

## **Yantra – The Visual aspects of Shankara’s Philosophy and its relevance to Contemporary Indian Artists**

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### **Introduction**

*Yantra* was defined as any instrument for holding or fastening in the Rig Vedic period.<sup>1</sup> 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’.<sup>2</sup> *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.<sup>3</sup> *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 ‘*Shilpi Yogin*’ who is initiated into the mantra and the techniques of drawing them. The *Yantras* are categorised into four types which are *Devata Yantra* – symbolic of the deities worshipped in rituals, *Dhyana Yantra* – the *Yantras* used for contemplation and the *yantras* that are awakened in the subtle body, *Raksha Yantra*- are the *yantras* used for protection and *Vastu Yantra* – are the ground plans of sacred architecture.

### **Yantra – a brief about its development**

The earliest usage of a form which resembled the *yantra* is dated between 10,000 to 8000 BC. This is an upper Paleolithic shrine in Siddhi district of Madhya Pradesh, which determines the beginning of the worship of the goddess and the linking her to geometric abstraction.<sup>4</sup> The Harappan seals and amulets contained motifs of abstract geometry with a sacred nature formed of circles, triangles, double spiral and the swastika. Two good examples are the representation of ‘the endless knot’ and the ‘crusiform design’<sup>5</sup> fig.1.

The Atharvana-Veda contains the description of a *Yantra* like figure in a hymn.

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“The impregnable city of the gods consists of eight circles and nine triangles. Within which is a golden cell, resides one eye. Those who know Brahman think that this Eye is Atman. For into that impregnable city, which is Brahman has entered”<sup>6</sup>

The Puranic literature glorifies various gods and goddess through mythologies and legends. They also recommend rituals which fetch benefits and as part of some of them are the *yantras*. The Brahmanda Purana gives a very good account of the form, ritual and the meditational process of the *yantras*. The Brahmanda Purana gives hymns like the Lalitha Sahasranama and Lalita Trishati which are names of the Goddess describing Her as the Empress who resides in the centre of the most celebrated *yantra* the Sri *Yantra*.<sup>7</sup> The Tantric literature is vast and there are many texts dealing exhaustively with *yantras* symbolic of the deities exercised in ritual practices. The development and practice of *yantra* was in vogue in the 8<sup>th</sup> century when Shankaracharya, a saint philosopher contributed to its understanding and popularised it by consecrating *yantras* in various sacred places of India and composing his tantric work Saundarya-Lahari.

To introduce Shankara in Radhakrishnan’s words “... in a few years Shankara practiced several careers, each enough to satisfy an ordinary man. His great achievement is the Advaita system, which developed by means of commentaries on ancient texts. In his wanderings from his birth place in the Malabar to the Himalayas in the north he came across many phases of worship, and accepted all those which had in them the power to evaluate man and refine his life.<sup>8</sup> He travelled through the country and re-established rituals and worship models in the temples and set four monasteries (mutts) in four directions of the country. These mutts were handed over to his four prime disciples and the lineages of these mutts are unbroken even to this day.

One of the major contributions of Shankara which finds the prime quest in the present paper is the visual aspects of his philosophy which is the *yantra*. The *yantras* of Shankara are found in various places of India where he consecrated them for ritual purposes and the other is his lyrical composition Saundarya-Lahari which is a hymn of one hundred stanzas and has a *yantra* corresponding to each of the hymn.

### **Shankara consecrated yantras**

Shankara during his travels had discussions, discourses and debates with the people and scholars. He also installed *yantras* in places of worship like Shringeri, Tirupathi, Trichi, Srirangam, Kanchipuram, Srirangapatna, Shivanasamudra and Kollur in the South of India. The *yantras* were generally meant for ritual purposes and were installed in the sanctum sanctorum. One of the unique *yantra* is the *Sri yantra* installed as the ear rings of the Goddess Akilandeshwari at Tiruvanikkavai, Trichi, Fig 2.

<sup>1</sup> Williams, Monier, *Sanskrit – English dictionary*, Motilal Banarsidas, 1999, Delhi, p-845

<sup>2</sup> Rao, Ramachandra, S.K, *The Yantras*, Sri Satguru Publications, 1998, Delhi, p 10

<sup>3</sup> Khanna, Madhu, *Yantra* Thames and Hudson, 1994 London, p 11

<sup>4</sup> Jayakar, Pupul, *The Earth Mother*, 1989, Penguin Books, p 39

<sup>5</sup> Fairsevis, Walter A, *The Harappan Civilization and writings*, Oxford & IBH Publishing Co. PVT. Ltd, 1992, New Delhi, P217

<sup>6</sup> R.Ramashastry, Origin of the Devanagari Alphabets, p 67

<sup>7</sup> Ganesh and Vasudev Tagore, Tr. Brahmanda Purana, Motilal Banarsidass, 1984, Delhi, p 1228

<sup>8</sup> Radhakrishnan S, Indian Philosophy, Vol I Oxford University Press, 1998, New Delhi, p 449

## Shankara's composition Saundarya-Lahari

The Saundarya-Lahari is a hymn of one hundred verses in praise of the goddess which has one *yantra* corresponding to each of the hymns. The philosophy of the Saundarya-Lahari revolves around the cosmic principles Shiva and Shakti and their inter relation and their inter dependency, but however in most of the verses it establishes the supremacy of the goddess as Shakti, the highest, Ultimate, Unmatched, Creator, Sustainer, Destructor and all pervasive in various forms like the Power, Mother, Consort, the vital force *Kundalini*, the *Sabda Brahman* and the slayer of demons. She is hailed as the most beautiful symbol of woman hood and with all these attributes She is an ocean of kindness with which she blesses her votaries with both spiritual and material benefits. She is regarded as the Empress whose abode is the *Sri Yantra* as in fig 3 and is the deity of *Sri Vidya* cult.

## Yantras of Saundarya-Lahari

The *yantras* prescribed by Shankara which correspond to the one hundred verses of the Saundarya-Lahari are all considered as the diagrammatic form of the Goddess. The *yantras* are sometimes repetitive and there altogether 68 different patterns of *yantras*. These *yantras* are simple and based on the basic geometric shapes like circle, triangle, square, rectangle with combination of a few symbols like the trident and the seed syllable inscribed on them. An example is seen in the fig 4.

29 of the *yantras* are based on the triangle. It needs a minimum of three lines to form a triangle a closed space. The star hexagon is formed by the section of two triangles, one with the apex upwards and the other with the apex downwards. This is also symbolic of the oneness of the cosmic principles Shiva and Shakti. The *yantras* based on the square are about twenty four and are variously composed with seed syllables placed in them. The rectangle and the circular *yantras* are interesting, however the most interesting is the *Sri Yantra*. The *Sri Yantra* is prescribed for the verses 22 and 33. The beauty of the *Sri Yantra* visually lies in the fact that it is made up of all the basic forms mentioned earlier, i.e. the square, lines, circle, triangle and the petals of the lotus. The diagram shown in the fig 3. is one of the most popular *yantras* found in domestic worship and temples alike.

## Post-Shankara representation of Yantra

Rituals and worship at the places where Shankara installed *yantra* are carried on even after 1200 years. One of his prime disciple's Padmapadacharya wrote a commentary called 'Sambandha-dipika' on Shankara's work 'Prapanchasara Tantra' which means the essence of the universe. The Sringeri's lineage of Shankara's Mutt has been a strict follower of the Sri Vidya cult. The twelfth pontiff Vidyananya<sup>9</sup> was proficient in the cult of Sri Vidya and authored a treatise called 'Sri Vidyananya Tantra'<sup>10</sup> His disciple Lakshmana Deshika wrote two important

tantric works 'Sharadatilaka Tantra' and 'Tara-pradipa' which has prescribed *yantras* exhaustively. Lakshmana Desika's four disciples wrote one work each which dealt with *yantras*. Lolla Lakshmidhara one of the leading scholars in the court of Krishnadevaraya in the 16<sup>th</sup> century wrote a lucid authoritative commentary on the Saundarya-Lahari which is the chief source of interpretation to the later writers and a guide to the students of this cult. Some prominent scholars of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century are Gambiraraya Dikshita and his son Bhaskararaya whose commentary on Saundarya-Lahari is considered important among the thirty six commentaries written on Saundarya-Lahari of Shankara.

## Saundarya-Lahari - Illustrated Manuscripts

A text on the Saundarya-Lahari by W. Norman Brown mentions 48 manuscripts of this text spread all over the world. Amongst which are two illustrated manuscripts in Sanskrit are found in Baroda. These manuscripts belong to the 17<sup>th</sup> century early Western Indian and Rajasthani style of miniature painting. The manuscript paintings consist of a verse of Saundarya-Lahari composed in half of the folio and a painting that illustrates the meaning of the verse in the other half of the folio. One folio depicts creatively the *Sri Yantra*.

## Influence of the visual aspects of Shankara's Philosophy in the contemporary Indian Art

Religion and art were inseparably linked at the very beginning of the consciously motivated human activity.<sup>11</sup> Their relation can be understood in two ways, the first being the art that was used for religion i.e. in the form of the idols, the *yantras* and other ritual articles and objects that the artist or craftsman made for the purpose of worship. The other is the inspiration an artist draws from these religious and ritualistic practices and also extend to the contemplative states and interprets in his artistic expression. Here Shankara's *yantras* are the ritual drawings which have inspired some artists resulting in a strong influence on their visual expression.

It is in the 1960s that a trend in the Indian art as a revival of the 'Indianness', some artists were influenced by the visuals of Indian Brahminical philosophic systems. Pranabranjan Ray calls this trend as 'neo-Brahminical art'<sup>12</sup> He classifies artists like KCS Panniker as the foremost and followed by others like Reddappa Naidu, Janakiram, Vasudeva and Vishvanadham. A group of Delhi based artists of the sixties, were interested in painting Shaiva and Shakta and Mahayana tantric visual aids to rituals, i.e. the *yantras* and *mandalas*. Because of this preoccupation this trend in modern Indian art came to be known as Tantra Art. The writings of connoisseur, collector and propagator Ajith Mookerjee produced concrete examples of exquisitely worked *yantras*, *mandalas* and other visual aids to Tantrik rituals. George Butcher and Philip Rawson certified that the Tantrik visuals were epitomes of Indian metaphysical thought and the basis of the Tantra Art movement. All these led to a sudden burst of energy in the form of Tantra Art. Artists like

<sup>11</sup> Art and Life in India – The last four decades – edited by Joseph James – Art religion Interface and Neo- Brahminical Art, Pranabranjan Ray P 52

<sup>12</sup> Art and Life in India – The last four decades – edited by Joseph James – Art religion Interface and Neo- Brahminical Art, Pranabranjan Ray P 52

<sup>9</sup> Sringeri, Tattvaloka, Sri Sharada Trust, P- 8

<sup>10</sup> Rao, Ramachandra, S.K, *Sri Chakra*, Sri Satguru Publications, 1999, Delhi, p 5-6

K.V. Haridasan, P.T. Reddy and S.H. Raza who drew inspiration from the tantric forms. Balan Nambiar is a unique sculptor who has drawn motivation from Shankara and his philosophy. The present paper attempts to analyse the paintings of K.V. Haridasan and G.R. Santosh and the influence they have drawn from Shankara's *yantras*.

### G.R. Santosh - Shankara's influence on his paintings

G.R. Santosh was a poet and artist born in Kashmir and studied painting in Baroda. He started painting landscapes, later brought an influence of the cubist but felt the spiritual content was missing in his paintings. He stopped painting for two years and struggled to find his roots and identity. As he quoted his own words "in my country there is a tradition of purely geometrical images. What was left to me? You know even the *ragas* have been put to into painting; there was hardly anything left for me to do. So my tantrik painting began".<sup>13</sup>

Santosh had right from the beginning been attracted to Shankara's shrine in Srinagar, which happens to be his native town. His constant visit to the temple made him more curious and was drawn to the *Sri-Yantra* drawn on a rock by Shankara. This started to evolve in his painting as internal experiences depicted in a mystic manner.

### K.V. Haridasan - Shankara's influence on his paintings

K.V. Haridasan hails from a village near that of Kaladi which is the birth place of Shankara. He received the knowledge of the tantrik cult and Shankara's Saundarya-Lahari from his father. He also practiced yoga to compliment his painting pursuits. In 1968 he exhibited a series of paintings titled '*Yantra series*' followed by '*Bija Yantra*', are composed of symbols like triangles, circles, squares and seed syllables. He has participated in many general exhibitions as well as specific exhibitions held for Tantrik artists. He also painted images of symbolic of the goddess like form which he drew influence from Shankara's Saundarya- Lahari.

The basic division of space in his paintings were drawn from the outermost square form of the *yantra* called the *Bhupura* with three concentric square forms with the "T" like portals with a central blooming flower like motif and surrounded by three concentric circles. The grid form which Haridasan repeatedly uses in paintings can be compared to Shankara's *yantra* with a grid.

### Conclusion

Though the concept of *yantras* had developed very prominent in the Tantras, the advent of Shankara and his travels through India and consecration of *yantra* along with writing tantric works Saundarya-Lahari and Prapanchasara Tantra gave the *yantras* a new dimension and access to people. Even after 12 centuries people reach to these places seeking benevolence and draw inspiration from his establishments and thought which has also influenced Indian contemporary artists. Artists like SH Raza has quoted Saundarya-Lahari, where as Biren De uses exhaustively the male female concepts in his visual representation, whereas Balan Nambiar exhibits Shankara's

<sup>13</sup> Santosh GR Catalogue 1989

<sup>14</sup> Radhakrishnan S, Indian Philosophy, Vol I Oxford University Press, 1998, New Delhi, p 451

thought through some of his sculptures. Much relevant to this paper is that G.R. Santosh drew inspiration from Shankara's *yantras* and his temple in Srinagar which later becomes the significant form in his paintings. K.V. Haridasan had a strong influence of Shankara due to his early learning and later he consciously reflected his philosophy in his paintings. K.V. Haridasan and G.R. Santosh both have contributed to the contemporary Indian art immensely by rethinking the visual aspects of Shankara's which are his *yantras*. In the words of S.Radhakrishnan "Shankara is a philosopher and a poet, a savant and a saint, a mystic and a religious reformer. Such diverse gifts he possess that different images present themselves, if we try to recall his personality. One sees him in youth, on fire with intellectual ambition, a stiff and intrepid debater, another regards him as a shrewd political genius, attempting to impress on other people a sense of unity; for a third, he is a calm philosopher engaged in the single effort to expose the contradictions of life and thought with an unmatched incisiveness; for a fourth, he is the mystic who declares that we are all greater than we know. There have been few minds more universal than his."<sup>14</sup> The present paper draws conclusions observing the fifth creative dimension of his as an artist whose sacred ritual diagrams are symbolic of the cosmic principles. These *yantras* have left intense impressions on artists like G.R. Santosh and K.V. Hridasan who have represented them in their paintings opening new avenues of rethinking Shankara.

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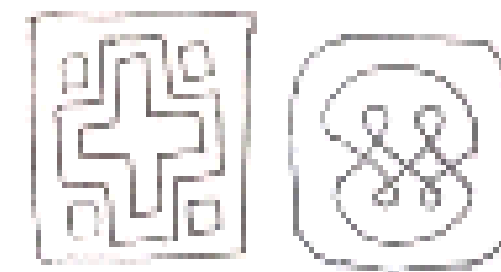


fig.1 Crusiform designs

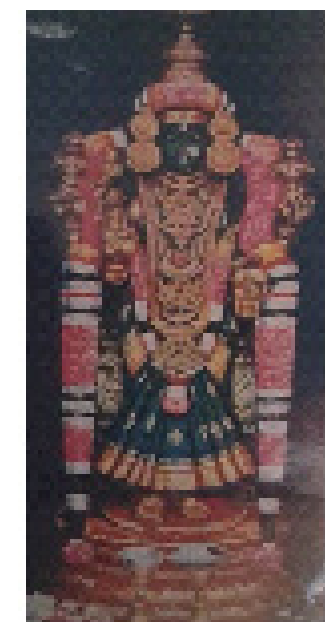


fig 2. Goddess Akilandeshwari at Tiruvanikkavai, Trichi



fig 3. Sri Yantra

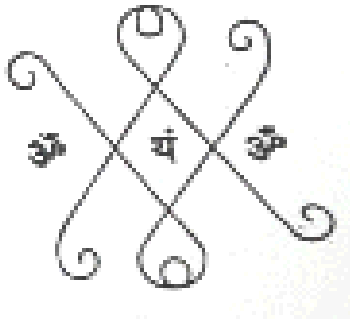


fig 4. Yantra from Saundarya-Lahari