CHAPTER-II

ABSTRACTION AND TANTRIC ART
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Abstraction is the thought process wherein ideas are distanced from objects. Abstraction uses a strategy of simplification of detail, wherein formally concrete details are left ambiguous, vague, or undefined. Or in another words it is a general concept formed by extracting common features from specific examples.

Indian Abstract art emerges in very different conditions from European abstraction are the negation of the powerful representational tradition that swept Europe from the renaissance to the late nineteenth century.

In India the abstract was always an element in figurative art, especially as part and parcel of symbolic iconography. As such, it forms one of the many accepted Indian art traditions. Indian Abstraction is a fine blend of the material and spiritual, the neo-representational and the contemplative. As such it stands somewhere on the borderline of the abstract proper and the symbol. It is perhaps this limitation over the fields of ritual, symbols and material organization in space that has made abstract art popular among those who find mere visual statements difficult to relate to.

Tantric Art and Modern Abstract Painting share remarkable affinities in style, even though they are separated from each other by centuries. Spiritual beliefs in India, whether through Buddhism, Hinduism, or Jainism are manifest through a living language of signs, symbols and practices. In

India images and symbols are the tools of spiritual life. Circles, Squares, Triangles, Spirals, and Ovals all represent the “Divine” just as effectively as more representational figurative icons.

Abstract art forms from the east and the west also share a spiritual nature in the way that the art not only depicts the visible, but also reveals the invisible-supernatural world. This is the artist challenge, which is as fold as mankind-how to depict the intangible.\(^2\)

The purely abstract styles of tantric paintings make the diagrams and symbols mysterious, yet familiar at the same time. Today’s viewers will find these images from a distant land and complex spiritual belief system less foreign than might be expected due to this familiarity with the visual vocabulary of modern abstract art. They were spiritual diagrams created out of and for spiritual devotion. Abstraction enables them to communicate profound concepts than otherwise cannot be adequately conveyed.

In the Abstract Tantric Art, shapes and colours became separate and independent entities. By no longer depicting the external world, artists were enabled to represent an internal, spiritual realm expressed with an abstract vocabulary-dots, lines, triangles, squares, circles. The use of these shapes frees convey new symbolic interpretations channeled through the artists. Different styles in tantric art developed over time.\(^3\)

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Plate – 7

Yantra, Rajasthan, c. 17th century,
Copper plate

Ref. p. 17
Tantra shows us the way of the process of expansion, of the power of senses. One of the meaning of Tantra is expansion. Tantric-techniques are designed for this purpose. If suppose the power are aroused by the application of tantra-techniques then what is the use of it, if they are not channelized uncontrolled power harms the sadhaka himself. Considering this, Tantra has devised the unique method of Yantra, the term ‘Yantra’ comes from root ‘Yam’ which means to control. Yantra is an aid for controlling power. It is also represented of the Higher reality.

Yantra are designs, which contain energy and power within them. They function as aids to meditation, enabling the practitioner to tap into that energy and power. The images are primarily abstract using dots, lines, triangles, squares, circles and other geometric forms to express complex ideas. The harmonious compositions seemingly contradictorily can be both static and dynamic, are typically arranged around a center. Compositions are ordered and structured, yet retain a feeling of spontaneity.

Schematic conceptions of the world, illustrating both the visible and invisible cosmos are comparable to maps. The viewer uses these diagrams as spiritual tools, but the creative process of creating them is also an extremely important part of the spiritual discipline.\(^4\)

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Plate - 8

The Bindu, sacred point of origin and return, with concentric circles symbolizing the eternal cycles of cosmic evolution and involution. Andhra Pradesh, c. 19th century, Wood.

Ref. p. 18
DOT:

It is an image of concentrated energy. It is the point from which everything escapes and develops, and to which everything returns. In the Brhadaranyaka Upanishad there is the metaphor of a spider sitting at the center of its web, issuing and reabsorbing its threads in concentric circles, all held at one point. The spider’s threads symmetrically expand into a visible circumference, but they can all be traced back to the central pint of the web.

Like the spider in its web, the center of the Yantra is the power-point from which the entire diagram expands, the radiating source of energy that generates all forms. It is the divine essence out of which proceeds the polarized world. It is called Bindu, the first drop, which spreads unfolds, and expands into the tangible realm of the universe. Indeed the optical focus of the Yantra is always its center, from which the force lines radiate outwards in concentric circles and dissolve in the outer circumference.

Dot is represented by Bindu. As the whole of Geometry is an expansion of dot, so also the entire Yantra is an expansion of Bindu. The cosmic forces are all pervasive, and hence, represented on Yantra are believed to be all pervasive e.g. Ether which is all pervasive is represented in the form of Bindu. In tantra, this dot or Bindu is considered as Shiva, which symbolically represents.⁵

THE STRAIGHTLINE

The straight line is composed of an unbroken series of points. These points, moving independently, give length (without breadth) to it. The straight line thus signifies growth and development, and like time, consist of an infinite number of discret points.

THE TRIANGLE

The triangle is the archetype symbol of a sacred enclosure, since space cannot be bounded by fewer than three lines. The triangle is thus conceived as the first closed figure to emerge when creation emerged from chaos. In this aspect it is known as the root of all manifested nature. The rhythm of creation is crystallized in this primal form. Tantra calls the triangle the cone of fire, a reference to its shape. This is the fire of aspiration which is ever burning in the heart of the spiritual seeker. The threefold structure of the triangle is interpreted over multiple levels. Some of these visualizations are:

1. Creation, Preservation and Destruction, i.e. Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva.
2. The three tendencies: the neutral, the positive and the negative – Sattva, Rajas and Tamas.
3. The three Vedas: Rig, Yaju, and Sam.
4. The three seasons: Spring, Summer and Winter.
5. Past, Present and Future

6. The three main pilgrimages: Prayag, Gaya, and Kashi

When used in a Yantra, the downwards triangle is a symbol of feminine power, the creative essence of the universe, also known as Shakti. The triangle pointing upwards is symbolic of the male principle (Purusha). When the two triangles penetrate each other forming a hexagon, it symbolizes the fusion of polarities, the union of Shiva and Shakti.

When the triangles - male and female part at the apex, time and space cease to exist, and all creative activity comes to a standstill.

THE CIRCLE

The circle occurs very frequently as it is derived principally from the motion of the revolution of planets. It symbolizes wholeness or totality and represents the principle which has no beginning, and no end, for e.g. time, perfectly symmetrical entity, equidistant from the center at the points; it indicates the realm of radiation that proceeds from the one center. In other words, a circumscribed field of action. When used in a Yantra, a circle is normally placed within a square pattern.

THE SQUARE

The square is the fundamental format of most Yantras. There is a significant well thought out logic behind it. The phenomenal world extends into four direction. These four directions represent the totality of space,
and they bind the earth in order. The square too is the simplest and perfect manifestation of the number four, by virtue of the four perfect, equal lines bounding its form. The square pattern has four gates, one in each of the cardinal directions. They are known as cosmic door because it is through them that the aspirant symbolically enters the Yantra. These gates are an initiatory threshold which simultaneously opposes the phenomenal and entrances the monumental.6

SOUND

Some of the images in abstract tantric art include written elements. These writings are chants, with the syllables conveying energy and strength into those who are inaugurated into tantra’s secrets. While meditating, practitioners may chant the syllables silently or audibly, absorbing its potency and allowing it to blossom inside them. In tantric thought, sound without vibration does exist. It exists both as “struck [sound is said to give pleasure] and “unstuck” [sound leads to liberation]. The universe is conceived in sound. It is born in sound. It grows and lines in sound. It is dissolved in sound. The universe is the result of an idea. Every idea is the result of a sound. As no creation of any kind is possible without an idea behind it, every creation is the result of a non-vibratory sound. Sound creates air, atmosphere and climate, and then only it reaches the stage of vibration, sound creates light. Light is nothing but sound of a particular frequency. In act every vibratory sound has coloured, it is colour, which

The ceiling of Adi Nath Temple, Ranakpur, is decorated with crystalline patterns symbolizing the unfolding of sabda, the sound element, in a mandala field.
assumes the quality of light. Sound create shapes and sizes, every vibratory sound has a shape and a size.⁷

COSMIC EGG

It represents the golden egg from which the universe is born. The cosmic egg is also known as the “Golden Womb” and lies at the beginning of the sea of creation, made form the ever-present wind and water. The cosmic egg is the origin of all creation of the visible and invisible world.

The earliest ideas of “Egg shaped cosmos” comes from some of the Sanskrit scriptures. The Sanskrit term for it is Brahmanda (Brahm means ‘cosmos’ or ‘expanding’), ananda means (‘Egg’ or “Egg of God”). The cosmic egg of the Tantric tradition is the symbol of raw matter floating in chaos prior to be given form. The fertilized World Egg divided into regions and currents of energy. The cosmos is represented here as potential in microcosm.⁸

Long ago, when all things and inanimate were lost in one dreadful ocean there appeared a large egg, source of the seed of all creatures. Lying in this egg Brahma went to sleep. At the end of thousand Ages ‘he awoke’ Awake and knowing creation to be lost in this flood, the lord broke open the egg. From it Om was born; then arose, Bhuh. From this arose Tejas. Tejas escaping from the egg, evaporated the water. When the residue had been

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Plate 10
Brahmanda, stone, contemporary expression of ageless tradition form.
The first cause formed the “Golden Womb” or Golden Cosmic Egg
dried up by tejas it became an embryo. The embryo, called a bubble, became solid. Brahma, Grandfather of the world, arose in the middle of the egg. The placenta is known as Mt. Meru, the afterbirth is the mountains, and the waters of the womb are the oceans and the thousand rivers. The water which surrounds the navel of Brahma is mahat, and by this choice pure water is the great take filled. In the middle of it, O great-minded, a banyan tree stood like a pillar.

Cosmic egg or Brahmaṇḍa includes within itself the totality of manifested being. All later developments are contained within it in a germinal form. It contains the past, the present, the future. Arjuna sees the whole world from, Viṣvarūpa, in one vast shape. He sees the form of the divine bursting the very bounds of existence, filling the whole sky and the universe.

In Hindu Tantra, based on the Hindu philosophy of Kashmir Shaivism, the Shri Yantra represents the expansion of the universe from the cosmic egg after its creation by Shiva through the power of Shakti. The cosmic egg is represented by a dot in the center of the Sri Yantra, mandala called the bindu.9

PETALS OF LOTUS

Energy is represented in the form of Lotus petals. The petals symbolize the elements, senses, and other parts of the body, all inherent in the cosmic forces. The energy centers or chakras, which are located throughout the

Plate – 11
Lotuses as symbols of unfolding energies
human body, both absorb and radiate cosmic energies or vibrations. The lotus is called *Padma* in Sanskrit. The representation of lotus as a central portion of the wheel or *chakra* reveals three distinct divisions i.e., the pericarps known as the *Karnika*, the second is filament i.e. *Kesar*, and the third is its petals.\(^\text{10}\)

Lotus is a symbol of expanding consciousness. The lotus is much more than a flower for Hindus. It is symbolic of all that is good and beautiful. Scriptures tells us that it first bloomed with the creation of the universe. Over the centuries it has lost none of its allure. Fertility is the most important symbol that has been associated to the flower. Other associates like rebirth, purity, beauty and sensuality flows from this aspect.

A legend states that "Brahma emerged from a lotus that grew out of *Vishnu* the Preserver's Navel".\(^\text{11}\)

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