

DEFINING SYMBOLISM IN THE YANTRA-S AND INDIAN CLASSICAL DANCE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

Arts in general are the representations of a particular culture representing a country. It applies to Indian arts as well. Indian arts represent Indian culture in the most vivid manner, wherein one finds religious ideologies are dominant. Symbolism reaches its peak when it comes to Indian arts. Indian art beheads towards two goals *rasa* and *mokṣa*. *Rasa* is to relish art and *mokṣa* is salvation. All the Indian arts not only entertain *rasika*-s but also to educate the masses.

Symbolism beautifies this teaching in the particular art form. It also generalizes the message for everyone in common. The representation of religious ideologies especially in Hinduism, is portrayed through various deities and the ritualistic practices associated with it.

The most significant practice in Hinduism is the portrayal of the deity in a symbolic manner. For eg. *Durgā* is a feminine deity in the most ferocious manner while fighting with demon *Mahiṣa* but she is a motherly figure as *Ambā*. *Śiva* is represented through *Liṅga* and *Viṣṇu* through *Śāligrām*. (*Śivaliṅga*, *Aṣṭabhujā Devi* and *Śāligrām of Viṣṇu*). Similarly one branch of Hinduism believes in the representation of benevolent energy through a particular geometric diagram known as *yantra*.

These *yantra*-s are the geometric patterns combining dots, lines, circles, etc representing a particular deity. These dots, lines, circles, and other related geometric patterns symbolize a particular element of the deity.

The present researcher being the student of classical dance especially *Bharata Nāṭyam*, finds similarities between the forms of *yantra* and kinetics of *Bharata Nāṭyam*. Hence, this particular study aims to define the relation with an Indian classical dance and *yantra*-s in terms of symbolism. Since Indian classical dances have a religious background, this particular study aims to define the relation between Indian classical dances with *yantra*-s in terms of the symbolism.

Keywords: Indian Culture, Symbolism, Yantras, Indian Classical Dance, Geometry

INTRODUCTION

The word **symbolism** is defined on the Oxford Languages Dictionary website as,

"An **artistic** and **poetic** movement or style using **symbolic images** and **indirect suggestion** to **express mystical ideas, emotions, and states of mind.**"

(Oxford Dictionary of Phrase and Fable)

In the light of the above mentioned definition, the present research tries to study and compare the symbolism in *yantra*-s and Indian classical dances.

The essence of Indian arts are a reflection of the country's culture and the depth of symbolism embedded within these arts.

Indian culture aims to represent four essential goals to be achieved by people in their lifetime. They are *Dharma*, *Artha*, *Kāma* and *Mokṣa*. These four pursuits are not mutually exclusive; they are interconnected and are considered essential for a well-rounded and fulfilling life. They provide a framework for individuals to lead a balanced life by fulfilling their obligations, pursuing material wealth and desires within ethical boundaries, and ultimately seeking spiritual liberation.

Spiritual liberation is the ultimate goal of life and represents the release from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth (*samsāra*). It signifies freedom from the limitations of the material world and the realization of one's true nature or connection with the divine.

Indian philosophy depicts this divinity in a variety of forms of Gods and Goddesses. It divides these Gods and Goddesses as per three tattvas - *Sāttvika*, *Rājasika* and *Tāmasika*. These Gods are worshiped considering the motif of expected achievements. For example, before beginning an auspicious ceremony Lord *Gaṇeśa* needs to be worshiped, since it's believed that he is the remover of an obstacle. To complete a tedious but important task one needs to worship Lord *Hanumāna*.

These deities are the representations of the energy of the devotee himself but in the dormant state. The worship activates these dormant energies in the devotee.

In short, these worships are the tools to open particular energy channels in the devotee and to make him/her realize that he/she is not restricted to the materialistic body but is connected to the cosmic energy.

These *śāstra*-s or sciences were being taught secretly in ancient India since there are only a handful of people who believe in such a consciousness while doing worship. The number of people who turn this worship into a serious *sādhana* are even less.

This is the reason why this sacred knowledge was being imparted through *Guru-Śiṣya paramparā* secretly in India avoiding the outflow of the knowledge to the people who are not eligible for the same. This is clearly evidenced through a verse in *Gaṇapati Śloka* which says,

“*Idam atharvaśirṣa aśiṣyāya na deyate*”.

(“Ganapati Atharvashirsha - Sanskrit Wisdom”)

Here one also needs to understand that the learning was never denied to anyone but of course the systematic training was compelled to understand the intricacies of the sacred knowledge.

To fulfill the above criterion the sacred knowledge was being locked in ancient India through the medium of symbolism. There comes Tantrism to play its role in India which not only locks the knowledge into secret shapes and *bija mantra*-s but also it enhances the level of concentration in devotees resulting in the regularity of its ritualistic routine by offering a concrete medium to contemplate.

Since Indian arts, especially Indian classical dances, are based on these religious philosophies of India, symbolism plays a pivotal role here. The designing of these dance styles reflect a closeness with the rituals of the temple. The attire and the make-up of the dancer takes her/him into the spiritual realm altogether while performing on the stage even in the modern era. The designing of the movements to be used in these dances are created in such a way that they tune the devotee to the higher reality even though it's momentary. The content of these dances also portray higher reality.

Thus, the present researcher intends to study the symbolism in *yantra* in context with Indian classical dance especially, *Bharata Nāṭyam* in order to find out the relation of these religious philosophies while designing the structure of Indian classical dance, especially *Bharata Nāṭyam*.

When a layman visualizes *Bharata Nāṭyam*, the first thing which comes to mind is the elegant costume of *Bharata Nāṭyam* which is symbolic in nature.

“According to this yogic model, the physical human body has a subtle body of energy centers and conduits that correspond to, though do not directly connect with, the nervous system in the physical plane. Within this subtle body exist a central current known as the *Suṣumnā* (axial channel). On either side of this central channel run additional channels. The *Iḍā* is believed to carry feminine, lunar forces on the left side of the body. The *Pingalā* is believed to carry the masculine, solar forces on the right side of the body. The *Iḍā* and the *Pingalā* intertwine in helical fashion and form *cakra*-s (energy centers) as they cross one-another at the *Suṣumnā*.”

(Stark)

Moving on to the practical aspects of *Bharata Nāṭyam* following references highlights symbolism in various dances as,

“In *Silappadhikāram*, eleven dances are referred to which were danced by divinities like *Śiva*, *Tirumāḷ* (*Viṣṇu*), *Murugaṅ*, *Kāma*, *Kali*, *Tirumaḡaḷ* (*Lakṣmī*) and *Indrāṇi*. They depict the destruction of various demons and symbolize the triumph of good over evil. This is evidence enough that the dance was a divine art whose theme was the destruction of evil and the purification of the spirit.”

THE CONCEPT OF YANTRA -

"Yantra was defined as any instrument for holding or fastening in the *Rig Vedic* period. The expression 'yantra' is derived from the root 'yam' or alternatively from the form 'yantrati', the meaning in both cases being 'to restrain', or 'to compel'. Yantra is a term that has been expanded to refer to religious enterprises and has a special theological significance. Mystic and abstract geometric yantras are the chief instruments of meditative discipline and increasing awareness. Yantra in the present context is used in the sense of a 'mystic energy diagram'. It is a simple composition of lines, triangles, squares, circles, lotus petals, the trident and the central dot or seed syllable. Yantra is a diagram made of lines, which is often geometric in form. The intersection of many lines and the overlapping of these geometric forms create an energy field of its own in every different combination. Such a space created draws the cosmic energy from its centre and keeps charged the space it encloses. The yantra is considered as the diagrammatic form of a deity and is used in ritual worship almost at par with the icons of the deities. Each deity is represented with a specific yantra with precise rules and methodology for drawing, consecrating and worshipping them. The artist who draws these ritual energy diagrams is called as the 'Śilpi yogin' who is initiated into the mantra and the techniques of drawing them. The yantras are categorised into four types which are *Devatā yantra* – symbolic of the deities worshipped in rituals, *Dhyāna yantra* – the yantra-s used for contemplation and the yantra-s that are awakened in the subtle body, *Rakṣā yantra*- are the yantra-s used for protection and *Vāstu yantra* – are the ground plans of sacred architecture."

The above mentioned quotation clearly points that these yantras made up of different geometric shapes which were used to create energy fields of it's own kind.

a) Shapes - In the light of the above mentioned fact that yantra-s are geometric representations of a particular deity, an example of *Śri Cakra* in context to the below mentioned quotation enhances a deep understanding of this concept properly which also enhances the importance of number of geometric shapes involved in the yantra-s.

"In the physical Part of *Śri Cakra*, There are a total of nine Triangles. 4 Triangles showing the upward direction and these are called as *Puruṣa* (Male) *Yoni* (*Yoni* also means Body), and 5 Triangles showing the downward direction and these are called as *Stree* (Female) *Yoni*. This Phenomenon says *Srṣṭi* (Emergence) is a combination of *Stree* and *Puruṣa*. *Stree* and *Puruṣa* are two distinct types (dual) which means for the creation of anything Unification of duality is required. This is called Unity in Diversity (or) Unity in Duality, which is the basic format of Vedic Philosophy."

Apart from triangles, there are dots, lines with two dots, squares, circles, lotus etc. All of the above mentioned geometric shapes play an important role and symbolize important respective aspects of divinity.

1. "The triangle on it's apex represents water, the female, the moon, the *yoni*, the Divine Mother and the origin of all. It is the dynamic element of this form, energy and therefore, the feminine.
2. *Trikoṇa*, right facing represents dynamic male element
3. *Trikoṇa*, left facing, represents the dynamic female element.
4. The lotus represents the divine manifestation and expression."

"Frequently, *Hindu yantra*-s appear as a square, or bounded within a square. The square, a form sacred to the *Hindu*-s, represents the earth, the corporeal world. A Square within a square represents heaven, the spiritual world. However, there are other forms in which yantras appear from time to time. Often triangles are employed. They too have a divine significance--the divine, that which is unattainable but fervently sought. The center, sometimes represented by a dot or a small circle (Indic: *bindu*) which exemplifies the deity, eternity, the ever-past, ever-present, ever-future and is the power locus:of the yantra. Additionally, it is believed that it is from the *bindu* that the triangles, squares and rectangles so necessary for the *yantra* are formed.

b) Numbers Involved In Geometric Shapes Of Yantra-s:- The above mentioned shapes also represent numbers. These numbers are equally important in the *Yantra* of particular deities.

"The eight petals are thrones of eight goddesses who rule over *vachan* (speech), *ādāna* (transference), *gamana* (departure), *visarjana* (transcendence), *ānanda* (bliss), *bana* (absence), *upādāna* (giving) and *upekṣā* (neglecting)."

c) **Energy created by these Yantras with examples:-** Various geometric patterns of specific numbers along with their specific *bija* mantras are responsible to create particular energies pertaining to that particular deity which is unique of its own kind. For eg. the *Śrī yantra* is considered to harness energies related to wealth, abundance, prosperity, and harmony. It symbolizes the interconnection of the cosmos and is believed to bring material and spiritual wealth to those who meditate upon it. The concentric circles, triangles, and lotus petals in the *Śrī yantra* are thought to create a field of positive energy conducive to attracting wealth and abundance. On the other hand, the *Śiva yantra* represents the cosmic energy of Lord *Shiva*, the destroyer and transformer in the *Hindu* trinity. It is associated with qualities like strength, protection, and spiritual evolution. Meditating on the *Śiva yantra* is believed to channel the energies of *Śiva*, promoting inner strength, courage, and transformation. This *yantra* is often used for seeking protection and for spiritual growth. Both *yantra*-s serve as powerful tools for meditation and spiritual alignment, but their energies are directed toward different aspects of life. The *Śrī yantra* focuses on prosperity and abundance, while the *Śiva yantra* emphasizes strength, transformation, and spiritual evolution. Ultimately, the choice between these *yantras* may depend on the specific energies one seeks to cultivate in their life.

HUMAN ANATOMY AS ŚARĪR YANTRA:-

“There are seven types of *yantra*-s: 1) *Śarīr yantras*--applied to the six *Cakra*-s--2) *Dhārṇā yantras*--which are worn on various parts of the body for specific purposes--3) *Āsana yantras*--which are kept under the *āsana* during *sādhanā*--4) *Māla yantra*--in which the devotees assume the form of a *yantra*--5) *Pūjā yantra*--which are ascribed to different deities--6) *Chatar yantra*--they are kept on the person, usually, under a hat or turban, wrapped in a piece of cloth--and 7) *Darśana yantra*--refers to *yantra*-s that are installed in a sanctified place which brings benefit when viewed by a devotee.”

Human anatomy is made up of the skeletal system, muscular system and nervous system. All the systems work together for an efficient working of the human body.

Material parts are driven by the energy lying in them. Thus this energy plays a vital role in the human body. The body is thus considered as a *yantra* which channelize this energy in an upward direction after following a systematic method of contemplation in order to achieve ultimate bliss.

This *Śarīr yantra* focuses on 6 *Cakra*-s (energy points). To activate these *Cakra*-s some physical movements are essential in context with a proper geometric alignment.

THE FLOW OF THE ENERGY IN THE HUMAN BODY AFTER UNDERGOING SOME RITUALS -

In India we have *Śodaopacāra*-s which were followed in *Hindu* rituals. One of them is *Pradakṣiṇā* (circumambulation of the deity / altar). This has an utmost importance in itself. The below statement indicates the importance of movement in the process of self-realization.

“When practising *Pradakṣiṇā*, the devotee's mind is cleaned, positive energy is absorbed, and the celestial aura that surrounds the Deity is absorbed.”

The flow of the energy in the human body in general situation and after the performance of Indian classical dance

Motion is commonly defined as physical movement or change in position. However, observing a dancer in motion transcends mere physical shifts. It's a dynamic visual art comprising fleeting yet powerful images crafted through strength, balance, and grace.

The beauty of this art defies scientific dissection as its aesthetics are paramount. Nonetheless, understanding fundamental movement principles can facilitate safe and efficient bodily motion. This is the reason why dance has evolved as one of the sciences in India. There was always an appropriate system to follow to perform dance.

While observing this particular study in this particular context, it was observed how this relation can be formed between *yantra*-s and Indian classical dance.

The alignment of mind and body happens while performing Indian classical dance just as it happens while worshipping *yantra*-s as the representation of particular deities. Since the present researcher is a *Bharata Nāṭyam* learner, the examples from *Bharata Nāṭyam* repertoire will be more appropriate.

The *mārgam* as designed by renowned *Tanjore* Quartettes named *Śrī Cinneyyā*, *Śrī Ponneyyā*, *Śrī Shivānandan* and *Śrī Vadivelu Pillai* begins with *Alaripu* which has subtle movements of eyes, neck and shoulders in 1st, 2nd and 3rd speeds turning into more complex movements at the end. This makes the body of the dancer ready to perform more complex dance pieces further. The *Jatiswaram* and *Tillānā* exerts the body with its *nṛtta* which creates a sense of bliss in the mind of the dancer. And slow but steady progression of the *abhinaya* in *Padam* allows the dancer to bring out the essence of his/her *Sātvika abhinaya* into motion resulting in momentary but pure bliss.

CONCLUSION -

The Relation of Yantras With Indian Classical Dance -

Above observations reveal the connection between yantra and Indian classical dance, the present researcher comes to a conclusion that there is a uniformity in the symbolization of *yantra*-s and Indian classical dance in terms of shapes, lines and energy execution. The power of these *yantra*-s are echoed by respective mantras pertaining to particular deities.

The relationship of Yantra-s with Bharata Nāṭyam:-

Specifically in the context of *Bharata Nāṭyam*, the dance choreography imbibes certain geometric shapes using the human body parting into two halves, the upper half and the lower half moving symmetrically.

When it comes to *nṛtya*, just as yantra having symbolism in terms of *bindu*, lines, *trikoṇa*, etc., *Bharata Nāṭyam* also executes human emotions through juxtapositioning of the human body.

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