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Abstract

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Indian Art: Transforming Symbols

Jyoti Sahi is one of the most fascinating of modern Indian painters. Prabhu S. Guptara reflects on the recent exhibition of his work in London and his simultaneously released book on Indian symbols.

Jyoti Sahi is an unassuming and soft-spoken man. Bespectacled, bearded, and of medium build, he is not the sort of person who would be noticed in a group of artists. Indeed, he would probably not wish to be noticed. That, of course, is a fatal drawback to anyone in today's frantically self-assertive artistic world. But the quality of Sahi's art, and his theoretical work, should combine to win him lasting attention in the long run.

His observations on South Indian folk culture over several years of residence there, and his reading and thinking over some decades, have resulted in a massively impressive but ambiguous book, *The Child and the Serpent: Reflections on Popular Indian Symbols* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, £6.95). Sahi has the associative and synthetic mind characteristic of an artist, but he has, in addition, developed the discipline of putting scholarship and observation on paper in an organized and accessible manner. It is of course easy to disagree with his assumptions: he errs on the side of an eclectic and universalistic catholicism, which leaves the book with an air of having staggered to an all-encompassing close rather than of having arrived at a conclusion; but the comprehensiveness does remain remarkable.

Starting with symbols of opposition such as dark and light, and the one and the many, he goes on to cover the whole range: the womb and the tomb, transfiguring energy and magic, sacred space and dance, the moon and the feminine in Indian thought, the sun and the tree, and finally, the serpent and the child, who in his view represent an eternal effort at renewal and wholeness.

Indian traditional painting and music provide him with as much material as do architecture and sculpture and the everyday practices of Indian villagers — who are neither as simple nor as naïve as they are sometimes imagined. But their culture does not place the same value on verbalizing as does Western culture, and Sahi's contribution is to attempt to put into words a whole complex of living and feeling and seeing which is obscured not only from the West but also from the urbanized Indian.

What makes Sahi's book most interesting to a Western reader — its Jungian outlook — is also what raises questions for an Indian reader. For his masterly exposition of material occasionally and imperceptibly slips into tendentious interpretations: Sahi's theoretical categories are a peculiar but distinctively personal and original mixture of Indian and Western. As indeed is his practice.

St Martin-Within-Ludgate, where the exhibition of his work was held, just a few yards away from St Paul's, is a dull sort of place, architecturally as well as artistically. The overall impression that Sahi's work made in these surroundings was overwhelming: the vivid Indian colours against the dull white of the walls, the dirty brown of the pews; the strange Indian shapes, forms, and designs against the anonymously second-rate nineteenth century paintings above the crucifix and side walls.

That the exhibition took place in a church was appropriate, though. Sahi was born and brought up in India, but studied and taught art in London before returning to join Dom Bede Griffiths' experimental Christian ashram (an Indian equivalent of a monastery) in South India. Sahi is now one of the foremost of the new breed of Indian Catholic artists whose work combines deeply traditional Indian art forms (usually folk forms rather than classical ones) with Christian themes. The result is pleasing to (non-Christian) Indian eyes — witness the wide sale of their material in Indian markets by members of the Association of Indian Christian Artists. The enterprising Jesuits have in fact set up a minor industry, Art India, around the printing of the work of these artists, in the form of large framable pictures, greetings cards, post cards, letter forms, and small pictures. While such activity would be impossible in the West, of course — quite apart from being regarded as hopelessly unprofessional — Art India's products are beginning to fill a real gap in the market for indigenous art available to the masses at reasonable prices. Art India has also published two little booklets of Sahi's paintings (*The Way of the Cross* and *St John's Gospel*), for which Sahi has provided some comment, designed to assist meditation on the paintings.



From a snake stone in Srirangapatnam



Womb-tomb symbols — a roundel from the Bharbut stupa railings, probably representing Brahma. The theme is closely related to the later Padma-Nabha, a creator figure from whose navel emerges a flowering lotus stem, symbol of the universe

Along with an Indian symbolic tradition, these paintings draw upon an iconographic tradition that belongs to Eastern Orthodox as well as Roman churches. There is a Blakean energy in these paintings, tempered by the curvilinear feminine forms which dominate Indian art and music. Mandala forms nudge mandorla forms, traditional kolam patterns (usually traced in rice-powder on village doorsteps) combine with distinctively Buddhist motifs such as the open palm. Sahi ranges, in fact, as far afield as Taoist yin-yang patterns (which probably came into Indian folk art through the human grapevines which took Indian Buddhism, for example, into China and brought Chinese sages to India). And yet, the very universality of folk forms has the result that Western viewers will be reminded of Rouault by Sahi's paintings, while his wood-cuts recall Dürer in a curious way.

Though there was very little in the exhibition to reflect this, Sahi has also studied the Indian Mulim tradition of painting and has done some exquisite work for the little church in Srinagar, Kashmir, which portrays scenes from the life of Jesus in Islamic rather than traditional Indian terms. The Islamic world is of course closer to that of Jesus than the Advaitic one, and it is difficult to resist the impression that his Islamic experiments, at their best, come closer to combining a genuinely Indian tradition with a genuine Christian one. His experiments with folk motifs are more satisfying visually, but where Sahi draws upon classical Indian traditions there is a tendency towards the abstract which, in lesser hands, may distort the distinctive Biblical balance between what might be called the 'personal' nature of God, and that in Him which transcends merely human personality. In combining such diverse philosophical and visual traditions, Sahi's is some of the most stimulating Indian work to have been exhibited in Britain in the last few years.