

Original Article

FROM EPIC TO IMAGE: THE RAMAYANA AND MAHABHARATA IN INDIAN PAINTING AND VISUAL ART

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ABSTRACT

The document examines the profound connection between Hindu mythology and Indian art, highlighting how mythology has consistently inspired creativity over the ages. It portrays mythology as a mirror of human aspirations, trepidations, principles, and ethical direction, initially conveyed through oral storytelling and subsequently codified in sacred texts.

Hindu mythology is depicted as an extensive and communal tradition rather than the vision of an individual prophet, classified into six primary categories: Shrutis, Smritis, Epics, Puranas, Agamas, and Darshanas. Within this framework, the Ramayana and Mahabharata emerge as the most significant epics, greatly influencing Indian spiritual thought, culture, and artistic endeavors.

The Ramayana, written by Maharishi Valmiki, recounts the saga of Lord Rama as a model ruler and a paragon of virtue. In addition to the central story, it features multiple sub-narratives that enhance its philosophical and moral richness.

The Mahabharata, compiled by Vedavyasa, is a far more extensive epic focused on the clash between the Pandavas and Kauravas, with Lord Krishna serving as its philosophical essence. It encompasses intricate narratives that explore themes of ethics, responsibilities, devotion, and the human condition, making it one of the most intricate literary masterpieces globally.

The document emphasizes the extensive representation of scenes from both epics in Indian art forms, including temple sculptures, murals, miniature paintings, and manuscripts found in regions like Ellora, Mahabalipuram, Hampi, Rajasthan, Kerala, and Mysore. These artistic depictions played a crucial role in making the epics accessible to both educated and uneducated audiences. It further addresses the significance of miniature painting traditions—such as those from the Rajasthani, Mughal, and Pahari schools—in depicting epic stories. The patronage from royal figures, notably Rana Jagat Singh and Mughal emperor Akbar, was instrumental in maintaining and disseminating these visual art forms.

Additionally, the study investigates how contemporary Indian artists—including Raja Ravi Varma, Nandalal Bose, M.F. Husain, Jamini Roy, Ganesh Pyne, among others—have reinterpreted the epics through modern styles, personal symbolism, and current perspectives, ensuring the narratives remain pertinent in evolving cultural contexts.

Ultimately, the document highlights the role of cultural festivals, workshops, and national events like Gita Jayanti, Ramayana Melas, and Mahabharata workshops in fostering ongoing interest in epic traditions. In conclusion, it asserts that the Ramayana and Mahabharata have greatly impacted not only Indian painting but also literature, music, dance, theatre, cinema, and popular culture, continuously influencing Indian identity and artistic expression.

Keywords: Mahabharata, Vedavyasa, Pandavas, Kauravas, Lord Krishna

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Received: 16 December 2025; Accepted: 10 January 2026; Published 26 February 2026

DOI: [10.29121/granthaalayah.v14.i2SCE.2026.6740](https://doi.org/10.29121/granthaalayah.v14.i2SCE.2026.6740)

Page Number: 89-95

Journal Title: International Journal of Research -GRANTHAALAYAH

Journal Abbreviation: Int. J. Res. Granthaalayah

Online ISSN: 2350-0530, Print ISSN: 2394-3629

Publisher: Granthaalayah Publications and Printers, India

Conflict of Interests: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Authors' Contributions: Each author made an equal contribution to the conception and design of the study. All authors have reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript for publication.

Transparency: The authors affirm that this manuscript presents an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study. All essential aspects have been included, and any deviations from the original study plan have been clearly explained. The writing process strictly adhered to established ethical standards.

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most significant ways to comprehend human societies' inner consciousness and cultural development is through art. Art reveals emotional, intellectual, and spiritual development, whereas archaeological objects such as tools, weaponry, and skeletal remains demonstrate physical existence. People have used simple lines and shapes to express emotions such as fear, love, grief, and triumph from the beginning of human history. These representations eventually evolved into more symbolic and structured visual representations.

Humans developed skills in fields like writing, architecture, pottery, and agriculture as civilization advanced. Belief systems emerged in concert with these material developments, first concentrating on elements of nature such as the sun, moon, rain, rivers, and earth. Religion and mythology emerged as a result of the personification and veneration of these natural forces over time. In order to visualize these beliefs, art became crucial, transforming abstract ideas into tangible representations of gods and goddesses.

This study emphasizes how closely religion and art are related. Because religious beliefs encouraged artistic endeavors, art became a significant medium for spiritual expression and communication. This link in ancient Indian society is exemplified by the sacred paintings of the Indus Valley and the poems of the Rig Veda, which reinterpreted natural elements as legendary figures. Over time, mythology developed into an organized narrative framework for effectively conveying moral principles, social conventions, and intellectual concepts.

The preservation of artistic heritage and aesthetic ideals depended heavily on texts like as the Vedas, Ramayana, Mahabharata, Puranas, and Shilpashastra. These works produced theories about proportion, beauty, symbolism, and the discipline of art in addition to having an impact on religious rituals. This information was shared with the public orally and in writing, and it had an impact on India's artistic identity.

This study also examines the purposes and functions of art, which include the production of beauty, the improvement of the environment, the representation of reality, the preservation of concepts and people, the expression of faith, creativity, and emotions, the sharing of experiences, the reflection of social and cultural realities, the resistance to injustice, the portrayal of daily life, and the artist's personal fulfillment. Art is seen as a mirror of society, able to record history, raise consciousness, and influence human cognition. Artists have used art to communicate both internal and outward truths, as demonstrated by examples from both Indian and Western artistic traditions. Art has continuously changed in reaction to social and cultural changes while retaining its essential function, from the frescoes and temple carvings of Ajanta to the creations of Raja Ravi Verma and modern artists.

THE ROLE OF EPICS IN VISUAL ART

The Ramayana and the Mahabharata are the main sources of inspiration that connect abstract philosophical ideas with visual depiction, and mythology serves as a fundamental narrative framework for Indian art. These epics are described as "friendly compositions" that convey deep spiritual and moral lessons through simple narratives, making them understandable to both academics and the uneducated. The Ramayana and Mahabharata are extensive accounts of human creativity, behavior, and societal norms rather than merely religious writings. These stories have multiple purposes in Indian painting:

- **Narrative Transmission:** Stories that were once passed down orally over thousands of years are given a concrete form through visual art.
- **Moral and Social Guidance:** By depicting ideal behaviors, such as the "ideal son" and "ideal king" in Rama, the "ideal wife" in Sita, and the "ideal brothers" in Lakshmana and Bharata, paintings of these epics serve as a visual "code of conduct" for society.
- **Universal Accessibility:** The "common man" can understand the deepest truths of the Srutis (Vedas) and Smritis without extensive study thanks to the epics' straightforward language and well-known subject matter.

INDIAN PAINTINGS OF THE RAMAYANA

Numerous generations of artists have been influenced by the Ramayana, which is considered the Aadi Kavya (first literary writing).

- **Thematic Focus:** The "perfection and idealism" of Rama-Rajya, a period of harmony, happiness, and tolerance, is often portrayed by artists.
- **Iconographic depictions:** Important incidents that are frequently depicted include Rama's exile, Ravana's kidnapping of Sita, and Hanumana's devoted service, including his flight to the Himalayas to return a whole mountain of medicinal herbs.
- **Symbolism of Good vs. Evil:** The epic's recurring theme is the "destruction of evil by good," but it also permits nuanced depictions, such the scholar-demon Ravana.

INDIAN PAINTINGS OF THE MAHABHARATA

With 100,000 verses, the Mahabharata provides painters with a vast storehouse of intricate imagery and psychological nuance.

- **Central Narratives:** Lord Krishna, an incarnation of Vishnu, is frequently the focal point of paintings that depict the great conflict between the Pandavas and Kauravas.
- **The Bhagavad-Gita:** The conversation between Krishna and Arjuna at Kurukshetra, which represents the idea of Nishkama Karma—action without desire for its fruits—is a key topic in visual art.
- **Diverse Episodes:** In addition to the main conflict, artists use a variety of subplots, such as the sea's turbulence, Shakuntala's tale, or Yudhishtira's humanity tests.

TRADITION'S PERSISTENCE

In Indian visual art, the Ramayana and Mahabharata stories continue to be the most popular subjects. Because they have been continuously "painted or carved on the walls of temples and forts through the ages," the "thread of divinity and creativity" that unites ancient customs with contemporary artistic expression will continue to exist.

Indian artists started reinterpreting mythology via their own viewpoint and current issues with the shift from traditional to modern painting. Mythology evolved from being a literal story to a metaphor for communicating national identity, psychological issues, and social realities. Through realistic approaches, artists such as Raja Ravi Varma popularized legendary themes, making holy beings more approachable to the general public.

Mythology is no longer exclusively associated with religious devotion in the modern world. Myth is a conceptual tool that artists use to question tradition, reinterpret identity, and connect the past and present. This change demonstrates the adaptability and ongoing relevance of legendary ideas in Indian art.

TRANSFORMATION TO CONTEMPORARY TRADITIONALISM

Important individuals who bridged the gap between ancient scripture and contemporary visual language preserved and reworked traditional themes as Indian art progressed into the modern period.

- **Raja Ravi Varma:** Through oil paintings and inexpensive printed reproductions, he is credited with "immortalizing" the gods and goddesses from the epics so that the common populace could access them.
- **Regional Miniature Traditions:** The Rajasthani, Mughal, and Pahari schools of miniature painting used epic narratives to portray the social and geographical contexts of their times, acting as visual archives of history.

Through the translation of these "Epics" into "Images," both modern and traditional artists have created a "thread of divinity and creativity" that unites generations and creates a harmonious relationship between the two.

CONTEMPORARY INDIAN ARTISTS AND MYTHOLOGICAL PAINTINGS

The stories of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata have been revived by contemporary Indian artists, who have gone beyond simple illustration to employ these epics as a prism for contemporary social, political, and psychological criticism. Modern art frequently humanizes these characters or uses their history to discuss topics like gender, conflict, and identity, whereas traditional art concentrated on the figures' holiness.

The Ramayana and Mahabharata are now viewed in modern Indian art as dynamic "cultural metaphors" rather than merely religious texts. To reimagine these ancient stories, artists use a range of techniques, from abstract and cubism to hyper-realistic and folk-fusion.

A thorough section on modern Indian painters' mythical paintings, with a particular emphasis on the two great epics, may be seen below.

1) M.F. Husain: The Epic Narrative and Cubism

One of the most well-known modernists to discuss the epics was Maqbool Fida Husain (M.F. Husain). His Mahabharata series, which was displayed at the 1971 São Paulo Biennial, depicted the chaos and moral complexity of the Kurukshetra conflict using a vivid, cubist-inspired language.

- **Focus:** Husain's paintings convey the movement and vitality of the conflict rather than static emblems. In order to symbolize the unavoidable momentum of Dharma and Karma, Buddha frequently employed horses as key symbols of strength and speed.
- **Crucial Realization:** Husain humanized the gods by emphasizing not only their heavenly qualities but also the psychological weight of their decisions.

Figure 1



2) Tyeb Mehta: Universal Suffering and Mythology

Mythology was a common way for Tyeb Mehta to convey the "angst of the modern human condition." Despite being well-known for his portrayals of Mahishasura Mardini, he frequently takes a fragmented approach to epic topics.

- **Method:** He uses the "diagonal line" to divide the canvas, which is a visual symbol for the inner turmoil that characters like Arjuna and Karna experience.
- **Thematic Depth:** Mehta saw the Mahabharata's conflicts as a reflection of the violence that followed partition and the divisions in contemporary Indian society.

Figure 2



3) Atul Dodiya: Comparing the Everyday and the Epic

Atul Dodiya is renowned for fusing Western art history and popular culture with Indian mythology. His paintings sometimes include shutter paintings, which, when raised, expose a contemporary, frequently grim urban reality while the outer layer may depict a scene from the Ramayana.

- **Interpretation:** Dodiya makes observations about modern Mumbai life through the trials of Sita or the ideals of Rama. He raises the question of whether the moral compass offered by these epics still directs contemporary India by situating these characters in contemporary contexts.

4) Anjolie Menon: The Viewpoint of Women

Anjolie Menon offers a contemporary, frequently reflective perspective on the epics' female heroes, especially Sita and Draupadi.

- **Focus:** She frequently emphasizes the vulnerability and tenacity of women in her artwork. In addition to being a subservient character, her "Sita" represents unwavering resistance to social injustice.
- **Style:** She gives these figures a status that unites the heavenly and the human by employing a brilliant, transparent technique evocative of Byzantine icons.

Figure 3

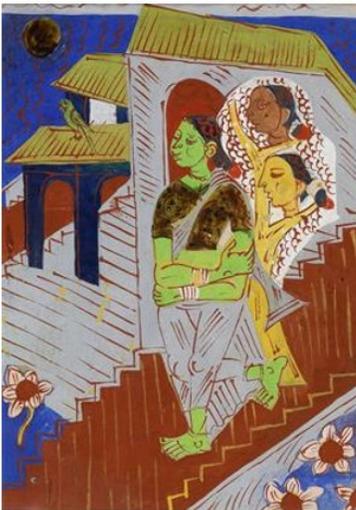


5) K.G. Subramanyan: Tradition's Play

According to K.G. Subramanyan, mythology is a "living language." He frequently depicted episodes from the epics with wit and irony using folk techniques and the terracotta mural style.

- **Method:** He thought mythology ought to be lighthearted (Leela). In order to maintain the narrative rooted in the "soil" of the common people, he frequently incorporates regional traditional motifs (such as those from Kalighat or Pattachitra) into his Ramayana paintings.

Figure 4



6) Modern Folk-Fusion (Avinash Karn and The Vayeda Brothers)

The epics are also being updated for the twenty-first century by contemporary folk artists.

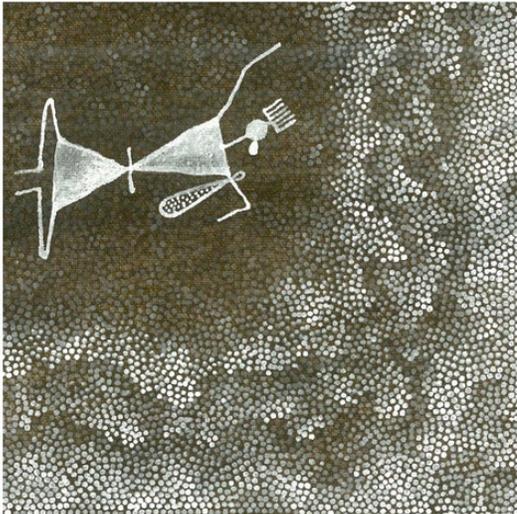
- **Madhubani/Mithila Art:** Artists such as Avinash Karn incorporate themes of women's empowerment or environmental protection into scenes such as the Swayamvara (marriage) of Rama and Sita using traditional Bihar traditions.

Figure 5



- **Warli Art:** The Vayeda Brothers have demonstrated that tribal aesthetics may successfully support the weight of big epic narratives by experimenting with narrating Mahabharata episodes using Warli's rhythmic, geometric patterns.

Figure 6



Poosapati Parameshwar Raju's Ramayana-based calligraphic series, which uses abstract and Devanagari-inspired brushstrokes to tell epic stories. His artwork demonstrates how cultural legacy may be preserved while traditional scripts, symbols, and iconography are transformed into a contemporary visual language.

Table 1

Table 1 The Epic Focus of Artists		
Artist	Major Theme / Style	Epic Focus
M.F. Husain	Cubism / Dynamic Movement	The Battle of Kurukshetra (<i>Mahabharata</i>)
Tyeb Mehta	Existentialism / Fragmented Forms	Internal Dilemmas / Conflict (<i>Mahabharata</i>)
Atul Dodiya	Post-Modernism / Shutter Art	Mythology in Urban Context (<i>Ramayana</i>)
Anjolie Menon	Contemporary Iconography	Resilience of Sita and Draupadi
Nandalal Bose	Modern Traditionalism	Narrative clarity of Rama's adventures
Jamini Roy	Folk-Simplification	Rama, Sita, and Hanuman in Kalighat style

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study shows how closely mythology and art are related. Together, they establish a link between tradition and modern living, preserving cultural legacy while fostering creative reinterpretation. Art can enhance human understanding and preserve cultural continuity across time thanks to this mutually beneficial relationship.

Mythology is a dynamic tradition that constantly stimulates artistic expression. Indian aesthetic identity has been greatly influenced by the intimate relationship between myth and art, which enables art to serve as a link between spiritual belief, cultural legacy, and artistic expression.

The study supports the notion that mythology and art are complementary disciplines. Whereas art delivers form and prominence, mythology offers content and significance. When combined, they uphold customs, spread morals, and enable creative reinterpretations of inherited information.

Indian mythological painting is dynamic and ever-evolving. Indian artists have made sure that mythology remains an essential and expressive component of visual arts by fusing creativity and tradition. The study highlights the centuries-long influence of mythical themes on Indian painting. Mythology has provided artists with a rich visual vocabulary that preserves cultural history while encouraging creative expression, from traditional miniature techniques to modern reinterpretations.

By changing the emphasis from ritualistic devotion to critical inquiry, modern Indian artists have successfully guaranteed that the Ramayana and Mahabharata stay relevant. By reinterpreting these epics, they establish a link between India's ancient past and its contemporary identity, utilizing the "Epic" to clarify the "Image" of the current world.

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