

Abstract Art in India: Philosophical Roots and Contemporary Practice

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ABSTRACT

Abstract art in India represents a unique confluence of indigenous philosophical traditions and contemporary global artistic movements. This paper examines the evolution of abstract art in India by analysing its metaphysical foundations, cultural influences, and the practice of modern and post-modern Indian abstract artists. Using qualitative methods that include textual analysis, artist-centric reviews, and interpretative visual analysis, the study highlights how Indian abstract art embodies concepts such as *śūnyatā* (emptiness), *rasa* (aesthetic essence), and *advaita* (non-duality). The results show that Indian abstract art is not merely a stylistic import but a culturally rooted, deeply reflective practice expressing inner experience, spirituality, and contemporary socio-cultural narratives.

Keywords: Abstract Art, Indian Aesthetics, Advaita, Śūnyatā, Contemporary Indian Artists, Non-Representational Art, Rasa Theory

INTRODUCTION

Abstract art, globally recognised for its deliberate move away from representational imagery, marks a significant shift from depicting the external world to expressing internal realities, emotions, and metaphysical ideas. While the evolution of abstract art in the West—represented by movements such as Cubism, Abstract Expressionism, and Minimalism—emerged predominantly from modernist concerns such as fragmentation of form, the rejection of realism, and the exploration of pure visual elements like line, color, and texture, the trajectory in India has been markedly different. Indian abstraction is not merely an adaptation of global modernist tendencies; rather, it is deeply intertwined with indigenous philosophical, spiritual, and artistic traditions that date back thousands of years. The Indian subcontinent has historically fostered artistic expressions that prioritise the inner world—mental states, spiritual experiences, and metaphysical truths—over the material or representational depiction of reality. This orientation is evident in several traditional visual forms that employed abstraction long before it became a modern artistic style. For instance:

- **Tantric diagrams**, such as *yantras* and *mandalas*, use geometric abstraction to represent cosmic energies, spiritual pathways, and metaphysical ideas. Their purpose is not decorative but contemplative, serving as tools for meditation and self-realisation.
- **Mandalas**—found widely in Buddhist and Hindu traditions—compose geometric patterns that symbolise completeness, unity, and the structure of the universe, reaffirming the deep connection between form and philosophical meaning.
- **Jain cosmological charts** (*Jambudvīpa* diagrams, *Lokapurusha* depictions) represent cosmic order through symbolic and abstract shapes, depicting realms of existence in highly stylised and non-naturalistic visual formats.
- **Buddhist visual symbolism**, particularly in Tibetan art, emphasises non-representational motifs such as circles, wheels, flames, and lotus patterns, which serve as metaphors for enlightenment, impermanence, and the cyclical nature of existence.

These traditional forms illustrate that abstraction is not a new or foreign concept within India; instead, it has always been embedded in the country's visual culture. The movement away from literal representation towards symbolic or conceptual expression has historically served philosophical and spiritual purposes, especially within Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain thought. Against this historical backdrop, modern Indian abstract art developed not as a sudden break from tradition, but as a continuation and reinterpretation of these ancient visual languages. When Indian modernists in the mid-20th century encountered global avant-garde movements, they did not simply imitate Western artists. Rather, they integrated modernist aesthetics with their own cultural legacies, creating a uniquely Indian form of abstraction that resonates with both global techniques and indigenous sensibilities. This research paper explores these philosophical foundations and traces how leading modern and contemporary Indian artists—including S. H. Raza, V. S. Gaitonde, Ram Kumar, Nasreen Mohamedi, and G. R. Santosh—reimagined abstraction through their own artistic vocabularies. Each of these artists contributed significantly to the evolution of non-representational art in India, drawing from spiritual introspection, meditative practices, sacred geometry, and philosophical reflection to construct artworks that

transcend form and meaning. Their diverse interpretations demonstrate how abstraction in India has evolved into a profound and contemplative artistic language that stands apart from its Western counterpart.

2. Research Methodology

This study is qualitative in nature and follows an interpretative research design.

2.1 Sources of Data

- **Primary Data:** Visual analysis of selected artworks by leading Indian abstract artists.
- **Secondary Data:** Academic journals, books on Indian aesthetics, artist interviews, exhibition catalogues, museum archives, and digital art repositories.

2.2 Analytical Framework

1. **Philosophical Analysis:** Evaluation of Indian metaphysical traditions such as Vedanta, Buddhism, Tantra, and aesthetic theory (*rasa*, *bhava*).
2. **Comparative Visual Analysis:** Examining common elements—color, form, line, emptiness, geometry—across different artists.
3. **Contextual Study:** Understanding how socio-cultural and historical factors influenced the evolution of abstract art in India.

3. Philosophical Roots of Indian Abstract Art

3.1 Advaita Vedanta and Non-Duality

Advaita emphasises the unity of the self and the universe. Many artists—such as V. S. Gaitonde—expressed this through minimalism and meditative canvases.

3.2 Buddhist Concept of Śūnyatā

The idea of emptiness is reflected in the spatial silence found in Nasreen Mohamedi's lines and grids.

3.3 Tantric Aesthetics and Sacred Geometry

Tantric art employs geometric abstraction to represent spiritual energy. S. H. Raza's *Bindu* series is the most well-known contemporary example.

3.4 Rasa Theory

Classical Indian aesthetics emphasises emotional essence rather than visual realism, aligning naturally with abstraction.

4. Contemporary Practice in Indian Abstract Art

4.1 S. H. Raza and the Metaphysics of the *Bindu*

S. H. Raza is one of the most influential figures in modern Indian abstract art, celebrated for transforming the *bindu*—a simple dot—into a profound aesthetic and philosophical symbol. Although Raza began his career as an expressionist landscape painter, his artistic vocabulary underwent a significant shift during the late 1970s when he reconnected with the spiritual and metaphysical tenets of Indian culture. The *bindu*, in Raza's interpretation, is not merely a geometric form; it represents the point of origin, the seed of creation, and the centre of cosmic energy as described in Tantric and Vedantic traditions. His canvases blend vibrant color fields with symmetrical arrangements of triangles, squares, and circles to construct a visual language that harmonises intuition, spirituality, and geometry. Through the *bindu*, Raza attempted to express the inner equilibrium that underlies existence—the unity between microcosm and macrocosm. The recurring presence of radiant reds, yellows, and blues symbolises elemental forces, while the strict structuring of shapes evokes both discipline and transcendence. In this way, Raza's work transcends pure formal abstraction and becomes a meditative experience, inviting viewers to contemplate concepts of infinity, oneness, and the cyclical nature of life. His *bindu* series stands today as a powerful embodiment of Indian metaphysics within contemporary art practice.

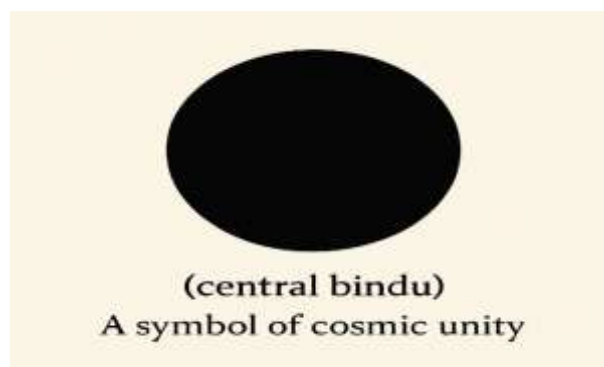


Figure 1: Sample Representation of Raza's Bindu Concept

4.2 V. S. Gaitonde and Meditative Minimalism

V. S. Gaitonde is widely regarded as one of India's most enigmatic and sophisticated abstract artists, known for his deeply meditative approach to form, color, and silence. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Gaitonde rejected both representational imagery and overt symbolism, instead cultivating a minimalistic visual language that sought to evoke inner stillness and contemplative awareness. His works are characterised by subtle tonal variations, delicate textural layers, and an almost ethereal, atmospheric quality created through meticulous application of paint using rollers, palette knives, and dry-brush techniques. Drawing inspiration from Zen Buddhism, calligraphy, and the philosophy of non-duality, Gaitonde believed that art should emerge from a place of profound quietude—an idea reflected in his assertion that he was a “non-objective painter” rather than an abstract one. His canvases often appear like meditative spaces suspended between light and shadow, inviting viewers to experience a sense of serenity and transcendence. The absence of narrative content or identifiable imagery encourages introspection, focusing attention on subtle rhythms, textures, and vibrations. Gaitonde's minimalist compositions thus function as visual meditations, embodying the idea that silence itself can be a powerful and expressive artistic force. Through his disciplined restraint and emphasis on the spiritual inner world, Gaitonde helped redefine abstraction in India as a deeply contemplative and experiential practice.

4.3 Nasreen Mohamedi and the Poetics of Line

Nasreen Mohamedi occupies a singular position in the history of Indian abstract art, renowned for her austere, meticulously constructed line-based drawings that reflect a profound sense of discipline, restraint, and inner clarity. Unlike many abstract artists who rely on expressive brushwork or vibrant color fields, Mohamedi embraced minimalism through a highly refined visual vocabulary composed almost entirely of lines, grids, and geometric rhythms. Her practice was deeply influenced by Islamic architecture, Japanese Zen aesthetics, and the vast desert landscapes she encountered during her early years in Bahrain and later travels. These influences shaped her sensitivity to spatial relationships, balance, and the beauty of emptiness. Mohamedi's works are executed with extraordinary precision—each line calibrated to create an experience of movement, vibration, or quiet order. Despite their apparent simplicity, her compositions evoke a lyrical interplay between structure and freedom, conveying an almost musical sense of rhythm. Her drawings function as meditative spaces, where silence and geometry merge to capture the ephemeral nature of thought and perception. Mohamedi's approach to abstraction stands apart for its intellectual depth and contemplative rigor; she transformed the line into a poetic instrument, expressing not external forms but the distilled essence of inner experience. Through her minimalist sensibility, she expanded the possibilities of Indian abstraction and inspired a new generation of artists to embrace a more introspective and conceptually driven practice.

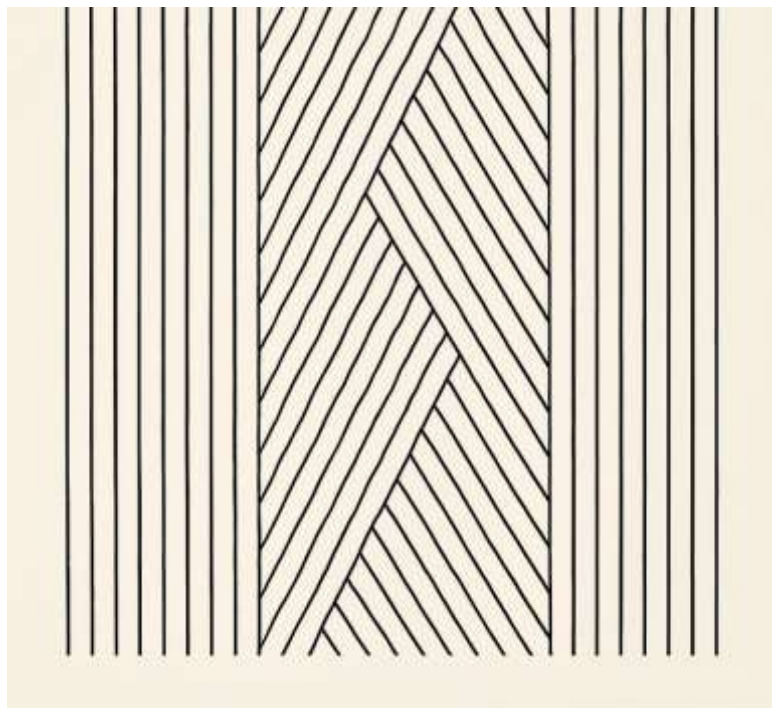


Figure 2: Line-Based Abstraction Inspired by Mohamedi

4.4 G. R. Santosh and Neo-Tantric Abstraction

G. R. Santosh stands as a central figure in the Neo-Tantric art movement in India, a style that reinterprets ancient Tantric symbolism through the lens of modern abstraction. Deeply influenced by his spiritual experiences in Kashmir and his exposure to local Shaivite and Tantric traditions, Santosh developed a distinctive visual language that integrates sacred geometry, vibrant colour fields, and symmetrical compositions. His works often feature archetypal forms such as

triangles, circles, squares, and lotus motifs—each laden with metaphysical meaning within tantric cosmology. These geometric configurations are not used merely for decorative effect; rather, they function as symbolic diagrams of the universe, representing the interplay of masculine and feminine energies, the alignment of chakras, and the union of the material and spiritual realms. Santosh employed modernist palettes of luminous blues, reds, greens, and ochres, blending them with gradients and meticulous shading to create a sense of mystical radiance. His paintings evoke the meditative precision of traditional *yantras* while embracing the freedom and scale of contemporary abstraction. Through this synthesis of ancient philosophy and modern aesthetics, Santosh revived tantric art for a new generation, transforming it from a ritualistic visual tradition into a powerful contemporary idiom. His contribution bridges cultural memory and artistic innovation, demonstrating how spiritual symbolism can be reimaged in dynamic and visually compelling ways.

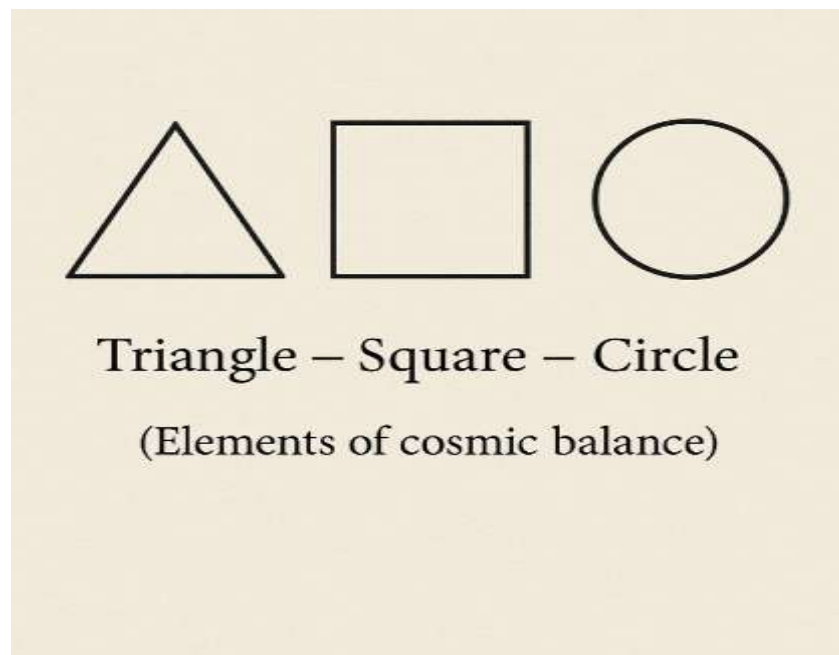


Figure 3: Neo-Tantric Geometric Motif

4.5 Ram Kumar: Landscape as Emotional Abstraction

Ram Kumar occupies a distinctive space within modern Indian art as an artist who transformed landscape painting into a vehicle for emotional and existential expression. Although his works are often categorised as abstract landscapes, they transcend topographical representation and instead evoke inner psychological states shaped by themes of loneliness, angst, and urban alienation. Early in his career, Kumar painted figurative scenes reflecting the anxieties of post-Independence India, but over time his figures dissolved into vast, desolate terrains composed of fragmented blocks, muted colors, and broken horizons. These abstracted landscapes—often inspired by his travels to Varanasi—capture a sense of spiritual desolation, displacement, and quiet turmoil. His palette of earthy browns, greys, and blues enhances this introspective mood, suggesting landscapes that exist as much within the mind as in the external world. Kumar's approach to abstraction is emotionally charged yet visually restrained; he uses layers, textures, and irregular forms to articulate the fissures and tensions of human experience. Rather than depicting specific locations, his compositions become metaphors for fragmented identities, transitional spaces, and the search for meaning. Through this emotive treatment of landscape, Ram Kumar expands the vocabulary of Indian abstraction, demonstrating how non-representational forms can powerfully convey psychological depth and existential reflection.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Philosophical Depth Distinguishes Indian Abstraction

The analysis reveals that Indian abstract art is fundamentally distinguished by its deep philosophical and spiritual undercurrents. Unlike Western abstraction, which often emerged from formal experimentation, psychological expression, or reactions against realism, Indian abstraction is rooted in metaphysical concepts such as *advaita* (non-duality), *śūnyatā* (emptiness), and Tantric cosmology. These traditions emphasise inner experience, stillness, and the nature of consciousness, shaping the ways artists approach abstraction. As seen in the works of Raza, Gaitonde, Mohamedi, and others, non-representational forms in India are frequently used to symbolise unity, balance, transcendence, or meditative thought. This philosophical depth gives Indian abstraction a contemplative quality that differentiates it from many Western movements, while also allowing it to remain culturally grounded and emotionally resonant.

5.2 Integration of Tradition and Modernity

The findings also demonstrate that Indian abstract artists have been remarkably successful in synthesising traditional visual philosophies with modernist artistic techniques. Ancient symbols—such as the *bindu*, mandalas, yantras, and sacred geometric patterns—are reinterpreted using contemporary palettes, compositional strategies, and materials. Artists like Raza draw on spiritual iconography, while Gaitonde blends Zen-like silence with modern textural experimentation. Mohamedi integrates Islamic aesthetics with minimalist line-based structures, and Santosh revitalises Tantric diagrams through modern colour gradients and precision. This fusion of personal introspection, cultural memory, and modernist innovation results in a distinctively Indian visual language—one that is simultaneously ancient and modern, universal and personal.

5.3 Diversity in Mediums and Approaches

Another significant outcome of the study is the clear diversity and heterogeneity within Indian abstract art. The artists examined in this research demonstrate a broad spectrum of non-representational approaches, each rooted in a unique worldview. Raza's iconic color-field compositions explore spiritual symbolism; Gaitonde's atmospheric surfaces reflect meditative stillness; Mohamedi's refined linear constructions embody precision and purity; Santosh's neo-tantric geometry visualises metaphysical structures; and Ram Kumar's abstract landscapes express emotional unrest and existential reflection. This multiplicity indicates that Indian abstraction is not a monolithic style but a dynamic field with multiple trajectories, each shaped by personal, cultural, and historical influences. Such diversity strengthens the depth and global relevance of Indian abstract art.

5.4 Increasing Global Recognition

Over the past few decades, Indian abstract art has gained substantial recognition in international art markets, global exhibitions, and scholarly discourse. Works by Gaitonde, Raza, and Mohamedi have been featured in major museums such as the Guggenheim, Tate Modern, and the Met, while auction records reflect rising global interest. This increased visibility indicates that the philosophical richness and visual sophistication of Indian abstraction resonate with global audiences. It also highlights India's expanding influence on international modern and contemporary art narratives. The growing global recognition affirms the cultural significance and artistic value of Indian abstraction and paves the way for more research, exhibitions, and cross-cultural dialogue.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that abstract art in India represents a unique convergence of ancient philosophical traditions and contemporary artistic innovation. Rather than being a derivative of Western modernism, Indian abstraction emerges from centuries-old spiritual, metaphysical, and aesthetic frameworks that emphasise inner experience, meditative inquiry, and the symbolic nature of form. Artists such as Raza, Gaitonde, Mohamedi, Santosh, and Ram Kumar have redefined abstraction by integrating metaphysical concepts with modern visual strategies, resulting in a genre that is intellectually profound, visually compelling, and culturally specific. The findings reveal that Indian abstract art continues to evolve, driven by ongoing experimentation and the reinterpretation of traditional ideas. Its increasing global recognition demonstrates the universal relevance of its philosophical foundations and artistic expression. Future research may explore the intersection of Indian abstraction with digital technologies, AI-generated art, cross-cultural collaborations, and the global South's contribution to non-Western modernisms. Such explorations will further illuminate the adaptive and innovative potential of abstract art in India, ensuring its continued significance in both national and global artistic discourses.

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