.

Colour

The intentional use of colour by Raza heightens the spiritual resonance of his creations. Shakti (cosmic energy), emptiness, infinity, and enlightenment are represented by deep reds, blacks, blues, and golds, respectively. In addition to being visually arresting, these vivid contrasts and harmonious combinations serve as energetic conduits that evoke in the viewer feelings of contemplation and emotion.

Symbols

The bindu serves as a visual mantra that stands for transcendence, concentration, and creation. While the abstract composition promotes introspection and allows the viewer to experience metaphysical and meditative moments, the surrounding geometric forms mirror the cosmic order. By combining form, colour, and symbolism in this way, Raza bridges the gap between contemporary abstraction and traditional Tantric philosophy and turns painting into a spiritual tool.

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