

The Influence of Spirituality in Indian Modern Painting

*"Spirituality is the axis of Indian modern painting; without it,
form becomes hollow and meaning dissolves."*

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Abstract

The evolution of Indian modern painting is deeply interwoven with spirituality, which has served as both, a source of inspiration and a means of cultural identity. Unlike Western modernism, often associated with materialism and individual expression, Indian modern art is emerged as a synthesis of tradition and innovation, drawing from the country's rich spiritual and philosophical heritage. Since the Bengal School of Art, spirituality became a defining element in modern artistic expression. The artists used mythology, folk traditions, and abstract symbols not only to reconnect with India's cultural roots but also to present a spiritual response to colonial influences and modernist trends. The development of Indian modern painting cannot be studied without acknowledging the pioneering role of Raja Ravi Varma, whose works in the late 19th century introduced a new language of art in India. Varma gave spirituality a visual form accessible to the wider public, by blending European realism with Indian mythological and religious themes.

Keywords: Spirituality, Indian modern Art, Modern Paintings, Indian Modern Artist



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Introduction

The tradition of Indian painting has been deeply connected with spirituality since ancient times. However, in the modern era, from the latter half of the 19th century onwards, when Western influence fell upon Indian art, artists while maintaining their own style, their art is not just a depiction of reality, but also a medium for spiritual experience and cultural consciousness. Modern Indian paintings kept the Indian artists connected to their tradition. The artists incorporated religious and philosophical concepts in their works, which is the showcase to rich heritage of Indian art. Spirituality is a special part and characteristic of Indian art. This characteristic is especially evident in Indian modern painting. In the era of modernity, while artists were in a race to do something new and constantly experimenting through their artworks, they also have depicted deities, mythological tales and spiritual concepts in their art. Art in India has always been more than an aesthetic expression; it has served as a spiritual language that connects the material and the metaphysical. The prehistoric cave paintings to intricate temple murals, Indian art has consistently reflected the human quest for the divine. Unlike Western traditions, where modern art is often moved toward individualism and material expression, the Indian modern painting retained a profound connection with the spirituality. This link between art and the sacred did not diminish with the rise of modernism but, instead, evolved into new forms that bridged tradition and innovation.

Spiritual Themes in Modern Indian Painting

The place of Raja Ravi Varma in the world of Indian art is unique, and he is considered the cornerstone of modern Indian painting. During the colonial period, when Western influence

was increasing on Indian culture and Indian art was continuously dying due to the neglectful policies of the British rule, Ravi Varma's paintings re-oriented Indians towards their religious and spiritual identity. His art emerged as a bridge between Indian spirituality and modernity. He based his artworks on Hindu religious and mythological themes in the Western style. Most of his paintings depicted events from the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Puranas, presenting images of various deities like Lakshmi, Saraswati, Krishna-Radha in a form that became not just pictures but a medium for spiritual experience. He made his paintings accessible to every home through lithographic printing. The images of deities were no longer confined to temples but also resided in the homes of common people. The forms of gods and goddesses created by him became the center of people's spirituality through his paintings.

Many art movements and changes have occurred in modern art; artists have used symbols from time to time. Symbols hold deep significance in Indian art, and they have also been used in modern painting. To impart a contemplative and serene quality to art, some artists incorporated practices of yoga and meditation into their art. Modernity is used to comment on cultural and social issues. And some artists have expressed their personal spiritual journey through their art. In Ravi Varma's paintings, spirituality is not just a subject matter but the soul of his art. By presenting deities and mythological figures in human form, he deeply established the feeling of devotion and spirituality in Indian society. His paintings gave a new direction to Indian art by combining religion, beauty, and spirituality.



Figure 1 Manini Radha

Indian social life along with Indian traditions the subject of his paintings.

Bharat Mata Painting This painting is based on Bankim Chandra's "Vande Mataram." In it, Bharat Mata (Mother India) is depicted as the goddess of knowledge and agriculture. This four-armed figure, holding a sheaf of wheat in one hand and wearing white garments in the other, symbolizes the national consciousness envisioned by Abanindranath Tagore. There are many such artistic works that embody culturalism, modernity, and Indian identity.

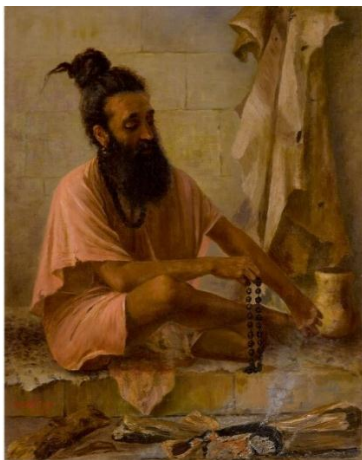


Figure 2 Swami Vishvamitra in Meditation

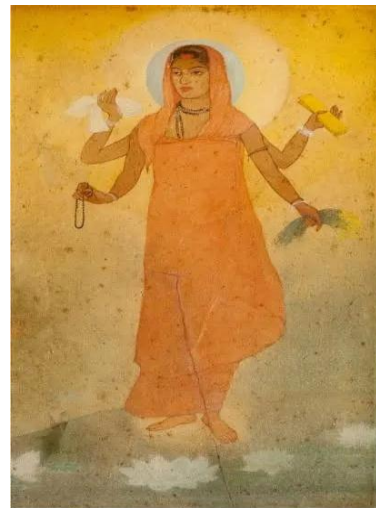


Figure 3 Bharat Mata

After the British rule, the academic style arrived in India, but it did not make Indian artists lose their identity. In the Bengal School, artists like Abanindranath Tagore and Nandalal Bose revived Indian tradition, spirituality, and the spirit of Swadeshi. Abanindranath Thakur was a leading artist of Bengal; his paintings, especially 'Bharat Mata', became a symbol of Indian culture and spiritual awakening. During this period of British dominance, Indian art and culture were being ridiculed, and the golden age of Ravi Varma's art was also left behind. At such a time, Abanindranath made Krishna Leela, paintings based on Indian scriptures, and

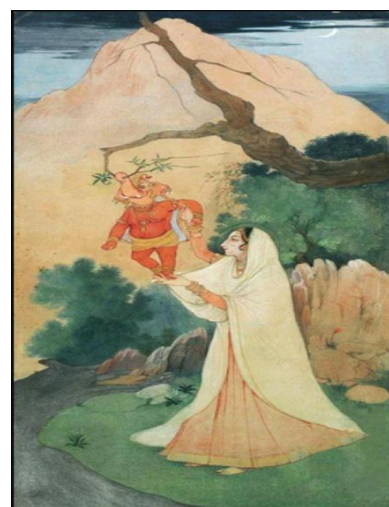


Figure 4 Ganesh Janai

Influenced by the Bengal School, Jamini Roy gave a new direction to the possibilities of art creation, drawing inspiration from this painting tradition, rural folk art, and indigenous elements. His paintings were deeply rooted in devotion and spiritualism, depicting themes of Indian tradition and folk devotion, including religious and mythological portrayals of Ramayana, Krishnalila, Gopis, and Mahishasuramardini. If Jamini Roy had not existed, indigenous elements would not have been present in art, nor would artists have turned to local folk art traditions for self-expression. It was the influence of Jamini Roy's art that enabled art to emerge from villages and towns and gain recognition on the international stage.



Figure 5 Gopini

Nandalal Bose, who enriched the Indian art world with his immense talent, deeply studied Indian art traditions. Alongside depicting life's emotions, Nandalal Bose also strived to express mythological narratives. He stated that "the study of modern art is essential, but one should not forget one's own tradition." Many of his paintings are based on mythological tales, Indian festivals, and daily life centered on spirituality. Important works include Shiva drinking world poison, Ganga Avataran,

Parthasarathi, Saraswati, and Natipuja. He drew inspiration from the Ajanta cave painting tradition, incorporating the rhythm of its lines, the serenity of its postures, and its spiritual movements into his own style. He also created paintings related to Ramayana, Mahabharata, Buddhist and Jain religions, Upanishads, and the Gita. His paintings were not limited to merely religious subjects but extended to nature, culture, nation, and the philosophy of life. His art beautifully blends the roots of Indian tradition with a universal spiritual perspective suited for modern society.

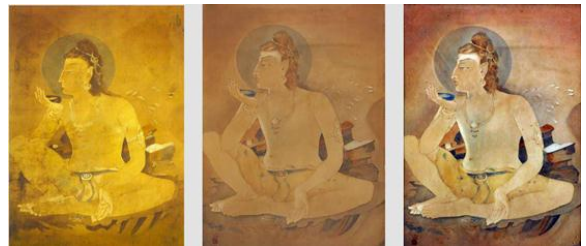


Figure 6 Shiva Drinking World Poison

Amrita Shergill incorporated a deep spiritual sensibility into her art. Her spirituality was not explicitly religious or mythological, but rather rooted in existentialist, Marxist, and Indian cultural philosophies. Her works, such as "Brides Toilet," "Group of Three Girls," and "Village Scene," deeply honored poverty and suffering, reflecting a spiritual humanism. In many of her paintings, women are central. These figures, often lost in thought and silence, bound by social roles but rich in inner life, frequently transcend individuality. They point towards the Shakti principle – the woman as a symbol of patience, fertility, and spiritual power. Unlike the common sensuality in European modernism, her female figures display inwardness, mystery, and a quiet strength. The often silent figures in her works recall Indian spiritual traditions that emphasize self-realization.



Figure 7 Bride's Toilet

In modern Indian and contemporary art, many artists have worked in their own unique styles and strongly emphasized the influence of spirituality in their depictions. Hussain presented the mythological tales of Ramayana and Mahabharata in a modern form, depicting Shiva, Durga, Hanuman, Krishna, and Ganesha in new and unique ways. The horse paintings by Hussain are symbols of spiritual energy. They are not just animals but symbols of life, movement, and liberation. A sense of unity and diversity is seen in Hussain's paintings. He used symbols of Hindu, Muslim, and Christian religions, which reflect the diversity of Indian culture. His depiction of Ramayana and Mahabharata is symbolic and modern, based on spiritual themes.

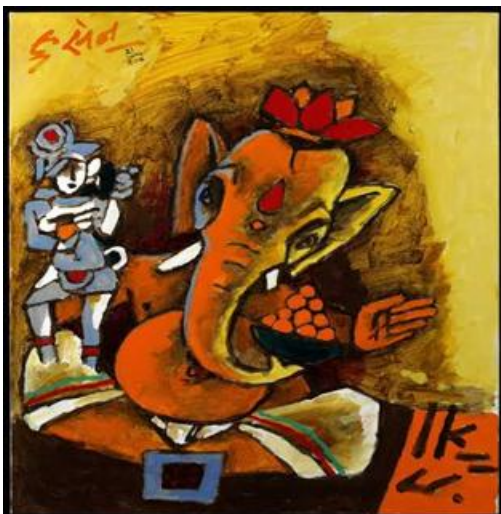


Figure 8 Lord Ganesha

Syed Haider Raza is one of the most important artists in modern Indian painting, and modernity is at the core of his artistic philosophy. His entire journey – from landscapes to the famous 'Bindu' series – can be read as a progression towards expressing the inner, spiritual essence of existence. In Indian spirituality, the Bindu represents the source of cosmic creation and the union of the microcosm. For Raza, the Bindu was not a geometric point but a spiritual center, a point of meditation and energy. Raza's palette included the symbolic use of Indian colors. In which red color symbolizes fertility and power, blue color symbolizes infinity and depth, yellow and orange colors symbolize spiritual glow. These colors were not merely decorative but were intended to evoke an emotional and spiritual essence in the viewers, as is the case in Indian classical art.



Figure 9 Bindu

In contemporary painting, artists have not limited spirituality to mere religious symbols, but have depicted it through new experiments in form, color, and composition. Contemporary artists have not only created visual art but have also expressed questions related to soul, consciousness, and existence through art. Painting has also been used as a medium for the

process of meditation, silence, and emptiness. In contemporary art, it is presented as universal energy, nature, and internal experiences. For example, artists express spiritual experiences through geometric forms, light, and abstract use of colors. Many artists try to evoke the experience of meditation or samadhi by using deep, light, and transparent colors. In contemporary painting, the influence of spirituality is not limited to just religious symbols. Rather, it emerges as a search for human consciousness and peace. It has transformed art from being merely a source of visual pleasure into an experience and a form of spiritual practice.

Philosophical and Religious Influence

The influence of philosophy and religion on Indian modern painting is both profound and multidimensional. Unlike Western modernism, which often drew upon secular ideas and psychological explorations, Indian modern painters consistently turned to spiritual traditions for inspiration. The cultural memory of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sufism—combined with the philosophical depth of Vedanta and other schools of thought—shaped not only the subject matter of modern painting but also its forms, colors, and symbols. One of the strongest philosophical influences on Indian modern painting comes from Vedanta, which emphasizes the unity of the individual soul (Atman) with the universal soul (Brahman). This concept found expression in abstraction and symbolism. S.H. Raza's celebrated Bindu series, for example, emerged from his meditative engagement with Vedantic philosophy. The Bindu—a single cosmic point—was not just a visual element but a spiritual metaphor for creation, dissolution, and transcendence. Through abstraction, Raza gave

form to an eternal philosophical truth, demonstrating how Indian modernism absorbed metaphysical ideas into contemporary aesthetics. Similarly, the Bhakti movement, which emphasized personal devotion and emotional surrender to the divine, greatly influenced artists like Jamini Roy. By adopting folk styles and devotional themes, Roy's paintings of Krishna, Radha, and village deities reflected the simplicity and spiritual intimacy of Bhakti traditions. His rejection of Western academic realism in favor of bold lines, earthy colors, and folk symbolism was not merely an aesthetic choice but a philosophical one: an assertion that art must return to its devotional and communal roots.

Hindu mythology remained a rich source of inspiration for many modern painters. Raja Ravi Varma's depictions of Lakshmi, Saraswati, and episodes from the Ramayana and Mahabharata combined European realism with Indian spirituality, making religious philosophy accessible to the common people. M.F. Husain, on the other hand, reinterpreted these myths through modernist techniques—fragmented forms, dynamic compositions, and symbolic imagery—transforming mythology into a universal language of human emotion and metaphysical reflection.

Beyond Hinduism, Buddhist philosophy also influenced Indian modern painting. The focus on inner experience, meditation, and detachment can be seen in the calm, minimalistic, and meditative qualities of certain modern works. Abstract painters in particular found resonance in Buddhist ideas of impermanence and emptiness, which they expressed through silence, space, and form. Sufism and Islamic mysticism added yet another dimension to modern Indian painting. The Sufi philosophy of love, divine union, and

transcendence of the ego influenced artists who sought to represent the formless divine through abstract and symbolic expressions. For instance, calligraphic elements and mystical symbols sometimes found their way into modern compositions, reflecting a spiritual search beyond boundaries of religion.

Conclusion

Modern Indian artists, while adopting Western techniques, kept the Indian spiritual tradition at the center, embracing both modern perspectives and Western techniques. Thus, their art contains neither mere traditional religiosity nor purely material modernity, but a balanced synthesis of both. The artists like Amrita Shergill, Nandalal Bose, Rabindranath Tagore, Raza, Gaganendranath Tagore, and others used painting not merely for external realistic depiction but as a medium for the exploration of the soul and consciousness. Raza's 'Bindu,' Nandalal Bose's Ramayana-based paintings, and Tagore's mysterious sketches are examples of how deep spiritual feelings were expressed through spiritual symbols in modern painting.

This saved Indian art from becoming a mere Western imitation, giving modern Indian art a distinct spiritual identity. Spirituality is a fundamental element present in modern Indian painting. It inspired artists to rise above mere visual reality and express the invisible, eternal, and universal truth. This is why modern Indian art is considered distinct and profound on a global level.

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