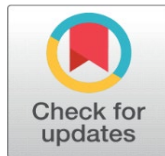


TRANSFORMING TRADITIONAL AND NATIVE FORMS INTO CONTEMPORARY VISUAL LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT

Continuity in Indian art is rooted in the ongoing transformation of traditional and native visual forms into contemporary practices. In a global and pluralistic context, Indian contemporary art reinterprets indigenous imagery, rituals, materials, and iconography to create new artistic expressions. Although contemporary art is not a direct copy of tradition, there remains ambiguity regarding how traditional forms operate as metaphors within contemporary artistic language, and how strong traditional references may sometimes overshadow personal expression. This study examines the historical relationship between art, ritual, mythology, nature, and everyday life, alongside a qualitative visual analysis of selected contemporary sculptural practices. Using contextual and comparative approaches, it investigates how traditional images are translated into contemporary visual language. The study demonstrates that traditional imagery functions primarily as metaphor rather than literal representation, communicating meaning at personal, experiential, and conceptual levels. Ritual practices and native forms significantly influence artists in constructing their own visual poetry, shaping distinct artistic languages grounded in cultural memory. The continuity in Indian contemporary sculpture thus lies in the transformative use of tradition as a conceptual and metaphorical tool that enables individual expression while sustaining cultural roots. Future research may explore region-specific and ritual-based practices to further understand how artists negotiate the balance between inherited tradition and individual creativity.

Keywords: Indian Contemporary Sculpture, Tradition as Metaphor, Ritual and Art, Iconography, Cultural Continuity

1. INTRODUCTION

Indian art has historically evolved through a sustained and dynamic dialogue between tradition and innovation [Kapur \(2000\)](#), [Mitter \(2001\)](#). From prehistoric rock art and early terracotta cultures to classical temple sculpture, mural traditions, and diverse folk practices, Indian visual culture has remained deeply intertwined with ritual, mythology, nature, and everyday life [Coomaraswamy \(1956\)](#), [Flood \(1996\)](#). Artistic production in India was never conceived as an autonomous aesthetic activity; rather, it functioned as an integral component of social organization, spiritual belief, and cultural transmission [Coomaraswamy \(1956\)](#), [Vatsyayan \(1997\)](#). This intrinsic embeddedness within lived experience enabled Indian art to sustain continuity across centuries while continuously transforming its visual language in response to changing historical and cultural contexts [Mitter \(2001\)](#), [Kumar \(1997\)](#).

In the context of contemporary art particularly sculpture continuity does not imply the repetition, revival, or stylistic imitation of traditional forms. Instead, it emerges through processes of reinterpretation, abstraction, fragmentation, and conceptual translation [Kapur \(2000\)](#), [Kumar \(1997\)](#). Contemporary Indian artists operate within a globalized visual and intellectual environment shaped by modernism, postmodern discourse, and transnational exchanges [Kapur \(2000\)](#). Yet, their engagement with indigenous traditions reflects an ongoing negotiation between inherited cultural memory and present-day artistic concerns [Mitter \(2001\)](#), [Guha-Thakurta \(1992\)](#). Traditional images, motifs, ritual practices, and material vocabularies thus become points of departure rather than fixed destinations, enabling artists to construct new visual meanings rooted in cultural familiarity [Jain \(1998\)](#).

The continuation of tradition in contemporary artistic practice can be understood across multiple interrelated levels formal, conceptual, symbolic, and material [Vatsyayan \(1997\)](#). In sculpture, this often involves transforming traditional iconography, ritual objects, architectural fragments, craft processes, and mythological references into contemporary forms that resonate with modern sensibilities [Kumar \(1997\)](#), [Sinha \(2009\)](#). Concepts such as sacredness, ritual movement, cosmology, belief systems, and community memory are not abandoned; instead, they are recontextualized to address contemporary experiences such as identity, displacement, modernization, political anxiety, and social change [Kapur \(2000\)](#), [Flood \(1996\)](#). This transformation allows tradition to remain relevant without becoming static or nostalgic [Mitter \(2001\)](#).

A critical issue within this discourse is the persistent misconception that contemporary art either rejects tradition in favor of Western modernity or blindly imitates inherited forms in the name of cultural authenticity [Kapur \(2000\)](#), [Guha-Thakurta \(1992\)](#). In reality, Indian contemporary art demonstrates a far more complex and layered relationship with tradition. Rather than functioning as a literal source, tradition often operates as a metaphorical and conceptual language [Kumar \(1997\)](#). The degree to which tradition is internalized and transformed depends largely on the artist's personal engagement with cultural context [Jain \(1998\)](#). Artists rooted in specific regional, ritual, or craft environments often carry forward an embodied knowledge absorbed through observation, participation, and lived experience that enables continuity without direct imitation [Coomaraswamy \(1956\)](#), [Vatsyayan \(1997\)](#).

Furthermore, contemporary iconography in Indian art does not necessarily rely on overt or recognizable religious imagery. Instead, it frequently emerges through fragmented forms, abstracted symbols, material choices, surface treatments, spatial configurations, and performative gestures that evoke traditional associations at subconscious or experiential levels [Kapur \(2000\)](#), [Kumar \(1997\)](#). This shift from direct representation to metaphorical and conceptual expression marks a significant evolution in Indian sculptural practice, aligning it with broader contemporary art discourse while retaining indigenous sensibilities [Mitter \(2001\)](#).

This paper examines the continuation and transformation of traditional forms and concepts within contemporary Indian sculpture, with specific reference to the works of Manjunath Kamath, Tallur L. N., and Balan Nambiar. Through figure-based and contextual analysis of their practices, the study explores how tradition is translated into contemporary visual language one that sustains cultural continuity while enabling individual artistic expression and critical engagement with the present [National Gallery of Modern Art \(n.d.\)](#), [Lalit Kala Akademi \(n.d.\)](#).

2. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology grounded in art-historical inquiry, visual analysis, and contextual interpretation. The research is primarily based on the close examination of selected works by contemporary Indian artists whose practices engage critically with traditional, ritual, and indigenous visual forms. Sculptural and mixed-media works exhibited in national and international exhibitions, museum collections, biennales, and gallery presentations constitute the core visual material for analysis. These artworks are examined through detailed observation of formal elements such as material choice, scale, surface treatment, construction methods, spatial configuration, and viewer interaction, with particular attention to how these elements reference or transform traditional visual languages.

Visual analysis is supported by a figure-based comparative approach, in which contemporary artworks are juxtaposed with traditional references such as temple sculptures, folk and miniature paintings, ritual objects, performance traditions, and craft artifacts. This method enables a nuanced understanding of visual continuity and transformation, allowing the study to trace how inherited forms, symbols, and material processes are reconfigured within contemporary contexts. Figures included in the study function as analytical tools rather than illustrative supplements, facilitating direct visual comparison and interpretative depth.

In addition to primary visual analysis, the research draws upon a range of secondary sources, including exhibition catalogues, artist statements, curatorial essays, recorded lectures, and documented interviews. Informal discussions with artists and practitioners further contribute to understanding the conceptual motivations, cultural influences, and personal philosophies shaping their work. Scholarly texts on Indian art history, ritual studies, anthropology, and contemporary art theory provide the theoretical framework necessary to contextualize the analysis.

A contextual approach situates the artworks within broader historical, cultural, and ritual environments, examining how traditions such as temple iconography, folk practices, mandala systems, and craft processes inform contemporary artistic strategies. Comparative analysis is employed across selected artists to identify convergences and divergences in their engagement with tradition, particularly in treating it as metaphor rather than replication.

The study emphasizes interpretative and analytical understanding over empirical measurement. By correlating visual evidence with cultural context and theoretical perspectives, the methodology enables an in-depth exploration of how continuity in Indian contemporary sculpture is sustained through transformation, reinterpretation, and conceptual negotiation rather than stylistic repetition.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. TRADITION AS METAPHOR IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN SCULPTURE

The results of the visual and contextual analysis clearly indicate that contemporary Indian sculpture does not operate as a linear or stylistic continuation of traditional imagery. Instead, tradition undergoes a process of transformation in which its conceptual essence, symbolic resonance, and experiential depth are translated into contemporary visual languages [Desai \(2003\)](#), [Kapur \(1997\)](#). Traditional forms do not appear as complete, intact images; rather, they function as fragments, references, structures, or metaphors that enable artists to communicate multilayered meanings relevant to contemporary contexts [Dalmia \(2001\)](#).

In this sense, traditional imagery functions much like a linguistic system. Just as words can be rearranged to form new meanings without losing their semantic roots, traditional forms act as visual vocabularies that artists reorganize to construct new narratives [Elkins \(2003\)](#). Through this metaphorical use, tradition remains culturally resonant while avoiding rigid historicism [Kapur \(1997\)](#). Figures included in this study demonstrate that continuity is achieved not through repetition but through reconfiguration [Desai \(2003\)](#).

The analysis further reveals that continuity becomes sustainable when artists internalize tradition through lived experience rather than through conscious imitation [Ingold \(2000\)](#). Artists who grow up within ritualistic, craft-based, or culturally dense environments often absorb visual sensibilities, material knowledge, and symbolic meanings intuitively. This embodied knowledge resurfaces in their artistic practice in abstracted or transformed ways [Bourdieu \(1990\)](#). Such internalization allows tradition to flow organically into contemporary forms without the need for literal quotation or nostalgic revival [Dalmia \(2001\)](#).

Moreover, the results indicate that contemporary Indian iconography often avoids overt religious symbolism. Instead, it emerges through subtle visual cues fragmented forms, rhythmic structures, material choices, surface treatments, and spatial arrangements that evoke traditional associations at subconscious or experiential levels [Elkins \(2003\)](#), [Archer \(1959\)](#). This shift from representational to metaphorical engagement marks a significant evolution in Indian sculptural practice, aligning it with global contemporary art discourse while remaining rooted in indigenous cultural frameworks [Desai \(2003\)](#).

3.2. SCULPTURAL PRACTICE OF MANJUNATH KAMATH

The sculptural practice of Manjunath Kamath demonstrates how tradition can function as a conceptual anchor rather than a visual template [Kamath \(2015\)](#). His works draw from a wide range of Indian cultural sources, including temple sculpture, folk narratives, Jain and Buddhist iconography, and architectural relief traditions [Goswamy \(2003\)](#). However, these references rarely appear as complete or intact forms. Instead, Kamath employs fragmentation as a primary strategy to negotiate continuity and transformation [Dalmia \(2001\)](#).

Figure 1



Figure 1 Artist: Manjunath Kamath, Title: Malechavilasi, Size: 61x43x23 cms, Medium: Coloured Terracotta, Year: 2018, Image curtesy: Gallery Latitude28.

Figure 2



Figure 2 Artist: Manjunath Kamath, Title: here and there, Size: 61x43x23 cms, Medium: painted Terracotta, Year: 2019, Image curtesy: Architecuraldigest.in.

Figure 3



Figure 3 Artist: Manjunath Kamath, Title: Swanapani, Medium: painted Terracotta, Year: 2019, Image curtesy: Sakshi gallery mumbai.

Figure 4



Figure 4 Tibetan art, Vajrayana Buddhism, bronze, 15th century, Rubin Museum of art, Tibet.

Figure 5



Figure 5 Artist: Manjunath Kamath, Title: Vahana, Medium: painted Terracotta, Year: 2014, Image Courtesy: Galleryspace Mumbai.

In several works (see [Figure 1](#), [Figure 2](#), and [Figure 3](#)), Kamath incorporates broken or partial sculptural elements that recall traditional idols, relief figures, and ritual objects. When juxtaposed with traditional references such as temple façade sculptures or Buddhist bronzes [Figure 4](#), these fragments reveal a deliberate refusal to restore wholeness [Dehejia \(1997\)](#). The incomplete image retains its symbolic charge while simultaneously opening space for reinterpretation. Fragmentation thus becomes a metaphor for cultural memory suggesting survival, adaptation, and renewal rather than loss [Kapur \(1997\)](#).

Kamath's use of materials further reinforces this conceptual approach. Terracotta and metal, materials historically associated with worship, ritual, and craft traditions, are employed in ways that preserve their tactile and symbolic qualities [Jain \(2010\)](#). However, through recombination and recontextualization, these materials are freed from their original ritual functions. Figures illustrating his terracotta works [Figure 5](#) show how surface treatment, scale, and painted textures recall folk and temple traditions while functioning within a contemporary sculptural language [Kamath \(2015\)](#).

Another significant aspect of Kamath's practice is narrative construction through assemblage. His sculptures often consist of multiple small elements arranged in a single spatial field, resembling visual storytelling traditions found in temple reliefs and folk art [Goswamy \(2003\)](#). When compared with traditional narrative relief panels, Kamath's works reveal continuity in compositional logic but not in iconographic rigidity [Elkins \(2003\)](#). The narrative becomes open-ended, allowing viewers to construct meaning through association rather than prescribed symbolism [Archer \(1959\)](#).

The results indicate that Kamath's approach sustains continuity by preserving the original cultural value of images while transforming their function. Rather than treating tradition as a closed historical archive, he allows it to operate as a living, evolving presence within contemporary visual culture [Desai \(2003\)](#), [Dalmia \(2001\)](#).

3.3. RITUAL AND MATERIAL TRANSFORMATION IN BALAN NAMBIAR

The sculptural language of Balan Nambiar emerges directly from ritual consciousness and performative traditions of coastal Karnataka and Kerala [Nambiar \(2008\)](#). The analysis shows that his work is not merely inspired by ritual performances such as Theyyam, Bhuta Kola, Nagamandala, or Kalaripayattu, but structurally shaped by their movement, rhythm, and spatial dynamics [Kothari \(2012\)](#).

Figure 6



Figure 6 Teyyam from Kannur, Kerala

Figure 7



Figure 7 Teyyam from Kannur, Kerala

Figure 8



Figure 8 Balans Work

Figure 9



Figure 9 Balans Work

Figures documenting ritual performances [Figure 6](#) and [Figure 7](#) juxtaposed with Nambiar's sculptural works [Figure 8](#) and [Figure 9](#) reveal striking parallels in form and energy. The dynamic expansion and contraction of ritual costumes, the centrifugal movement of the body, and the rhythmic repetition of gestures are translated into sculptural planes, curves, and spatial trajectories [Schechner \(2003\)](#). Rather than depicting ritual figures, Nambiar abstracts their kinetic essence [Nambiar \(2008\)](#).

Figure 10



Figure 10 Sri Chakra with Mirror Image, Stainless Steel, 2010, 30cm (h).

Figure 11



Figure 11 Poothara, 2010, Stainless Steel, 87cm (H).

A key result of the study is the artist's deliberate choice of industrial materials such as mild steel and stainless steel. This material shift introduces a conceptual tension between the ephemeral nature of ritual performance and the permanence of sculptural form [Malraux \(1978\)](#). In works such as Sri Chakra with Mirror Image and Poothara [Figure 10](#) and [Figure 11](#), mandala geometry and ritual symbolism are embedded within metal structures, creating a dialogue between spiritual tradition and modern industrial reality [Kramrisch \(1976\)](#).

Mandala systems play a crucial role in Nambiar's visual language. The circular and radial compositions observed in his works mirror ritual diagrams used for meditation and cosmic representation [Vatsyayan \(1993\)](#). However, the translation into metal disrupts the traditional sacred temporality of these forms. The resulting sculptures invite contemplation while asserting their presence as contemporary objects [Malraux \(1978\)](#). The mirror surfaces and reflective qualities further engage the viewer, transforming ritual symbolism into an experiential encounter [Schechner \(2003\)](#).

The results also reveal that Nambiar's work sustains continuity not through iconographic clarity but through embodied memory [Kothari \(2012\)](#). The rhythm, movement, and spatial awareness derived from ritual practice inform his sculptural decisions intuitively. This approach allows ritual traditions to survive as abstract energies rather than literal images, reinforcing the idea of tradition as metaphor [Desai \(2003\)](#), [Kapur \(1997\)](#).

3.4. CONCEPTUAL ENGAGEMENT WITH WOODEN DEITIES IN TALLUR L. N.

Tallur L. N.'s practice represents a critical and multilayered engagement with tradition, particularly South Indian wooden deity traditions and local ritual practices [Tallur \(2014\)](#). The results show that Tallur does not merely reference traditional forms; instead, he interrogates their meanings, functions, and relevance within contemporary society [Hall \(1996\)](#).

Figure 12



Figure 12 Title: Colonial Sisters, Artist: Tallur L. N. 2008, Material: Rose Wood, Size: 160x60x52 cm Collection: M+Museum, Hong Kong Photo Credit: <https://naturemorte.com/artists/Intallur/>

Figure 13



Figure 13 Title: Mother goddess(amma) Artist: Unknown, Province: coastal Karnataka, Material: Wood, Size: 160x60x52 cm, Collection: Heritage Village, Manipal. Photo Credit: Self.

Figure 14

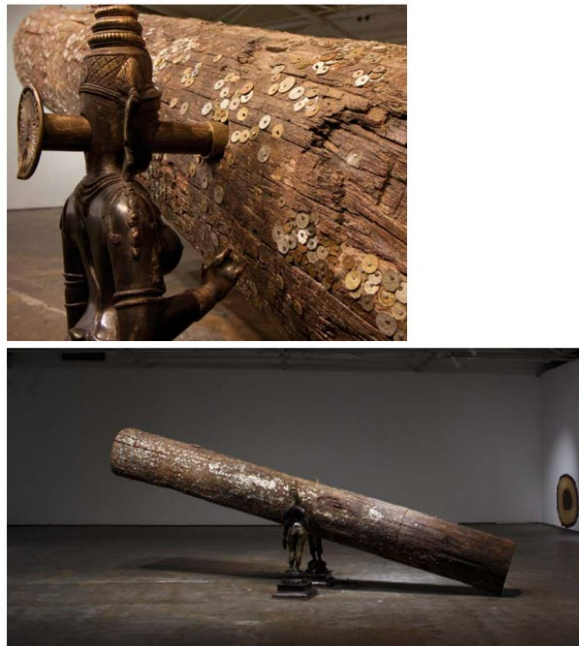


Figure 14 Title: Chrematophobia, Artist: Tallur L.N. 2010, Material: wood, two bronze sculpture and nailed coins, Size: 500x200x300 cm (approx), Photo Credit: <http://tallur.com/>

In works where Tallur borrows the visual language of wooden idols such as proportions, textures, and frontal iconicity figures [Figure 12](#) juxtaposed with traditional wooden deities [Figure 13](#) reveal formal similarities [Beach \(1992\)](#). However, these similarities are disrupted through context, material alteration, or conceptual framing. The traditional

deity form is relocated from a sacred environment into gallery or museum spaces, immediately altering its meaning and function Tallur (2014).

In other works, Tallur moves beyond formal quotation to engage with the underlying concepts associated with wooden deities, such as faith, fear, devotion, protection, and collective belief Hall (1996). Works like Colonial Sisters Figure 12 demonstrate this dual strategy. By commissioning two halves of the sculpture from different craft traditions and aligning them symmetrically, Tallur creates a contemporary metaphor for cultural hybridity, colonial history, and fragmented identity Ray (1986). When juxtaposed with a traditional mother goddess figure Figure 13, the transformation becomes evident Beach (1992).

Tallur's use of everyday objects and ritual practices further strengthens his metaphorical engagement with tradition. In interactive installations such as Chrematophobia and Password Figure 14, ritual beliefs surrounding wealth, purification, and bodily inscription are recontextualized using modern materials and technologies Kakar (1981). These works mock, critique, and reflect upon the persistence of belief systems in a rapidly modernizing society Hall (1996).

Figure 15



Figure 15 Title: Do or Die (Karma yoga2), Artist: Tallur L N. 2013, Material: wood, Steel, Charcoal, paint,C, Size: 70X80X45 cm, Photo Credit: <http://tallur.com/>

Figure 16



Figure 16

Another important result is Tallur's narrative strategy. His works often resemble contemporary folk tales layered, ironic, and embedded with political satire [Ray \(1986\)](#). Figures documenting functional objects such as sugarcane juice extractors [Figure 15](#) juxtaposed with Tallur's sculptural reinterpretations [Figure 16](#) demonstrate how mundane objects become metaphors for karma, labor, and social ethics [Kakar \(1981\)](#). The transformation of functional tools into conceptual artworks highlights how locality and lived experience shape visual language [Tallur \(2014\)](#).

Tallur's background in museology is evident in his meticulous attention to display, documentation, and historical reference. His works function as miniature archives, where tradition, history, and contemporary critique coexist [Hall \(1996\)](#). The results indicate that his practice sustains continuity by allowing tradition to be questioned, dismantled, and reconstructed rather than preserved unquestioningly [Desai \(2003\)](#), [Dalmia \(2001\)](#).

3.5. COMPARATIVE OBSERVATIONS AND SYNTHESIS

Across the practices of Kamath, Nambiar, and Tallur, the results reveal a shared conceptual approach despite differences in material, form, and intent [Desai \(2003\)](#), [Kapur \(1997\)](#). Tradition consistently functions as a metaphorical framework rather than a visual template. Figures across sections demonstrate that continuity is achieved through abstraction, fragmentation, material transformation, and conceptual recontextualization [Dalmia \(2001\)](#), [Archer \(1959\)](#).

While Kamath emphasizes fragmentation and narrative assemblage, Nambiar translates ritual energy into abstract form, and Tallur employs satire and conceptual critique [Kamath \(2015\)](#), [Nambiar \(2008\)](#), [Tallur \(2014\)](#). Together, these practices illustrate that Indian contemporary sculpture sustains cultural continuity by transforming inherited visual cultures into living, evolving languages [Desai \(2003\)](#).

The figure-based analysis confirms that tradition in contemporary Indian art is neither static nor nostalgic. Instead, it operates as a dynamic, generative force that enables artists to negotiate identity, memory, belief, and contemporary reality [Kapur \(1997\)](#), [Elkins \(2003\)](#). This transformation-based continuity allows Indian art to remain rooted while actively engaging with global contemporary discourse [Archer \(1959\)](#).

4. CONCLUSION

This study establishes that continuity in Indian contemporary sculpture is not sustained through imitation or stylistic preservation but through processes of transformation, reinterpretation, and conceptual translation. Traditional imagery, ritual practices, and native visual forms continue to inform contemporary sculptural practices by functioning as metaphorical and experiential resources rather than as fixed models to be reproduced. The findings clearly demonstrate that tradition in contemporary Indian art operates as a living system of ideas, memories, and embodied knowledge that artists actively negotiate in response to present-day concerns.

The sculptural practices of Manjunath Kamath, Balan Nambiar, and Tallur L. N. exemplify distinct yet interconnected approaches to engaging with tradition. Kamath's strategy of fragmentation and reassembly reveals how historical imagery can be activated through incompleteness, allowing the past to exist as a reflective and critical presence within contemporary space. Nambiar's transformation of ritual performance and mandala traditions into industrial materials demonstrates how spiritual and kinetic energies can be translated into modern sculptural forms without losing their meditative and symbolic resonance. Tallur's engagement with South Indian wooden deity traditions highlights how belief systems, collective memory, and social structures can be recontextualized to question faith, power, and identity within contemporary discourse.

Across these practices, tradition emerges not as a visual end product but as an underlying conceptual framework. The artists internalize tradition through lived cultural experience, ritual familiarity, and material memory, enabling continuity to flow intuitively rather than through conscious revivalism. This internalization allows traditional forms to be abstracted, fragmented, or materially transformed while retaining their symbolic potency. Consequently, continuity in Indian contemporary sculpture is revealed as an evolving dialogue between past and present, sacred and secular, permanence and impermanence.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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