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A Comparative Study of the Symbolic Visual Representations in the Art of Indian and French in Pondicherry

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Abstract:

Indian art lays emphasis not only on the outer form but also on the inner meaning. From the earliest times, Indian art evolved from the basic concept that it is of an auspicious character and thus the symbols and icons which were developed in Indian art were essentially philosophical-religious idea dictum. These auspicious symbols were the growth of the religious thought of ancient Indians.

Like Indian Art the Western art also lays emphasis on the inner meaning. In Puducherry there are ample of symbolic art forms seen in the Western French Art and Architectural structures. This paper aims to highlight the common symbolic art forms of the Indian and French which express their philosophical- religious ideas in their art in Pondicherry.

Keywords: Visual, Symbol, icon, motif

1. Introduction

In the Indian Art perspective “without meaning, Art is jejune.”¹ It is not an art for art’s sake; but an art for life’s sublime ideas.² The mission and the purpose of Indian art is to convey these ideas through the language of symbols which while representing a meaning in an outer form were used for ornamentation by followers of all religions in all ages.

The word “Symbolism” refers to the practice of representing things by symbols or of investing things with a symbolic meaning or character. In Indian Art, an image is intended primarily to express certain ideas, rather than to portray the likeness of any early thing. Art Historian Ananda Coomarasamy says “It is a Visual Symbolism, ideal in the mathematical sense.”³ According to Margaret Stutley “Most of the Indian Art was initially intended to remind the illiterate laity of religious truths and sacred stories, as were the painted frescoes in Christian churches in the Middle Ages”.⁴

The Indian figures, consist the parts all have certain significant symbolic philosophy. The body posture, limbs, hand gesture, the garments, attributes, emblems, weapons and also the accompanying minor divinities, animals, birds, fish, trees, plants and flowers all tells some symbolic ideas to the world. Like Indian religious figures the Western religious figures also lays emphasis on the inner meaning. There are a number of Christian symbolic images which bear the imprint of common symbolic ideas of both the Indian and Western in Pondicherry Churches built by the French. The symbolical motifs of French in the religious and the secular structures not only made for ornamentation they also express their philosophical- religious ideas in their art. Most of the symbolic representations of French decorative art in Puducherry speak a universal language of human emotions and reflect the universal spirit of man. Some of these symbolic images convey a similar meaning to the religious ideas of Indian art.

In the case of decorative motif there are a number of Indian traditional motifs has the same symbolic meaning related to the Western traditional motif; the Greco-Roman style and Christian theologies. Some of the common symbols are as follows:

- i. Object symbols – Flower pot (puranakumbha), sea shell (sankha) etc.
- ii. Vegetation symbols – Lotus (padma), lily, palm (tala), honeysuckle (mucakunda) etc.
- iii. Animal symbols- Fish (matsya), deer (mrga), horse (asva), elephant (hastin) etc.
- iv. Bird symbols – Eagle (garuda), Peacock, cock etc.

Analyzing each of the above symbolic motifs of both the Indian art and Western French art in the same art formula was used symbolically or merely with ornamental objective. Some of the common symbols seen in the French decorative art motifs in Pondicherry are as follows.

¹ V.S. Agarwal, Indian Art (Varanasi, 1965) p.55. “Indian aesthetic canon seeks beauty both in form and meaning”. Cf. V.S. Agarwal, Chakradhvaja (Varanasi, 1964) p.7. As a matter of fact purely ornamental motifs did not find favour at the hands of the Indian artists who laid more emphasis on ‘artha’ (meaning) than on ‘rupa’ (form).

² A.K. Coomaraswamy, (1923) Introduction to Indian Art, Madras, p.41.

³ A.K. Coomaraswamy, The Transference of Nature, p.28.

⁴ Margaret Stutley, (1985) The Illustrated Dictionary of Hindu Iconography, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, p.viii.

1.1. Object Symbol- Flower pot (*puranakumbha*)

Puranakumbha which is also known as puranakalasa, puranaghata and mangalakalasa, is one of the eight auspicious symbols of the classical Indian art.⁵ It is a symbol of fertility and its conception goes far back to the Vedic period.⁶ According to V.S. Agarwal “It (*puranakumbha*) is the emblem par excellence of fullness and prosperity, of life endowed with all its gifts... the full blooming overflowing contents of life are comparable to the plants and foliage luxuriating from the mouth of a jar filled with life-giving fluid.”⁷ It is generally associated with Goddess Lakshmi and with overflowing foliage composed of lotus buds, flowers and leaves. In South India *puranakumbha* is the pot (*kalasa*) filled with holy water and a coconut is kept on the mouth of the pot with overflowing foliage of mango leaves and flowers (Figure 1). Apart from its depiction as an ornament carved on bas-reliefs, it was also adopted for use architecturally with at least two prominent members, viz., with the column and the *sikhara*.

The pot and foliage capital became very popular in Medieval Indian architecture. It is surprising to see the pot (*kalasa*) was used almost as a general rule to crown the columns and the domes of the churches and buildings which were constructed during the French period in Puducherry. The flower pots in the Church of Our Lady of Immaculate Conception, Governor’s Palace and the Hotel Lagrenee de Mezieres can be seen as the examples (Figure 2). For the French the flower pot is an auspicious symbol as like Indians. Here the flower pots were covered with grapes and foliage crowning it. The flower pots with grapes and the foliage were shown to express the fertility and prosperity.



Figure 1: Bas-relief, Indian *puranakumbha* filled with holy water and a coconut kept on the mouth of the pot with overflowing foliage of mango leaves and flowers.



Figure 2: French flower pot covered with grapes and foliage.

⁵ R. Nath, (1976) History of Decorative Art in Mughal Architecture, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, , p.6.

⁶ V.S. Agarwal, op. cit, p.51.

⁷ Ibid, p.43.

1.2. Vegetation symbol- Lotus (padma) and Lily

The lotus symbol occupies an important position in Hindu Cosmology. According to Ananda Coomaraswamy about lotus “water is the source and support of all things and the lotus represents it”.⁸ Rising from the depths of water and expanding its petals on the surface, the lotus is the most beautiful evidence offered to the eye of the self engendering fertility of bottom. Through its appearance, it gives proof of the life- supporting power of all- nourishing abyss. This cosmic flower is a transformation of a portion of the substance eternally contained within the god’s gigantic body. This is why with a lot of symbolic meaning this cosmic flower lotus is the national flower of India. Like lotus in India, ‘lily’ “Le fleur de lis” is the national flower of France.

The lotus and the lily have been used on a large scale in Indian and French architecture respectively. It has been carved in bold relief in circular medallions and associated with other designs on arches, in series on plinths, lintels and friezes in pleasing tones. The Aayi mandapa has these ornamental motifs in ample measure. The lotus in the form of circular medallions in bold relief is seen in the friezes of Aayi mandapa and the hemispherical dome at the top of the structure with a finial with “Le fleur de lis” the French national flower lily (Figure 3).



Figure 3: The circular lotus medallion reliefs in the friezes of Aayi mandapa and the finial with “Le fleur de lis” the French national flower lily

1.3. Animal Symbol – i) Fish (Matsya), ii) Winged Horse

1.3.1. Fish (Matsya)

In Indian Hindu art ‘Fish’ Matsya, considered as the first avatar of Vishnu (Figure 4). Vishnu also portrayed as a great fish because all manifestation arises from the water.⁹ In Western Christian art, like Vishnu “Jesus Christ” is also represented as great fish. In Christian theology ‘Tertullian’ wrote (in “De Baptismo”) “But we, being little fishes, as Jesus Christ is our great Fish, begin our life in the water, and only while we abide in the water are we safe and sound”.¹⁰ Like early Christians the ancient Indus people also used the fish symbol. Leibert states that “according to some scholars the fish – sign in the Indus script signifies as God”.¹¹ One of the fish symbol in a relief is on the right side façade wall of the Our Lady of Immaculate Conception Church (Figure 5). Here the fish is presented along with the bread basket and a Cross in a stylized frame worked on stucco.



Figure 4: ‘Fish’ Matsya, first avatar of Vishnu

⁸ A.K. Coomaraswamy, (1930) ‘Origin of the Lotus’, The Indian Historical Quarterly, Vol. VI, Calcutta, p. 374.

⁹ Margaret Stutley, op. cit, p.91.

¹⁰ www.religionfacts.com/christianity/symbols.

¹¹ Gosta Liebert, (1976) Iconographic Dictionary of the Indian Religious, Leiden, p.176.



Figure 5: Relief fish symbol on the right side façade wall of the Our Lady of Immaculate Conception Church.

1.3.2. Winged Horse

There are a lot of references to the 'Winged Horse' in Indian and foreign literature but its sculptural depiction is very few. In Indian art we get an excellent depiction of winged horse in relief sculptural form on the ground balustrade of stupa at Sanchi and in Amaravathi sculptures. Krishna Murthy, in his *Mythical Animals in Indian art* denotes "In Hindu mythology, the celestial horse *uccaisravas* is the forerunner of this winged animal (horse)".¹²

Very much like Sanchi's winged horse, the image of an affronted winged horse is seen in the pediment in the façade facing east towards the sea of the Aayi mandapa in Puducherry. In Greek mythology there is a reference of the winged horse named as 'Pegasus'.¹³ The Greek coins of the 4th Century BC have some of the images of this winged horse.¹⁴ The symbolical meaning of the winged horse in the Aayi mandapa is unknown. But it is assumed that as the monument of Aayi was built on the Greco- Roman style, Greek mythological image of the winged horse was placed along with an anchor. The winged horse may portray a 'ship' which moves from place to place.



Figure 6: A wooden Indian winged horse

1.4. Bird symbol - Eagle (Garuda).

In Indian art eagle (garuda) is an important symbolic bird. It is a vehicle for Lord Vishnu. In Buddhism garuda plays a secondary role, it is sometimes considered as Bodhisattva. In Indian art garuda is a symbol of power and courage.¹⁵ Likewise for the French the eagle symbolizes the power and authority that's why during the period of Napoleon, the symbol eagle was used in wide variety. In Aayi mandapa the pediment facing north towards the Governor's Palace has the sculptural element of an eagle which symbolizes French Imperial Authority.

¹² K. Krishna Murthy, (1985). *Mythical Animals in Indian Art*, Abhinav Publications, p.11.

¹³ Seyffert, Oskar, (1957) *A Dictionary of Classical Antiquities*, London, pp.465.

¹⁴ R.A.G. Carson, (1977) *Coins of Greece and Rome*, London, Pl. 5, 91, 92.

¹⁵ Margaret Stutley, op. cit, p.49

2. Conclusion

The symbolic representations in an Art may mean different things to the different people according to their beliefs and customs but most of it reflects the universal spirit of man. In Pondicherry both these Indian and Western symbolic visual representations of the objects, animals, birds and the luxuriant plant life portrayed frequently in sculptures and paintings, both for the beauty of form and symbolism seem to reflect the universal spirit of the human mankind.

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