
THE POETICS OF ETERNITY: TRADITIONAL INDIAN AESTHETICS AND ART

Summary

The Characteristics of Traditional Indian Aesthetics

India is one of the oldest cradles of world civilization with a long cultural history that encompasses about five thousand years. The cultural values created in this country have left a distinct imprint on human history. When researching the philosophical, aesthetic, and artistic traditions that have formed on the Indian subcontinent, we use the general concept of *India* to denote not some political formation, but the totality of a multitude of states, of related nations and tribes that have existed for millennia, constantly shifting their territorial boundaries and replacing one another – a totality that created cultural, aesthetic, and artistic values that acquired forms characteristic of the Indian subcontinent.

Since time immemorial, the culture of India has interacted with those of neighboring countries and peoples. The Indian subcontinent was constantly invaded by Aryans, Persians, Greeks, Huns, Arabs, Mongols, and many other conquerors, all of whom left their mark on Indian cultural history by bringing new myths, principles of thought, and styles of art. By assimilating these external influences, the powerful cultural tradition of India became increasingly rich and multifaceted.

The connoisseur of Indian aesthetics and art Radhakamal Mukerjee observes that metaphysics, religion, mythology, and art have become, in the cultural history of India, more significant factors in the life of society than state institutions, politics, and conquests (Mukerjee, 1959, p. 9). A distinctive feature in the development of traditional Indian culture and aesthetics is the extremely close interweaving of aesthetic ideas, mythology, art, religion, and philosophical metaphysics. We encounter rudiments of Indian aesthetic thought in the mythology of the Indian subcontinent, in the cults and beliefs of the various nations and tribes that settled in this region. Old myths and the rich world of their images constantly nourish Indian aesthetics and art. Later, with the formation of the influential traditions of Brahmanism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism with their developed philosophical metaphysics and world of religious images, there appeared the need to create religious art, to symbolically render or naturalistically depict didactic religious legends. At the same time, there was a growth in the sacralization of Indian aesthetic thought and art and in tendencies toward symbolism and canonicity.

Indian aesthetic thought is closely interwoven not only with mythology but also with principles of philosophical metaphysics. Indians generally tend toward metaphysical thinking and theorizing, toward seeking the invisible essence behind phenomena. The relationship between aesthetics, art, and philosophical metaphysics is revealed by Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, who indicates their shared symbolical basis. “According to the common understanding of humanity,” he emphasizes:

art and metaphysics are alike: for observe (1) that on the one hand, the natural language of metaphysics is precisely symbolism and (2) on the other, that it is just the symbolic character of art which distinguishes the work of art from natural species. So what is meant by “aesthetic experience” and by “perfect understanding” are one and the same; each being the consummation of an act of non-differentiation, in which our consciousness identifies itself with an intelligible form. (Coomaraswamy, 1981, pp. 156–157)

In comparison to the aesthetic traditions of the West, India, like China and Japan, has a more holistic worldview – one that encompasses the totality of a multitude of different principles and in which, in the great torrent of existence, one opposite is inseparable from another. Linda Leach aptly observes:

The division of life and art into categories based on binary opposites is only one dimension of the Indian world-view. Sacred and profane, celestial and terrestrial, religious and mundane, are differentiated categories, but are always viewed in a relationship of complementarity rather than polarities. Thus, one element can be transmuted into the other, and vice versa. The sensuous can become devotional, the devotional spiritual, and the physical metaphysical. (quoted from Vatsyayan, 1982, p. 91)

The relationship between the religious worldview of the Indians and their aesthetics is far more complex than is usually depicted in the works of many Western researchers. Many of the traditional movements, schools, and conceptions of Indian aesthetics are actually directly connected with the religions of the country or its individual regions. This influence is expressed more in a canonized outer form, symbolism, and iconography than in a deep, universally human content. Whenever aesthetic thought and the artistic culture closely connected with it achieved great heights in India, their independent value and autonomy in regard to religion inevitably became clear. Even the aesthetic thought and art defined by the strictest rules and canons feel the refreshing influence of secular folk culture. This impulse forces the ideologues of all the most influential religious movements to constantly seek compromises with the traditions of living folk culture.

When we examine the archaic strata of traditional Indian aesthetic thought, well-founded doubts arise about whether it is correct to use the modern term *aesthetics* because in monuments of the Vedic Period we do not encounter clearly crystallized aesthetic theories. Aesthetic views were not separate from the Vedic worldview – from a mythological, religious, artistic understanding of the world, from reflection on the ritual process.

When Sanskrit treatises on aesthetics later evolved under the influence of Indian mythology, religion, and philosophical metaphysics, they stood out for their surprising canonicity and continuity of ideas – characteristics which can be explained by the orientation of their authors toward the old sacred sources of the Vedic Period and of Brahmanism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism.

Traditional Indian aesthetics devotes much attention to the psychology of art, i.e. to the effect of art on a person and to aesthetic understanding. This distinctive feature, which separates Indian aesthetic thought from that of the West, is due to the tremendous attention theoreticians devote to personal psychology and to the subtlest experiences. Treatises deal at length with the effect of poetry, drama, music, the fine arts, and aesthetically performed ritual on human consciousness and with their ability to promote personal growth from primitive sensuality to the highest stages of spirituality. The psychological orientation of Indian aesthetic thought is reflected in the main categories (*rasa* – aesthetic experience or aesthetic mood, *bhava* – aesthetic feeling, *dhvani* – aesthetic suggestion) that dominate many treatises on traditional Indian aesthetics. “It is never stressed sufficiently that in the traditional Indian psychology,” writes Grazia Marchianò:

to which the theory of aesthetic enjoyment owes so much, a hierarchy between intellectual and sensory faculties is based on a distinction not between *high* and *low* functions, as has been characteristic in the dualistic Cartesian approach to the body-mind complex, but between gross and subtle levels of perception, cognition and insight. Indian doctrines are of one mind about the fact that at subtler levels of perception, the entire apprehension of the world picture changes and that the path to sensual refinement passes through an intensification of feeling. (Marchianò, 2010, p. 180)

Indeed, the Indian aesthetic tradition is dominated by the classification and analysis of aesthetic experiences in general and not by the description of specific personal experiences. In other words, despite a strong psychological element, the devaluation of the individual is manifest.

In essence, this emphasis on literature separates the traditional aesthetic thought of India from that of the Far East (China, Japan), where, because of the visual associative

understanding of reality characteristic of pictographic writing and because of the cult of natural beauty, works devoted to landscape painting predominate. They are the pinnacle of Chinese aesthetic thought. In Japan, because of the special role of *tanka*, *renga*, and *haikai* poetry and because of the influential Heian literary tradition, there is a more nearly equal relationship between the aesthetics of the fine arts and that of literature.

Unlike the Far East, where treatises on aesthetics are usually succinct and metaphorical, limiting themselves to dealing with a few of the most important (as seen by the authors) aesthetic problems, in India they often acquire from the *Upaniṣads* a tendency toward the abstract speculative treatment of problems. Works on philosophical aesthetics stand out for their elaborate metaphysics and emphatic symbolism, while they avoid the aesthetic intuitivism and metaphoricity characteristic of Chinese and Japanese works.

A Look at Research Into Indian Aesthetics and Art

Now, we will briefly discuss the history of Western knowledge of the Indian aesthetic tradition created in Sanskrit – a history that, because of the lack of reliable written records and archaeological data and because of problems in accurate dating, has been complicated and has until now encountered many difficulties.

In traditional Indian aesthetics as developed in Sanskrit, the concept of aesthetics as a branch of learning and its object, structure, and fundamental problems as well as aspects of their study differ noticeably from their Western counterparts. Kanti Chandra Pandey, who has done fundamental research into Indian aesthetics, writes:

The word “aesthetics” in the context of Indian Aesthetics means “science and philosophy of fine art”. And fine art is the art, which presents the Absolute in sensuous garb, and aesthetical relation, as distinct from the utilitarian, with a work of which gives rise or leads to the experience of the Absolute. (Pandey, 1959, vol. I, p. 1)

All Sanskrit aesthetic treatises, or *śāstras*, can be classified into two main groups: the first consists of *nāṭyaśāstras* – treatises on poetics devoted to the aesthetic principles of drama and poetry, and the second – of *śilpaśāstras*, which deal with the aesthetic principles of architecture and the fine arts (painting, sculpture). Because of their specific features, treatises on music stand somewhat apart from these two groups. Eventually, *nāṭyaśāstras* and *śilpaśāstras* formed their own canonical traditions with their own distinctive ideas and problems.

The early stage of Indological studies was dominated by works on rhetoric and literary aesthetics. It began comparatively recently, when Paul Regnaud published, in 1884

in French, the work *La rhétorique sanscrite* (Sanskrit Rhetoric), which deals with several important treatises on poetics. The work begun by Regnaud was continued by the noted German Sanskritologist Hermann Jacobi, who in the early 20th century translated works by Ānandavardhana and Ruyyaka into German and later published significant research on medieval Indian aesthetics.

Soon afterward, there appeared Hari Chand Sastri's study *Kalidasa et l'art poétique de l'Inde* (Kālidāsa and the Poetic Art of India, 1917), which reveals the world of this Indian literary colossus' aesthetic ideas. In the systematization of the results of early research much was accomplished by Pandurang Vaman Kane, whose introduction on the history of *alaṃkāra* literature in *The Sāhityadarpaṇa of Viśvanātha* (1923), the first work on Sanskrit aesthetics and poetics, clarified complicated problems of chronology. This research was continued by Sushil Kumar De in his fundamental two-volume work *Studies in the History of Sanskrit Poetics* (1923, 1925), Subodh Chandra Mukerjee in *Le rasa, essai sur l'esthétique indienne* (Rasa: An Essay on Indian Aesthetics, 1928), and Hari-Ramchandra Diwekar in *Les Fleurs de rhétorique dans l'Inde* (The Flowers of Rhetoric in India, 1930). In the West, however, undoubtedly the most important scholar was the famous French Indologist and propagator of terms in comparative philosophy and aesthetics Paul Masson-Oursel, who devoted his most important methodological work to comparative research in general and to Indian aesthetics. Works by these scholars provided an important basis for further research.

A qualitatively new period of research began to emerge about three decades ago, when many significant works appeared, one after the other, by Raniero Gnoli, Daniel H. H. Ingalls, Kanti Chandra Pandey, Louis Renou, J. L. Masson and M. V. Patwardhan, A. K. Warder, Marie-Claude Porcher, Sneh Pandit, T. N. Ramachandran, Y. S. Walimbe, K. Krishnamoorthy, S. N. Ghoshal Sastri, Padma Sudhi, Pabitrakumar Roy, Pothukuchi Subrahmanya Sastri, Devendra Nātha Shukla, Rekha Jhanji, Kapila Vatsyayan, Surendra Sheodas Barlingay, Shyamala Gupta, Arindam Chakrabarti, R. Raj Singh, Richard McCarty, Robert Wilkinson, Louis Frédéric, Jean Deloche, Jeannine Auboyer, Michel Delahoutre, Gilles Béguin, Bruno Dagens, Vincent Lefèvre, Chantal Maillard, Grazia Marchianò, E. N. Temkin, Vyacheslav Ivanov, Yulia M. Alikhanova, Pavel Grintser, Irina Sheptunova, and other eminent Indologists. Research being performed in various countries of the world is revealing many new aspects and historical details in the development of Indian aesthetic thought. The publication, in India and other countries, of the main Sanskrit sources on aesthetics with adjacent translations and extensive commentaries gives researchers the opportunity to "cleanse" these texts on Indian aesthetic thought of various later interpolations and to interpret them in a scholarly fashion.

Despite significant new research on Indian aesthetics, especially using the comparativist approach, cooperation is difficult for the French, English, Russian, German, American, and even Indian schools, which are often dominated by different traditions for studying aesthetic monuments, different methodological principles, and different value systems. Sometimes, the impression is created that many of the followers of different schools, even when they know about alternative concepts, ideas, and positions on questions of aesthetic principle, avoid polemicizing with their opponents and instead cite and quote only authors whose views are close to their own.

When analyzing the Indian tradition of aesthetics and art, authors from various countries have often devoted most of their attention to different aspects. For this reason, it is very important for today's researchers into Indian aesthetics to become acquainted with the works of scholars from various nations. Some scholars have devoted great attention to revealing the distinctive aesthetic and artistic tradition of Indian poetics, architecture, and fine arts and the main stages of their historical development. Others have sought to uncover the connections between this tradition and the philosophical, religious, and mythic systems dominant in Indian civilization. Yet others have discussed textual problems, and a fourth group – the principal movements and schools along with their systems of categories. Some have given priority to comparative studies or to the cultural context and stylistic features of Indian aesthetics and art. For example, E. B. Havell explicated the ideals of Indian art. Paul Masson-Oursel analyzed the main traditions of Eastern and Western aesthetics in their comparative aspect, and Ananda K. Coomaraswamy – the similarities between the Indian and Western medieval traditions of aesthetics and art, while Kanti Chandra Pandey delved into the comparative study of Indian and Western aesthetic thought. S. N. Dasgupta researched the basic principles of art, and Michel Delahoutre studied the sacred sources of Indian traditional aesthetics and art.

When Western specialists in aesthetics and the philosophy and history of art, people formed by the ideals of Classical Antiquity and the Renaissance, first encountered Indian art, especially of the Hindu tradition, they were amazed that Indian artists ignore what is emphasized in the Western tradition – the ideal anatomy of the young human body and the laws of classical proportion. What is often highlighted in Indian art – asceticism in a man's body, details symbolizing sensuality or fertility in a woman's body – was, out of ignorance of the principles of Indian philosophy, religion, and aesthetics, given a false interpretation.

In the early 20th century, the Indologist E. B. Havell already began to speak about the vital need to become better acquainted with the distinctive features of Indian aesthetic and artistic traditions and to be liberated from Western stereotypes when reconstructing

ideals and worldviews (Havell, 1911, p. 111). He aptly observed that a representative of Western culture can hardly achieve a true understanding of the psychology and practice of the art of Eastern peoples without delving into their ideals, their philosophical and religious theories, and their systems for psychological growth and without knowing, for example, that the practice of Indian *yoga* was coordinated with a most thorough, scientifically founded system of mnemonics (the art of memorizing), which helped transmit all of Sanskrit literature from mouth to mouth, beginning with the Vedic Period and ending with the Middle Ages, without attempting to record it in writing. However, not only Indian but also Chinese and Japanese schools of painting relied on mnemonic and psychological methods that were widely cultivated in Eastern countries.

A poor knowledge of the cultural cosmos of Indian civilization, of its fundamental categories of world consciousness and thought, was precisely one of the reasons why understanding the distinctive features of Indian aesthetics and art required so much time and effort. In his recent article “On the Western Reception of Indian Aesthetics: The Grounds of Difference,” the well-known specialist in Indian aesthetics Robert Wilkinson frankly states that “the absence of any widespread interest, in the UK at least, in the extremely rich Indian tradition is striking, and by and large, continues to this day” (Wilkinson, 2010, p. 211). Recalling his own student years and comparing them with the present, he does not see any essential changes toward integrating the Indian aesthetic tradition:

During my own under- and postgraduate education in the late 1960s and early 1970s, no item of Indian aesthetics appeared on any reading list; nor was any such item included in any course on aesthetics; and this situation has not materially altered since. Outside a few specialist institutions in the UK, aesthetics means European aesthetics, from the ancient Greeks to the present. (Wilkinson, 2010, p. 211)

It is obvious that Indian aesthetic theories assume the basic features of the philosophical, religious, mythic, and artistic traditions to which they are so closely related. As in the West, these theories developed along diverse lines, but the Indian aesthetic tradition was undoubtedly more powerfully influenced by religious and mythic images. Louis Frédéric has even categorically maintained that “all Indian artistic forms are dependent on philosophy and mythology” (Frédéric, 1994, p. 9).

As is attested by old texts, *even ancient India gave exceptional importance to a philosophical knowledge of the world, because philosophy (ānvikṣakī) was regarded as the highest branch of learning, from which all the others drew inspiration and theoretical confirmation of their propositions.* For example, one of the famous canonical texts, the *Arthaśāstra*, states: “Light to all kinds of knowledge, easy means to accomplish all kinds

of acts and receptacle of all kinds of virtues, is the Science of *Anvikshaki* ever held to be” (*Arthaśāstra*, 1915, Book I, Chapter 2).

On the other hand, whenever we pass from the level of abstract theory to research into the aesthetics of a specific branch of art, we are immediately struck by the power of the mythic stratum in traditional Indian culture. According to a great authority on traditional Indian culture and mythology, Heinrich Zimmer, the diversity of Indian mythic and symbolic images is simply inexhaustible. Growing in number over the centuries, aesthetic treatises and monuments of poetry, architecture, and the fine arts constantly reveal a diverse abundance of mythic motifs and symbols that come to dominate works of art in different religious traditions and greatly influence various aspects of understanding in the Indian aesthetic world (Zimmer, 1951, pp. 19–20).

The Main Stages in the Development of Indian Aesthetic Thought

In order to correctly understand the distinctive nature of the traditional Indian aesthetics created in Sanskrit, it is essential *to study it not as a series of separate disconnected monads, but as an integral, organically developing whole of certain schools, movements, and traditions that polemicize among themselves*. As soon as we try to periodize Indian aesthetic thought in a more consistent fashion, we encounter a multitude of problems because, when dealing with individual periods, especially the oldest ones, we lack reliable archaeological data, historical documents, written records, and artistic monuments. Furthermore, over the course of millennia India was divided into many kingdoms and dukedoms that often fought among themselves and changed their borders and whose dynasties did not always have chronicles that allow us to link different cultural processes into a unified chronological system. During invasions by nomadic peoples and in the vortices of internecine wars between separate Indian states, many important written records and wonderful works of architecture and art were irrevocably lost.

What mattered for Indian philosophers, aestheticians, and artists was not *history* in the European sense of the word, but rather *tradition*, i.e. the uninterrupted transmission of evolving forms of culture and thought. Indian thinkers were mainly interested in *eternal spiritual values, whose meaning an individual person cannot much enhance*. This attitude explains the indifference to dates and chronologies, to the biographies of artists and theoreticians, and even to the authorship of works. Thus, even the most important aesthetic treatises are dated very diversely, often over a range of several centuries, and many problems of textual attribution arise. We can only approximately reconstruct when many of the most eminent Indian aestheticians lived, what influenced them, and when the events in their lives occurred.