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THE ROLE OF VISUAL ARTS IN VEDIC AND UPANISHAD THOUGHT - A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

India has made a profound contribution to metaphysical thought, particularly through the Vedas and Upanishads, which are revered as much for their spiritual depth as for their philosophical inquiries. These ancient texts address fundamental questions about existence, reality, and the nature of consciousness. The Katha Upanishad, for instance, explores the eternal and conscious essence within transient beings, stating: "There is one who is the eternal reality among non-eternal objects, the one truly conscious entity among conscious objects, and who, though non-dual, fulfils the desires of many. Eternal peace belongs to the wise who perceive him within themselves." Such passages reflect a deep-seated curiosity about life, death, and the interconnectedness of all existence.

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1. INTRODUCTION

India has made a profound contribution to metaphysical thought, particularly through the Vedas and Upanishads, which are revered as much for their spiritual depth as for their philosophical inquiries. These ancient texts address fundamental questions about existence, reality, and the nature of consciousness. The Katha Upanishad, for instance, explores the eternal and conscious essence within transient beings, stating: "There is one who is the eternal reality among non-eternal objects, the one truly conscious entity among conscious objects, and who, though non-dual, fulfils the desires of many. Eternal peace belongs to the wise who perceive him within themselves." Such passages reflect a deep-seated curiosity about life, death, and the interconnectedness of all existence.

While the Upanishadic philosophy transcends the tangible and physical world, it often uses sensory and material metaphors to illustrate its abstract ideas. In the Katha Upanishad, this is evident: "As the same non-dual air, after it has entered the world, becomes different according to whatever it enters, so also the same non-dual Atman, dwelling in all

beings, becomes different according to whatever it enters. And it exists also without." These teachings offer an intricate blend of abstraction and relatability, bridging the metaphysical with the sensory.

The Isa Upanishad further elevates this abstraction by portraying Brahman, the ultimate reality, as transcending all dichotomies: "It moves and moves not. It is far and likewise near. It is inside all this and it is outside all this." This paradoxical description underscores the ineffable nature of Brahman, defying conventional understanding.

In the Mundaka Upanishad, Brahman is depicted as beyond physical perception or intellectual grasp: "Brahman is not grasped by the eye, nor by speech, nor by any other senses nor by penance or good works. A man becomes pure through serenity of intellect; thereupon, in meditation, he beholds Him who is without parts." By rejecting any form of iconography or sensory identification, the Upanishads emphasize the meditative realization of Brahman as a formless, all-encompassing reality. This philosophy represents a pinnacle of abstract thought, blending spiritual insight with profound philosophical depth.

The notion of beholding the formless is both a visual and non-visual experience, transcending sensory perception and engaging with the abstract. The seers and intellects of ancient India, immersed in the profound philosophies of the Vedas and Upanishads, regarded the perceivable world as secondary and often subordinate to the ultimate reality—Brahman, described as Nirguna (attribute less), Nirākāra (formless), and Nityasatya (absolute truth).

The very essence of Brahman, as formless and beyond attributes, posed a significant philosophical challenge to the realm of visual arts. In texts like Parapūjāstotra, the act of giving form to the formless was considered a sin, alongside naming the nameless and enclosing the all-pervasive. These prohibitions reflect a tension between metaphysical abstraction and tangible representation, directly impacting the development of visual arts like sculpture, which inherently involve shaping and defining forms.

The dominance of such abstract thought led to the initial suppression of visual art forms, as intellectual pursuits centred around oral and written language—the preferred mediums for conveying Vedic and Upanishadic philosophies. Sculpture, painting, and other visual mediums were relegated to a lesser status in a society where scholars and seers emphasized the intangible and transcendental over the concrete and material.

However, this attitude eventually shifted. Human expression and communication, being diverse and adaptive, found ways to bridge the abstract and the tangible. Visual arts began to flourish as tools to symbolize and communicate the subtle concepts of Vedic and Upanishadic thought. Iconography, for example, emerged as a visual language to represent the divine and the metaphysical, translating the abstract into forms that could be meditated upon and understood. Deities like Vishnu, Shiva, and Durga, while embodying Nirguna qualities in essence, were given Saguna (with attributes) forms to make the ineffable more accessible to the human mind.

This evolution illustrates a reconciliation of the metaphysical with the visual, where art became a means of transcending the sensory to evoke the abstract. By embracing visual representation, society found a way to honour both the formless essence of Brahman and the human need for relatable symbols, allowing the visual arts to flourish as a complement to oral and written traditions.

2. THE ABSENCE OF VISUAL ART FORMS DURING THE VEDIC PERIOD: AN ANALYSIS

The lack of substantial artifacts from the Vedic period, especially in comparison to the rich visual and material culture of the Indus Valley Civilization, can be attributed to profound shifts in cultural and philosophical priorities. The Indus Valley Civilization (c. 3300–1300 BCE) left behind an extensive collection of artifacts, including seals, figurines, pottery, and other forms of visual expression, which reflect a sophisticated visual language, stylistic idioms, and craftsmanship.

In contrast, the Vedic period (c. 1500–500 BCE) and the subsequent mature phase of Vedic culture appear to have de-emphasized material culture, including the creation of visual art forms such as sculptures and icons. Several interrelated factors can explain this divergence:

2.1. SHIFT IN PHILOSOPHICAL OUTLOOK

The Vedic texts and especially the Upanishads, which emerged during the later Vedic period, introduced a philosophical framework that prioritized the metaphysical over the physical. The focus on abstract concepts such as

Brahman (the ultimate reality) and the Atman (the soul) discouraged attachment to the sensory and material world. In this worldview, the tactile and visual were seen as transient and secondary to the pursuit of spiritual truth.

This perspective likely contributed to a decline in the production of tangible forms of art, as the emphasis shifted toward oral traditions, chanting, and rituals that aligned with abstract spiritual practices rather than visual representations.

2.2. PRIMACY OF RITUALS OVER ARTIFACTS

The Vedic culture was heavily ritualistic, with fire sacrifices (yajnas) and offerings taking centre stage. These practices relied on ephemeral materials like wood, grains, and clarified butter, leaving little scope for the creation of permanent artifacts. Unlike the Indus Valley, where visual symbols might have played a role in communication or religion, the Vedic tradition relied on oral transmission of sacred knowledge and elaborate rituals rather than visual forms.

2.3. IMPACT OF THE ICONOCLASTIC PHILOSOPHY

The Upanishadic emphasis on the formless (Nirguna Brahman) and the ineffable nature of ultimate reality discouraged the creation of icons and sculptures that might reduce the divine to a finite, perceivable form. Texts such as the Isa Upanishad explicitly articulated the paradoxical nature of Brahman as being "inside all and outside all," resisting attempts to confine it to a physical representation.

Loss of Continuity with Pre-Vedic Traditions

The Indus Valley Civilization's decline and the subsequent migration and cultural shifts may have disrupted the continuity of artistic traditions. As the Indo-Aryan people established themselves in the Indian subcontinent, their cultural priorities, including a focus on hymns (Vedas) and oral traditions, did not emphasize the visual arts inherited from the earlier civilization.

Nomadic and Agrarian Lifestyles

During the early Vedic period, the Indo-Aryans were predominantly pastoral and agrarian. Their semi-nomadic lifestyle may not have been conducive to the development of large-scale artistic endeavours or the creation of lasting artifacts. The construction of elaborate temples, sculptures, and icons became more prominent only in later periods when societies became more settled and stratified.

Late Revival of Visual Arts

It was only after the Vedic period, particularly during the Maurya (c. 322–185 BCE) and subsequent Gupta Empire (c. 320–550 CE), that visual arts flourished again in India. This revival was facilitated by the rise of organized religions like Buddhism and Jainism, which embraced iconography to communicate their teachings and inspire devotion, as well as later Hinduism, which began to develop Saguna (with attributes) representations of deities.

In summary, the dominance of oral and abstract spiritual traditions, combined with the transient and ritual-focused culture of the Vedic period, left little room for the continuation of the rich visual traditions seen in the Indus Valley Civilization. The philosophical resistance to material representations of the divine further ensured that visual arts did not flourish until much later in Indian history, when new cultural and religious contexts encouraged their revival.

The seals of the Indus Valley Civilization, particularly the Pashupati seal, offer fascinating insights into the symbolic and proto-religious practices of the ancient culture. These artifacts bridge the gap between the prehistoric and historic spiritual frameworks of the Indian subcontinent, hinting at an evolving continuity of concepts that later found expression in the Vedic and post-Vedic traditions.

The Pashupati Seal and Proto-Shiva

The Pashupati seal features a male figure seated in a cross-legged meditative posture, with an ithyphallic condition, surrounded by animals. This imagery aligns closely with later depictions of Shiva as:

Lord of Animals (Pashupati), symbolizing his dominion over the natural world.

A meditator, embodying stillness and transcendence.

A representation of fertility and creation, as indicated by the ithyphallic imagery.

These elements prefigure the later conceptualization of Shiva as a cosmic deity. The linga form of Shiva in post-Vedic Hinduism encapsulates his dual nature as both a transcendent ascetic and a dynamic creator.

The Shivalinga: A Cosmic Symbol

The Shivalinga evolved into a central symbol of Shaivism, representing the Axis Mundi—the cosmic pillar that connects earth and heaven. Its form integrates metaphysical, symbolic, and ritualistic dimensions:

The Linga (Phallus): Represents Shiva as the creative principle of the universe, embodying the unmanifest, eternal essence.

The Yoni (Base): Symbolizes Shakti, the divine feminine principle, embodying dynamic energy and the material world. Together, they depict the union of the masculine and feminine, the active and passive principles of creation.

In this union, the linga-yoni represents the process of creation, maintenance, and dissolution—paralleling cosmic cycles and natural phenomena. This abstract symbolism allows the Shivalinga to transcend the literal and convey profound metaphysical truths.

Connection to Upanishadic Philosophy

The Brhadaranyaka Upanishad and other Upanishadic texts often use physical and tangible metaphors, including sexual activity, to explain cosmic processes. For instance:

Creation as Yajña (Sacrifice): The metaphor likens sexual intercourse to a sacrificial offering, emphasizing the transformative power of the union. The text highlights the interconnectedness of human and cosmic activities, bridging the microcosm and macrocosm.

Duality in Non-Duality: While Brahman is non-dual and formless, the juxtaposition of linga and yoni illustrates the apparent duality required to manifest creation, which is ultimately reconciled in the understanding of non-duality.

This philosophical framework provides context for the Shivalinga as a visual counterpart to the metaphysical ideas expressed in the Upanishads.

Symbolism in the Shivalinga Sculpture

The Shivalinga encapsulates layers of meaning:

Creation and Dissolution: The upward, vertical form of the linga represents the eternal, unchanging essence, while the circular yoni represents the cycle of creation and dissolution.

Earth and Sky: The yoni symbolizes Bhuvaneshvari (Mother Earth), and the linga connects her to the sky, representing the unification of the material and the transcendent.

Metaphor of Copulation: The visual metaphor echoes the Upanishadic concept that creation stems from the interaction of complementary forces, likened to the union of male and female.

Continuity of Symbolism

The evolution from the Indus Valley seals to the abstract form of the Shivalinga illustrates a remarkable continuity of thought. While the seals emphasize more literal and representational imagery, the linga abstracts these ideas into universal symbols, reflecting the shift in focus from the material to the metaphysical in later Indian spiritual traditions.

The tree motif has been a profound symbol in Indian culture, philosophy, and art, representing both terrestrial and metaphysical dimensions of existence. In the Indus Valley Civilization, a seal depicting a woman giving birth to a tree symbolizes the earth's fecundity and the interdependence of life. This imagery predates the literary concept of Matr Bhumi and underscores the use of visual language to convey ideas of fertility, regeneration, and life cycles in pre-literate societies. During the Vedic and Upanishadic periods, the tree emerged as a powerful metaphor, with the Bhagavad Gita describing an inverted tree with roots above and branches below, signifying the relationship between the eternal source and the transient material world. Similarly, the Aranyaka hymns associated trees and forests with natural serenity, reflecting their role as spaces for meditation and higher knowledge.

In the Buddhist period, the tree took on even greater significance, serving as a symbol of enlightenment and spiritual awakening. Buddha was born under a tree, attained enlightenment under the Bodhi tree, and delivered his first sermon in a deer park, making trees central to the narratives of his life. Iconographical features such as the Salabhanjikā and Yakṣi connected the divine feminine with nature, emphasizing fertility and enlightenment. The Mauryan period saw a rejuvenation of visual art as Emperor Ashoka used it to propagate Buddhist teachings. Reliefs depicting Māyādevi giving birth under a tree or the Bodhi tree as a sacred icon effectively communicated profound philosophical ideas to the

masses. Unlike the dominantly oral Vedic tradition, Buddhist and Mauryan art utilized the tree motif as a universal visual language, making abstract concepts accessible to laypeople. Through these periods, the tree evolved as a central motif, bridging natural, spiritual, and philosophical themes across Indian art and culture.

3. THE ARTISTIC TRANSITION FROM PRE-VEDIC TO VEDIC PERIOD

The Indus Valley Civilization left behind a vast collection of artifacts that demonstrate a rich visual language, stylized forms, and cultural idioms. These include seals, figurines, pottery, and architectural structures, reflecting an advanced and vibrant artistic tradition. However, when examining the Vedic Period, art historical studies face a significant challenge in identifying substantial artifacts that can be specifically attributed to this era.

The lack of continuity in the creation of visual art forms during the Vedic period and the years following it is striking. This absence may be attributed to the profound influence of Upanishadic philosophy, which prioritized abstract thought, spirituality, and metaphysics over material culture. The Upanishads describe the ultimate reality, Brahman, as Nirguna (without attributes) and Nirākāra (formless), emphasizing that giving shape to the formless or naming the nameless contradicts its essence. Consequently, visual arts, including sculpture and iconography, were de-emphasized during this time.

This shift in cultural focus placed greater importance on oral traditions, philosophical discourses, and metaphysical inquiries, sidelining tactile and material expressions. It wasn't until later periods, with the rise of temple art and iconography, that visual arts regained prominence. This resurgence allowed for the integration of abstract philosophical ideas into tangible forms, reconnecting Indian culture with its rich artistic heritage.

Visualizing the Universe: The Role of Buddhist Art in Forming Abstract Concepts

In both Vedic and Upanishad thought and Buddhist philosophy, the universe is often envisioned as an egg-shaped structure, known as Brahmānda, symbolizing the inclusiveness of all existence. While the concept of Brahmānda appears in Vedic literature, the Vedic scholars did not attempt to provide a concrete form to this abstract concept. In contrast, Buddhism actively transformed this metaphysical idea into physical expressions, most notably through the creation of Stūpas.

The Stupa represents the three jewels of Buddhism—Buddham, Dharmam, Sangham—in a symbolic form resembling three protective umbrellas stacked one atop the other. The hemispherical shape of the Stupa, with its conceptual lower half imagined to be beneath the ground, mirrors the shape of the Brahmānda. This tangible form of the Stupa became a powerful symbol of Buddhism, not only in India but across regions where Buddhism spread.

Buddhists utilized visual language to propagate their philosophical ideas. The cave architecture, such as seen in the Ajanta caves, became a medium for expressing abstract concepts of birth, rebirth, and purification. Monks would retreat into caves during the rainy season, known as Caturmāsya, to meditate, cleanse, and seek rebirth, symbolizing their transition into a new phase of existence. These retreats symbolized entering the "womb of Mother Earth" and emerging anew, reinforcing the Buddhist emphasis on cycles of birth and rebirth.

Through such visual expressions—sculpture, painting, and architectural forms—the Buddhists gave tangible form to abstract metaphysical ideas rooted in Vedic and Upanishad thought, bridging the gap between the intangible and the perceptible.

Vedic Pilgrimage and the Symbolism of Light and Darkness in Temple Architecture

According to the Vedic concept, life is viewed as a pilgrimage, with multiple stages of birth, death, and rebirth, culminating in the ultimate goal of Mokhṣa (liberation). This idea of cyclical existence, shared by Buddhists and Jains, emphasizes the journey toward self-realization and freedom from the cycle of suffering. Those who lack the strength to attain direct knowledge (Brahmavidyā) are encouraged to follow other paths such as devotion (Bhakti), which is deeply connected to pilgrimage and the idea of Tirthas (sacred sites) that offer cleansing and spiritual renewal.

Tirthas, whether situated by natural water sources like rivers, lakes, or the sea, or artificially created lakes, serve as places for purification—both of the body and the soul. The Tirthankara concept in Jainism embodies this idea, as Tirthankaras are revered as beings capable of helping people cross the ocean of life's sorrows (Samsarasāgara) and attain Mokṣa.

The architectural and artistic expressions of these Tirthas play a significant role in reinforcing the spiritual purpose they serve. Temples dedicated to deities are often constructed in alignment with Vāstupuruśa-mandala, a geometric

layout that represents both earthly and cosmic dimensions. The square and circular shapes—inspired by Vedic concepts like Agni (fire)—reflect the symbolic architecture of these sacred spaces.

Garbhagriha: The Sanctum of Light and Darkness

In the Garbhagriha (sanctum sanctorum) of temples, particularly in regions like Kerala, the lighting within remains deliberately dim. The use of wick lamps and their flickering flames creates a juxtaposition of light and darkness. This visual interplay emphasizes the symbolic journey from darkness to light, echoing the philosophical hymn, "from darkness lead me to light."

The dark-light contrast offers a profound sensory experience, conveying the idea of spiritual awakening from ignorance to knowledge. The Garbhagriha symbolizes the womb, not only as the physical space housing the deity but also as a metaphorical space where ignorance is overcome, gradually leading the devotee toward higher states of understanding.

Devotion, through its connection to this process, reflects the continual defeat of ignorance, where every moment of insight is accompanied by new levels of understanding, ultimately culminating in Mokṣa. The interplay of light and darkness in temple architecture thus embodies the broader Vedic philosophy of self-realization and transcendence.

The Role of Gestures in Communication and Artistic Expression

Gestures are integral to communicating ideas, narratives, and rituals, serving as a coded language in both ancient Vedic and later artistic traditions. During rituals like the Yajña, gestures play a crucial role in encoding the philosophy, ritual actions, and situations. In art, dance, and theatre, these gestures evolved into a rich vocabulary of their own, becoming an essential tool for expression and storytelling.

4. GESTURES IN SCULPTURE AND ICONOGRAPHY

In both Hindu and Buddhist art, gestures (Mudras) hold significant importance, guiding the interpretation of deities' emotions, situations, and the overall sentiment (Bhava/Rasa). In Hindu iconography, weapons are often depicted alongside deities, symbolizing their protective or warrior roles, while Buddhist and Jain art tends to avoid such attributes, focusing instead on peaceful and ascetic representations. The anthropomorphic, zoomorphic, and fusion forms of deities are symbolic, and their gestures play a crucial role in conveying meaning.

The Parapūjāstotra suggests that giving form and name to the formless (Brahman) is a 'sin,' emphasizing the Vedic and Upanishad preference for abstraction. However, in the polytheistic traditions of Hinduism, the embodiment of deities through form and gesture becomes necessary, as a purely abstract existence can be challenging for many to grasp. The dual existence of divine and human creation makes the world more tangible and comprehensible.

Abstraction and Symbolism in Deity Representation

The tradition employs two primary forms of abstraction:

Descriptive Abstraction: Through words, focusing on the qualities of deities.

Visual Abstraction: Through Mudras (gestures) and iconography.

The idea of writing and visual representation originated from ideograms, symbolizing fundamental concepts like the point, straight line, circle, and triangle. These elementary shapes carry symbolic significance, representing basic notions and guiding principles of Vedic and post-Vedic art forms.

Mudras in Ritual and Artistic Practices

In both sculpture and painting, as well as in ritualistic dance, Mudras evoke deities, contributing not only to religious practices but also to the aesthetic and performative aspects of art. Ritualistic dance forms, such as Bharatanatyam and Odissi, have evolved using Mudras and Karanas—specific postures derived from Natyashastra—emphasizing the interconnectedness between dance and visual art.

The Viṣṇudharmottara expands on this, elaborating on the Śthānas (postures) and Karakas (actions) found in Nātya, suggesting that these have roots in artistic expressions like Citrā (visual imagery), which captures fleeting moments akin to dance movements. Through gestures, art forms become vehicles of storytelling and spiritual practice, blending the abstract and the tangible in Indian culture.

Integration of Nṛtta, Citra, and Symbolism

Nṛtta (dance) and Citra (sculpture/painting) are interconnected, as both embody artistic expressions that complement each other. In dance, Mudrās (gestures) and body postures play a crucial role in conveying sentiment (Bhāva) and storytelling. Similarly, in sculpture and painting, the form is idealized, derived from perceptions but transformed into artistic representations that reflect deeper symbolic meaning.

In both art and performance, postures—especially those reflecting meditation and concentration—hold significant importance. Figures depicting meditation often feature long eyes, gently modeled upper eyelids, and a focused gaze directed towards the tip of the nose, embodying Yoga-like concentration. These postures reflect not just physical presence but deeper emotional and spiritual states.

Symbolism and Multidimensional Meaning

The symbolism in these art forms is rooted more in conceptual abstraction than in the direct, tangible experiences of daily life. Symbols in Indian art are often multidimensional, carrying multiple layers of meaning and interpretations. For example, Mudrās may convey different meanings depending on the context, much like facets of a singular truth. This multiplicity of meaning allows these art forms to remain relevant and resonant across generations, as they continue to engage with collective consciousness.

The mega narrative of Indian art is often represented through symbols and gestures, and these elements remain living traditions, evolving yet retaining their core essence. The Citrabhāsa (reflection or manifestation in visual art) continues to embody the same spirit, allowing modern interpretations to connect with the symbolic language of Mudrās and postures, thus preserving and perpetuating the cultural heritage.

Deities and Their Paths of Experience

The deities are personified forms of the basic energies of the universe, accessible through three primary paths:

Mental Activity - Meditation: This path involves a deep concentration and yogic focus, allowing one to experience the divine through inner reflection.

Words - Mantra: Mantras are sacred, often esoteric sounds or syllables that transcend the ordinary understanding of language. They are thought-forms, powerful for those who are initiated, carrying spiritual meaning beyond literal interpretation.

Created Forms - Painting, Sculpture, Diagrams: These forms provide a tangible manifestation of abstract spiritual concepts. From basic visual symbols to intricate diagrams like Mūlayantra, they serve as tools for understanding the divine through visual representation.

Theatrical Arts and the Fifth Veda

Since meditation, mantras, and esoteric forms may not be accessible to the common person, theatrical arts were created to make spiritual and moral teachings more engaging and comprehensible. Nātyaśāstra of Bharata illustrates this idea:

"The gods asked: Since it is not proper that the Vedas be heard by those of low birth, you should create a fifth Veda for all the classes of the people. Brahma replied: I shall compose a fifth Veda called the theatrical art, based on history, which will convey the meaning of all the scriptures and give an impulse to the arts."

This idea reflects that art serves as a universal language, transcending social barriers, offering moral lessons, and guiding individuals towards good conduct, prosperity, and spiritual growth. All forms of art, in essence, become a medium through which divine concepts are conveyed and understood, making them accessible to a broader audience.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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