

SPEAKING WITHOUT WORDS: GLANCES OF GODS AND DEITIES IN ART

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ABSTRACT

The five senses not only provide the data for processing but act as boundaries too. There may be the other dimensions to life which could not be sieved through the mesh of these five senses. This data is oriented towards mere survival of human beings and to gear oneself beyond mere survival requires transcendence from physical boundaries. The sense of “eye” creates the sense of “I” and according to Eastern spiritual philosophy that “I” has to be conquered and then dissolve with the sense of the universe. Artists around the world were aware of this ability of deities and beautifully translated this abstract power by showing eyes of deities different from human beings.

KEYWORDS

Gods, Deities, Art, Eye.

INTRODUCTION

In the ancient Indian scriptures, be it Hindu, Jaina or Buddhist, a human being is designated as a “Panchendria Jeevatma”, the one possessing five senses. Sense is a physical capability of living beings (“living” or the “beings”) facilitating perception of an external stimulus which, in turn, provides data for perception. Traditionally there are five well recognised senses including Sight (ophthalmoception), hearing (audioception), taste (gustaoception), smell (olfacoception or olfactoception), and touch (tactioception).

Among these five senses, the sense of sight is considered supreme. The input provided by the other four senses is only sub optimally processed by the brain, unless the seal of confirmation is applied, on the information, by the sense of sight. Inputs from sight fill in the details (as perceived by other senses) and provide sharpness and precision to the information. If the nose discerns a pleasant smell emanating from a plant, the sight of a beautiful rose not only confirms the information but magnifies the pleasure manifold, by supplementing it with visual data. Vision is also important for providing the three dimensional solidity to the world. The ability to detect other stimulus beyond those governed by these most broadly recognized five senses also exist; however, what could be defined as a sense is debatable.



EYES AS A TOOL OF COMMUNICATION

Besides being an instrument of vision, eyes also indulge in communication. Not only do they collect the information of the physical world but also give away the

secret of the self in exchange. In the process of perception, they surrender a part of the self to the object of their study. This wonder of communicating without words has compelled generation of poets and artists to eulogies the interactive prowess of glances.

SPIRITUAL MEANING

In the field of spirituality, sight refers to a supernatural experience that conveys a revelation. Eyes of god convey his omniscience as his sight is beyond the limits of time or place; he has the capability to see everything. The vision extends beyond seeing mere physical presence and includes knowledge of the inner thoughts and motives of all beings. God's eye carries the expression of his unfailing love for his children and conveys care and redemption. Eyes are considered windows to the soul and hence the symbolic meaning of eyes is spiritual in nature.

RELEVANCE OF SYMBOLS

Heinrich Zimmer gives a concise overview of the nature, and perennial relevance, of symbols.

"Concepts and words are symbols, just as visions, rituals, and images are; so too are the manners and customs of daily life. Through all of these a transcendent reality is mirrored. They are so many metaphors reflecting and implying something which, though thus variously expressed, is ineffable, though thus rendered multiform, remains inscrutable. Symbols hold the mind to truth but are not themselves the truth; hence it is delusory to borrow them. Each civilisation, every age, must bring forth its own."

CULTURAL VIABILITY OF EYES AS SYMBOLS

"Signs and Symbols", a book, states that a symbol is a visual image or sign representing an idea, a deeper indicator of a universal truth. From ancient to modern period, various religions and cultures use symbols to code and express specific ideologies and social structures and to represent aspects important to their tradition and culture.

There are certain abstract phenomena which can't be expressed on paper, wood, stone or any other tangible medium, so they are represented symbolically. If a god is to be shown as a possessor of endless patience for his devotees, who have the willingness to listen to their unlimited woes, how could an artist show such an abstract attribute, so he tries to convey this idea by showing large ears of the icons. Symbolic meaning of eyes could similarly be read in various ways. It could indicate focus and clarity, omniscience and vision, presence and observation, intelligence and perception, opening and awareness. The symbolic meaning of eyes also carries a message of clairvoyance or a vision of the future. This translates well with ancient alchemists and astrologers who spoke of eyes of the sky that foretold certain events, as they charted the stars in certain patterns to ascertain various outcomes. Thus, even the symbol of eye carries meanings that depend upon one's cultural background. In other words, the meaning of eye

as a symbol is not inherent in the way the eyes are depicted but it depends on how the culture codes and decodes it.

DIFFERENCE IN CULTURAL ORIENTATION

Oriental and occidental cultures have a very different concept of life and arts. European cultures are ethnocentric and consider humans to be the nucleus of the universe. They emphasize on the depiction of a perfect and ideal body, and as the man depicted god in his own image, we find the idols of gods and deities to be infused with the same kind of perfection. Asian cultures are Cosmo centric. Here, the nature is deemed supreme as it runs the world and the man is considered subordinate to nature. Hence, in the Asian cultures, we see the infusion of characteristic features of nature into the bodies of the idols to emphasize their status as supreme beings.

Swami Vivekananda, the great 19th century Indian mystic, once asked his guru, Sri Ramakrishna, if his revered goddess kali ever explained the visible world to him in their conversations. Ramakrishna mentioned that she explained the same by showing him a big reservoir of water covered with green scum. The blowing wind would move the scum to one side and expose the twinkling water underneath, but as the impact of wind would be over, the scum would swim back and cover the water again. He explained that the scum was like the surface of the visible world, the Maya, the appearance that keeps covering the deep consciousness, the Sachidananda. Without the guidance of a guru or divine intervention which moves the scum, no one can have the vision of the eternal bliss. The artists, while creating the icons of gods and goddesses, attempt to create the same expression of Sachidananda.

Looking someone in the eye is a western custom of honesty. Here, avoiding direct visual contact through means of helmets, sunglasses, etc. can imply not seeing the complete truth, or treachery. However, in other cultural contexts (e.g. Asian and Middle Eastern), the covering or lowering of the eyes can convey respect, modesty and submission (many Middle Eastern and Indian women wear veils for this purpose). In these cultures, the eye contact often means judgment, arrogance and authority.

The capability of sight is not only applicable in conscious state. A vision can be seen in subconscious state and in dreams. In dreams, the eyes portray an opening into a new dimension. This is symbolic of vision clearing, a focus on a new direction and may also represent one's ability to see past the common. It can indicate a spiritual arrival where ones inner vision perceives all things in their divine glory and even the simplest of things become imbued with an exquisite quality inherent in all of the nature.

Many ancient esoteric, as well as, earth-centric philosophies consider the eye to be a pathway or gateway into a different plane. The eye is not considered a mere physical symbol but an ethereal one in which consciousness may enter into a

gateway of infinite expanse, where there is no past, no present or future and sense of time does not exist. This journey is travelled through the obscure pathway of being-ness (black part of the pupil representing the same). Once the glass ceiling is broken, one is said to obtain higher knowledge, a glimpse of great revelation, sometimes analogous to enlightenment.

Upanishads, the philosophical text of India composed in the 8th/ 9th century B.C., have profoundly impacted all later Indian religious thoughts. They extrapolate the relationship between the individual soul and the divine creator and the essential unity of the whole creation. In the Upanishads, the visible world is seen as transient an illusion or maya. It is the desires and attachments that keep one anchored to ephemeral surface of the world and one has to dive deeper and look beyond the superficial to the eternal and stable one.

The philosophy of aesthetics, which developed to great heights in India and particularly it was in Kashmir under thinkers such as Abhinav Gupta, that the philosophy of aesthetics developed to its pinnacle and was closely linked to these teachings in the Upanishads. Analogues to the Western philosophy of “a thing of beauty is a joy forever”, Eastern philosophy also talks about Brahmananda or eternal experienced on seeing something truly beautiful, in nature or in art. It was believed that the moment of the experience of beauty was one in which the veils of illusion are lifted and one is able to see one's own intrinsic unity with the whole of creation. Thus, art played a very important role in Indian religious life.

For the ease of understanding, we would consider the depiction of eyes into three broad categories

The Third Eye (as an esoteric concept)

- Shiva: Hinduism
- Urna: Buddhism
- Erlang Shen: Chinese culture
- Symbol of Atun: Egyptian civilization
- Zia: Ancient Mississippi culture
- Theory of Chakra: Yogic philosophy
- Pineal body: Scientific philosophy

All Seeing Alert Eyes (fully open eyes)

- Goddess Meenakshi: Indian mythology
- Eye of Horus: Egyptian symbol
- Eye suspended in space: Jain miniatures
- Hamsa: Middle eastern eye symbol
- Hand of Miriam : Jewish communities

- Hand of Fatima: Muslim communities
- Ahimsa: Jain Emblem of Dharma
- Wide Open Eyes : Tel Asmer Mesopotamia
- Nazar: Mediterranean cultures

Inward Looking Contemplating Eyes (half open eyes)

- Contemplating Buddha
- Jain Tirthankara
- Guru Nanak

THE THIRD EYE

In certain South Asian dharmic traditions, Gods and deities are depicted with a third eye. The third eye is a mystical concept that indicates an invisible eye capable of perception beyond the capacity of ordinary sight. It is a portal that leads to hidden realm and inner spaces of higher consciousness. In one of the oldest religion of the world, Hinduism, many gods and goddesses are shown with a third eye vertically placed in the middle of the forehead. Lord Shiva, who is the adi yogi, is shown with a third eye. Asia has dialectical culture where everything is not supposed to be understood literally and logically. Every attribute that the gods have, carries symbolic meaning rather than a literal one. It was wisdom of great sages and mystics to code the meanings into symbols in order to avoid the possibility of distortion due to the limitations of language. Symbolism is an apparatus in the hands of humanity to communicate ideas which are best portrayed in a concise form. As the well-known saying goes, a picture tells a thousand words. In everyday life symbols are used to show important information at a glance. Symbolism is also especially used as a tool for communicating the non-physical, spiritual ideas, phenomena, and processes.

SHIVA: HINDUISM

Lord Shiva (or Shiva), the destroyer and the restorer, with his five forms (including Sadyojaat, Vaamdeva, Tatpurusha, Aghora and Ishana) is one of the most complex Hindu gods. The various symbols surrounding him portray his various qualities and powers. The Lord is also known as "Tryambaka Deva", as he is often depicted with three eyes. The third eye is considered to be the eye of spiritual wisdom and knowledge. It is believed that he uses the third eye to see beyond the superficial and shield the good from the evil. The opening of third eye is believed to vanish the evil and the ignorance. In addition, Hindus believe that the physical world will be destroyed if Shiva opens his third eye in anger.



The third eye is not a physical attribute but a concept. When the energies reach a peak within a being, it achieves a new kind of clarity of vision and sees life beyond the limitations of normal perception. Intellect breaks all its limitations and transcends into a higher plane of perception and understanding. Goddess Kali and Durga are also shown to have heightened perception facilitated by the third eye in line with the name “tryambikathe” or the three eyed one

URNA: BUDDHISM

In Buddhism, the third eye refers to the “Eye of Consciousness”, and asks followers to see the world beyond their physical eyes and through their mind. In yogic practices of India and East Asia, the eye of knowledge is referred to as “Gyanakakshu” and is shown as a brow chakra or brow center. It is denoted by a dot, or mark on the forehead of Buddha, in Buddhism. This attribute is ubiquitously depicted in Gandhara art, and considered to be one of the 32 mahapurusha lakshna of the enlightened one.



ERLANG SHEN: CHINESE CULTURE

Erlang Shen (“Erlang”) is a Chinese god depicted with a third truth-seeing eye in the middle of his forehead. China’s torrential floods are believed to be regulated by several semi-mythical folk heroes, the deified versions of Erlang, dating variously from the Qin, Sui and Jin dynasties. Erlang is also believed to be the second son of northern heavenly king Vaishravana according to some Buddhist literature.



The third-eye on his forehead is most popularly called “The Eye of Heaven” and is believed to have the ability to differentiate truth and lies, illusions and reality, deceptions and disguises. The concentrated energy can also act as an offensive weapon drafted through the third eye to fire continuous, highly destructive energy blasts of vast and incredible power, even powerful enough to shatter and disintegrate entire mountains

DISK OF ATUN: EGYPTIAN CULTURE

Analogous to the concept of the third eye in Hinduism, ancient Egyptian deities were also depicted with a third eye symbolizing the capacity to see inner soul which is sometimes shown as an eye of Ra and sometimes as a dot symbolizing a red disk of sun god Atun like a bindi, tilak or urna. Sun is the symbol of the



soul, and putting it between two physical eyes signifies that the bearer is able to see the soul within.

ZIA SYMBOL: ANCIENT MISSISSIPPI CULTURE

The Mississippian culture, though separated by thousands of miles, was also using the same iconography of the third eye. The dot between the eyes on the head emanates rays in four cardinal points and is called Zia, the sun symbol.



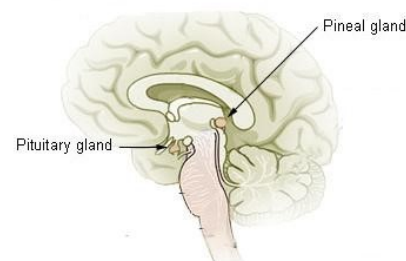
THEORY OF CHAKRA (YOGIC PHILOSOPHY)

According to Hindu tradition, Ajna (or "Ajna") or the third-eye chakra is the sixth primary chakra or energy point in the body. It signifies conscience and can be made more powerful through repetition, like a muscle. While our two eyes act like an interface between our mind and the physical world, the third eye is believed to reveal insights about the future. When something is observed by the mind's eye, or in a semi or subconscious state, it is being seen by the Ajna. It is a bridge that allows telepathic communication between two people. Mind is the sense organ and action organ associated with Ajna. Hindus believe that Ajna chakra is the portal through which spiritual energy from the environment enters their body and make efforts to protect it with spiritually protective forces. To mark the position of Ajna chakra, Hindus reverentially mark their foreheads with vermilion, sandal wood paste, holy ash etc. The occult powers to enter another body at will and to become omniscient are believed to be granted through meditation on Ajna. The seeker derives powers through the unity with Parmatama, the creator, protector and destroyer of the universe.



PINEAL BODY (SCIENTIFIC PHILOSOPHY)

The pineal body, conarium or epiphysis cerebri are the various scientific names for the third eye and it is positioned as a small endocrine gland in the vertebrate brain in the shape of a small pine cone. It produces and regulates a serotonin derived hormone called melatonin that effects the modulation of sleep patterns in both seasonal and circadian rhythms.



Though René Descartes believed the pineal gland to be the "principal seat of the soul" (a mystical concept) while his contemporaries regarded the pineal gland as a neuroanatomical structure devoid of any specific metaphysical qualities. However, the pineal gland continues to have an exalted status in the realm of pseudoscience.

ALERT/ALL SEEING EYES

The All Seeing Eye is an esoteric symbol of a higher spiritual power or God, a watchful caretaker of humanity or an awakened spiritual part within. Rig Veda, one of the oldest Sanskrit texts thought to have been written over 3,000 years ago, provides many references to what eventually became known as the All Seeing Eye. It refers to the sun and to other deities as being eyes in the heaven, eyes which reveals creation, or eyes which never close.

Let's discuss various deities with eyes fully open in constant surveillance

INDIAN GODDESSES

GODDESS MEENAKSHI: INDIAN MYTHOLOGY

Adi Shakti, the mother of the cosmos or the original source of energy, appeared as "Meenakshi" in her third incarnation. Meenakshi means the one who possesses eyes like that of a fish. Fish are supposed to sleep with their eyes vigilantly to protect their off springs. Similarly, goddess is always in a stance of eternal surveillance and looks after her devotees incessantly. Just by one look or glance, she is believed to have the power to eradicate our misery.



EYE OF HORUS: EGYPTIAN CULTURE

In ancient Egypt, the "Eye of Horus" symbolises protection, power and health. Horus was a falcon-headed sun god and the Eye of Horus was styled like an eye of a lanner falcon with its marking beneath the eye. Funerary amulets were often made in the shape of the Eye of Horus. The seven bracelets found on the mummy of Shoshenq II, made of precious and semi-precious materials, have Wadjet or Eye of Horus as their central element, intended to protect the pharaoh from evil in the afterlife. The symbol was also frequently painted on the bow of the vessel of Eastern sailors to ensure safe sea travel.



EYE SUSPENDED IN SPACE: JAIN MINIATURES

In Jain miniatures of western India Gujarat region, the god and goddesses are mostly shown in profile and three quarter profile but their eyes are shown in the front, almost hanging or protruding in space. These miniatures had a narrow format and pictures of Jain gods and goddess were painted with bright earthen colours and liberal use of gold. To emphasize the fact that God's vision is complete and he is alert even when he is not focusing on you, this kind of depiction was done by the artists.



HAMSA: MIDDLE EASTERN EYE SYMBOL

In the Middle East, the all-seeing eye, called Hamsa, Khamsa or Hamesh, is shown in the form of a hand-eye symbol. It is the symbol of protection depicted by an eye in the palm of the right hand. It is believed to protect against the evil eye and danger in general and hence acts as a good luck charm.



HAND OF MIRIAM: JEWISH EYE SYMBOL

The "Hamsa Hand", with hamsa as the Hebrew word for five and hand symbolising the hand of Miriam, is believed to represent the five books of the Torah, also known as "The Five Books of Moses" consists of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Genesis narrates the story of world's creation and ends with Moses dying in the land of Moab in Deuteronomy. Miriam, the sister of Moses who led the Israelites out of Egypt and Aron who became the first high Priest, played a key role in the story of Moses and was well respected.

HAND OF FATIMA: MUSLIM EYE SYMBOL

In the Arabic and Berber tradition, the hand, the eye, and the number five figure relate to warding off the evil eye. The Hamsa, in Arabic tradition, is known as the Hand of Fatima and the five fingers are associated with five pillars of Islam. The hand is named Fatima Zahra, daughter of the Prophet Muhammad. It is believed that it signifies Fatima's struggles and the difficulties she faced to protect her dignity. For centuries, Fatima's Hand is known as a popular amulet in the world of Islam for protection and is considered a powerful talisman for good luck. The house protected by the Hand of Fatima is believed to not catch fire and is hung on the walls as engravings forged in precious metals and painted in red.

AHIMSA: JAIN EMBLEM OF DHARMA

In Jainism, the hand with a wheel inside the centre of the palm symbolises "Ahimsa". The wheel also greatly resembles the pupil inside the eye, in a way signifying the progression or enhancement of vision. The word in the middle, Ahimsa, denotes that no living or non-living being should be hurt while treading the path of Dharma. The wheel also represents the dharma chakra which stands for the resolve to halt the samsara through relentless pursuit of Ahimsa.



WIDE OPEN EYES: TEL ASMAR MESOPOTAMIA

In Mesopotamia (ancient Iraq), during the early Dynastic period (ca. 2900-2350 B.C.), the gods who were worshipped were believed to live in specially constructed temples. The marble sculptures from Tell Asmar, represented by tall, bearded figures with long skirts and large eyes are world famous. The tallest figure is about 30 inches in height and represents the god of vegetation while the next tallest represents mother goddess. Mother goddesses were common in many ancient cultures and were worshipped for bringing fertility to women and crops. The eyes of these sculptures are the most active part of the otherwise schematic face. They are wide open in an effort of communicate in the absence of voice. Open eye, in this culture, also meant that the image is alive and is infused with vital life force.



NAZAR: MEDITERRANEAN CULTURES

Analogous to Hamsa, the symbol of Nazar is prevalent in most of the Middle Eastern and Mediterranean cultures. Nazar is an eye shaped amulet believed to protect against the evil eye. The word "Nazar", derived from the Arabic for sight or seeing, is believed to deflect the bad energies of the malicious sight oriented towards the bearer.



INWARD LOOKING CONTEMPLATIVE EYE: LION MEDITATION

The Lions Meditation is the art of meditating with the eyes half open and half closed. This symbolizes the focus on both the physical plane and subconscious plane even while going deep within. It symbolises ones conquest on both the physical world, the world of disturbance and distractions, and the subconscious world, the world of sleep. Since the eyes are partly open, they will not fall asleep and are challenging the world of the subconscious while maintaining the mastery over the physical plane.

BUDDHA AND BODHISATTVAS: AJANTA

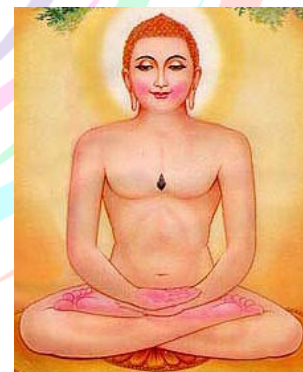
Indian thinkers and artists constantly turned their eyes inward, with the belief that the world around us is an illusion and soul is not separate entity but a part of the universal spirit. This inward vision and a sense of great peace and tranquillity are the hallmarks of the greatest art that India has produced. It is these qualities that are expressed finely in the exquisite art made during 4th to 6th century A. D. under the patronage of the politically mighty and art connoisseurs the Guptas and the Vakatakas. Northern plains provides us with sculptural gems that are capable of projecting us to rare heights of aesthetic expression. The gaze of these sculptures is riveted to the tip of the nose and there is a calm sense of sublime harmony. In paintings, it is the murals of the caves of Ajanta that introduce us to aesthetic sensibilities and bring to us this great vision in the art of India.



With the belief that the world around us is an illusion and that the soul is a part of the universal spirit, Indian thinkers and artists constantly turned their eyes inward. This inward vision and a sense of great peace and tranquillity are the hallmarks of the greatest art that India has produced. It is these qualities that are expressed finely in the exquisite art of the Guptas and the Vakatakas created from the 4th to the 6th century A.D. There are sculptural pieces from the northern plains of India, which take us to rare heights of aesthetic expression. The gaze of these figures is riveted to the tip of the nose and there is a sense of sublime harmony. In paintings, it is the murals of the caves of Ajanta that bring to us this great vision in the art of India.

JAIN TEERTHANKARS

Most of the tirthankars in Jain religion are depicted with their eyes half open and half closed. Probably that was the only way for the artists to translate their state of ecstasy in stone or paper. That typical glance is symbolic. The concentration of tirthankars is neither in nor out it is balanced in between, they have transcended both.



There are three possibilities with the eye, either they are open that means the focus is on the mind, if they are closed it indicates that they are in meditation, if half open half closed then or beyond both than it means ecstasy. Patanjali the great Indian ancient sage explained it as

Dharana: to be out

Dhyana: to be in

Samadhi: to be beyond both (transcendental)

It doesn't imply that the tirthankars spent their life sitting with half open half closed eyes, they certainly would have done all other essential functions, but the artist has depicted them so to give an indication that at the moment of dhyana the line between inner and outer has disappeared, they have transcended.

GURU NANAK

Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism in Punjab region of India emphasized bhakti and taught that the spiritual life can be pursued while keeping secular household as both lives are intertwined. In Sikh philosophy, the normal everyday life is part of the infinite reality and increased spiritual awareness empowers us to increase our active participation in the everyday world where we make wiser and conscious choices rather than passive and compulsive ones. Gurunank advocates living in an "active, creative and practical" life of truthfulness, fidelity, self-control and purity which are more important than all metaphysical concepts. Nanak describes repetition of god's name (Japa or Simran) as a means to feel God's presence. Since he advocates a balanced view of life both materially and spiritually, he is depicted with his eyes half closed and half open.



CONCLUSION

All these five senses not only provide the data for processing but act as boundaries too. There may be the other dimensions to life which could not be sieved through the mesh of these five senses. This data is oriented towards mere survival of human beings and to gear oneself beyond mere survival requires transcendence from physical boundaries. The sense of "eye" creates the sense of "I" and according to Eastern spiritual philosophy that I has to be conquered and then dissolve with the sense of the universe. Artists around the world were aware of this ability of deities and beautifully translated this abstract power by showing eyes of deities different from human beings.

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