

## ON SYMBOLISM: TOWARDS THE MYTHOLOGY IN INDIAN PAINTINGS

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### ABSTRACT

The word 'mythology' is substantial; it denotes experience of generations, popular amongst people or society in the form of legends or folk lore which is generally transferred from one generation to another on the bases of the recitation of stories. However, the ethics behind all kinds of mythological narration are always filled with moral values and direct the human kind towards the 'truth'. Most of Indian mythological narrations are focused on those stories which are related with gods and demons. These stories are usually carrying certain ideology and communicate some concepts. In the present time we find that such stories are prevailing and interacting either by orally transferred words or through illustrated scriptures in recorded form such as 'Punchtantra', Jataka stories, 'Bhagwat Geeta', 'Ramayana', 'Mahabharata' and 'Geet Govinda' etc. In this paper we have given a detailed study of Indian paintings, having use of mythological symbols.

**KEYWORDS:** Indian Paintings, Mythological Symbols

### INTRODUCTION

In this research paper prime focus will be on those paintings which have Indian mythological references as powerful media to convey substantial aspect of the subject. Such references are purposefully used to convey long existing and practicing culture in favour of contemporary society or to convey ideological element of the respective culture. For visual needs artists require some symbols and images that are called the source or media by which the artists are able to draw the actual identity of particularly chosen symbols. These symbols have been very strong part of paintings often used by the artists in all over the globe from very beginning of the civilization till the modern era.

Indian mythical characters have some specialties which are distinguished from each other by means of symbols. These symbols give the characters, a different identical appearance which becomes the speciality of that particular character. This speciality is a unique significance attracts artist's attention to paint them. Due to keen interest and persuasive response towards the mythological symbols, India has a plenteous collection of paintings illustrated on the walls of Ajanta, Ellora, Bagh, Badami and other places.

Symbols are the metaphors, "*means something that represent something else by association, resemblance, or convention especially a material object used to represent something invisible*".<sup>1</sup> In other words one can say that symbol is an abstraction of actual identity. Etymologically symbol's identity is derived from "*the Latin word Symbolum means, a symbol of faith and, Symbolus, a sign of recognition*".<sup>2</sup> Although "*Symbolism initially developed as a French literary movement in the 1880s, gaining, popular credence with the publication in 1886 of Jean Moreas, manifesto in Le Figaro*".<sup>3</sup> "*....Symbolist painters believed that art should reflect an emotion or idea rather than represent the natural world in the objective, quasi-scientific manner embodied by Realism and Impressionism*".<sup>4</sup> In western context symbolism is a movement which was started to give the importance to subjectivity and explore inner self expression in terms of symbols

but Indian culture denotes symbol as full of substantial meaning behind the image. In India symbols came into existence with the growth of religion and rituals, the exact time for its use is unknown but can be estimated from the Vedic time when ritualistic practices were in vogue such as 'Yagga'. For this purpose various materials were used symbolically for showing devotion towards the Supreme Being. Hence, from Vedic period to present time a huge treasure of symbols has been created and still is in trend. Indian mythology is huge reservoir consists ideological symbols for personalities and material both. So Indian art embodies a long list of symbols each with multilayered of meanings.

### **Symbol Used in Pre-Historic Time**

Indian mythological art is a vivid presentation of various symbolic vocabularies and "*occupying pre-eminent position right from the time of the Harappa culture*".<sup>5</sup> These symbols are helpful to show the most appropriate presentation of mythical beings, inspired by the information of principal scriptures. These auspicious symbols can be divided into various categories such as ritualistic symbols, iconographic symbols etc. Savita Sharma in her famous book 'Early Indian Symbols' writes "*one hundred and eight auspicious symbols are mentioned in the Harivamsa and Vasturantna Kosha*"<sup>6</sup> and these symbols are associated with individual deities as well as their exclusive weapons. While exposing the group of these symbols the most familiar one is "*Swastik*".<sup>7</sup> Swastika symbol "*indicates happiness, safety, fertility and prosperity. In Indian ethos all these are considered as blessings of sun god*".<sup>8</sup> Swastika is popular in Indian art because it is considered to be the foremost symbol which opens the earliest phases of Indian mythology. It was found in the excavation of Indus valley civilization and also can be seen in so many other Indian art also. (Appendix: plate-1) Identically Swastika is a cross with symmetric arms of equal length with ends of each arm bent at right angle. Sometime dots are added between each arm. According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica (2007) "*The word is derived from the Sanskrit swastika, meaning conducive to well-being. In India the swastika continues to be the most widely used auspicious symbol by Hindus, Jainas, and Buddhists. Among the Jainas it is the emblem of their seventh Tirthankara (saint) and is also said to remind the worshiper by its four arms of the four possible places of rebirth—in the animal or plant world, in hell, on Earth, or in the spirit world*".<sup>9</sup>

Through the edges Gods have been represented in Indian art merely through the symbols. So this category is dedicated to those symbols which were became the whole appearance of god at that time. The Hinayana sect of Buddhism recalls the artistic period when the Buddha's presence is depicted by means of symbols, such as a "*vacant throne, an umbrella or paduka (footprints)*".<sup>10</sup> These symbols specifically denoting the respect of Buddha and fill the vacuum of his presence and became popular as an strong resources in Indian art. Apart from these Buddhist symbols Indian art has demonstrated geometric forms and diagrams (squares and triangles), heavenly bodies (sun and moon) other elements of nature (flowers and trees) and many man-made items (the trident or trisula) etc.

### **Use of the Elements of Nature as Symbols**

Tree is a common symbol, which appears constantly in almost all forms of Indian art, either to enhance the beauty of the work or to represent as the central subject. Sometime it contributes as a complimentary element of the empty space of painting or as the eye witness of several mega events pertinent of the Indian mythology, for instance the 'Krishna-Lila' scenes, scene from Ramayana especially depiction of Ram & Sita in the dense forest during exile etc. from Indian miniature paintings. Ancient scriptures indicate towards the worship of the tree as an ancient Indian practice and still continue to be an element of modern Indian religious conduct. Bansilal Malla explains that in India "*all civilizations have*

made the use of tree symbol as fundamental expression of life, growth, fertility, procreation and so on".<sup>11</sup> In Indian art tree, when it is used as symbol exposed the connection of the tree with Indian mythology through paintings. In this sequence the peepal tree gets the attention first because in Indian mythology, it is considered as the most sacred tree worshiped and holds the highest regard in Indian mythology. It was painted so many times in Indian paintings as the Bodhi tree or "tree of enlightenment"<sup>12</sup> by the renowned painters of India such as Nand Lal Bose in his painting 'Under the Bodhi tree' (Appendix: plate-2) and Venkatappa's painting "Buddha and his Disciple" (Appendix: plate-3) showed the Bodhi tree as a paramount element. Apart from that it is considered the first-known depicted tree in India and has deep-rooted connections with the Indian mythology.

As said that "the present Kali Yuga began with the death of Lord Krishna that had happened under this tree only. In Hinduism it is believed that roots of Peepal tree are Brahma, the trunk is Vishnu and the leaves are Shiva".<sup>13</sup> According to the mythical believe Banyan tree also shares as equal status to the Peepal tree considered as "The Trimurti (meaning three forms of God), also known as the Hindu Trinity, is an iconographic representation of God in Hinduism, which depicts divinity as a three faced figure. This three faced represent God's roles of creation, preservation and destruction, which are associated with Brahma (the source or creator), Vishnu (the preserver or indwelling-life), Siva (the destroyer and transformer) respectively."<sup>14</sup> Some trees are popular among Indians due to their association with some events of Indian mythology. A unique one "the Parijat tree is named as *Adansonia digitata*, due to its resemblance to the *Adansonia* class of trees....",<sup>15</sup> considered to be a divine one which blooms occasionally. According to mythology, Pārijāta is a heavenly tree brought to the earth by lord Krishna to please his wife Satyabhama. "It is said that Lord Krishna stole a branch of this tree from Indra's kingdom and brought it to the earth. The Parijat tree was planted in Indralok, being one of the many gifts from the Samudra Manthan. Narada brought some flowers from the tree and gave them to Lord Krishna. Lord Krishna gifted the flowers to his wife Rukmini. Narada told Satyabhama (Krishna's other wife) about this and advised her to ask Krishna to get the Parijata tree from Indralok and plant it in her garden. Satyabhama did exactly that and in the meantime, Narada went back to Indralok and warned Indra that someone from the earth might attempt to steal the tree from Indralok. An angry Indra confronted Krishna while he was leaving with a branch of the tree. This led to a battle which Indra lost. However, he put forth a curse on the branch that it will never bear fruit even though it may produce flowers. Since then, the tree does not bear any fruit. Once Krishna brought the tree to Dwarka, another conflict arose between his two wives, with both insisting to have the plant in their respective gardens. So, Krishna planted the tree in such a manner that although it was planted in Satyabhama's garden, its flowers would fall in Rukmini's garden. In this way, Rukmini got the flowers and Satyabhama got the tree".<sup>16</sup> (Appendix: plate-4)

Lotus is the oldest and the most universal floral symbol in Indian art. It represents divine purity and non-attachment, a symbol of creation as well as love for God. The lotus is one of the eight auspicious signs popular in Buddhism and Hinduism. According to ancient scriptural text which details the life of Gautama Buddha, "the spirit of the best of men is spotless, like the new lotus in the [murky] water which does not adhere to it.... As the lotus is pure in the water, so the soul is also pure lotus while according to the Mahayana sect of Buddhism that all souls emerge from a lotus".<sup>17</sup> In Hindu mythology Lord Brahma is the first in holy trinity who have been born from the lotus that was growing out of the navel of Lord Vishnu and known as the "Navel-born (*Nabhi-ja*)".<sup>18</sup> According to Zimmer "This is the door or gate, the opening or mouth, of the womb of the universe"<sup>19</sup>. Thus in Hinduism the lotus became the visible representation of the womb of creation. Goddess Lakshmi is described as "lotus-born" (*Padmasabhava*), "standing on a lotus"

(*padmesthita*), “*lotus coloured*” (*Padmavarna*), “*lotus-thighed*” (*padma-uru*), “*lotus-eyed*” (*padmaks*), “*abounding in lotuses*” (*padmini, pushkarnini*), “*decked with lotus garlands*” (*padmamalini*)<sup>20</sup> The lotus inspired various Indian artists so many times to paint this symbol as auspicious and holy one. It is seen generally in Indian art, where the divine images often appear typically positioned on a lotus, such as lord Vishnu, Lord Brahma, goddess Saraswati etc. The lotus seat of these images suggests their transcendence of the physical world. The lotus perfects itself in a blossom that has transcended the mud and inspired the people to live in tough conditions and be pleasant. In painted form many times these divinities hold the lotus in one of their hand for instance as in a renowned painting “*Padmapani-Bodhisattva*”<sup>21</sup> (Appendix: plate-5) of Ajanta wall murals in India, Bodhisattva is shown holding a blue lotus in his right hand.

The unsullied purity and beauty of the lotus flower stimulated the Indian artist to incarnate this holy flower in their paintings. The new generation artist such as Ramachandran had painted a series of paintings on lotus and lotus ponds during different hours of the day and captured various seasons also (Appendix: plate-6). His lotus ponds series are expansion of the Indian scenery as the divine metaphor. “*The Great Departure*” (Appendix: plate-7), is another important painting of Arpna Cour an eminent Indian artist painted the lotus flower pattern upon the empty carpet of Gautama Buddha to fill the empty presence of Buddha. Atul Dodiya, a renowned cotemporary artist of India, has given a new energy to the Indian mythological symbols. “*Sour Grapes*” (Appendix: plate-8) one of his painting, he has recalled the famous mythological event where a lotus emerges out from the naval of the God Vishnu, showing the “*Dodia’s own face with a Picassian cubist style portrait in place of Lord Brahma*”<sup>22</sup>. Apart from these examples lotus enhances the beauty of water ponds of Indian paintings for instance “a dreamy lotus pond” with the celestial beings in the Jaysiri Burman’s paintings and in so many other scenes of Indian miniature paintings.

### Ritualistic Symbols

The tilak, is a mark made on someone’s forehead, represents one of a ritualistic practice in India generally followed in Hindu mythology. On a man, the tilak takes the form of a line and usually indicates his sectarian affiliation. For woman, a tilak usually takes the form of a bindi or dot which has its own described symbolism. Indian artists like Laxman Goud (Appendix: plate-9) and Thota Vaikuntam are some of those artists who often positioned a bindi on the forehead of their women characters in paintings (Appendix: plate-10). The followers of Shiva known as Saivites adorned three horizontal lines across the forehead, with or without a red dot. Sometimes a crescent moon or trident is also included among these symbols shown in some paintings also. One of the best example is a painting named “*Pandit*” of Krishna Hebbar (Appendix: plate-11). Tilak described an importance to be a part of such a strong tradition of Indian mythology as shown on the forehead of almost all the Indian gods and goddesses as well as their worshippers.

### Some Geometric Forms as Symbols

Some more symbols that can be included in this series are from the tantric ideology which is associated directly or indirectly with Indian mythology. “*Tantra – Since times immemorial, the term ‘Tantra’ has been used for a specific process, technique, method or a system like Bhairav Tantra, Dhyaan Tantra, Paak Tantra, Kaam Tantra etc. All healing techniques are Tantra skills. All sorts of activities such as meditation, prayer, worship are actually Tantra skills. The use of a special method is called Tantra. The Tantra used with pure & selfless feeling is a ‘divine Tantra’ (White Magic) and the one used with ill feeling is called ‘Tantrikta’ (Black Magic)*”.<sup>23</sup> The history of tantra is too complex to trace and mostly considered obscure as in case of the history of religion. “*Many tantras offer mythical explanations for their origins,*

often setting themselves as the given word of either Siva or a goddess such as Davi.... Shiva is known in Hinduism as Yogiraj or Yogeshwara 'The king of yoge' or 'God of yoga', while his consort is considered his perfect feminine equal"<sup>24</sup>. Pran Nath Mago explain that "long before, Indian yogis had conceived some symbolic abstract signs or yantras (the sri yantra being the most vital and significant of the Tantric philosophy)."<sup>25</sup> "Yantra – Yantra is a geometrical shape or a design through which by using a special picture or lines, we express the force of powers & energies of the Nature and those of our own thoughts. All these pictures, lines or symbols are called Yantr".<sup>26</sup> These abstract symbols have been "incorporated by the artists who did not have any practical experience of tantra, but adopted these symbols from yantra, mandala or diagrams. The iconic symbols of male and female energy and panchamahabhutas have been used to evolve some geometrical patterns with harmonious forms and colour representation of purusa, prakriti, bija and yantra have been introduced in the paintings."<sup>27</sup> Symbol like Bindu, a prominent symbol, used in Indian art at several times with a variety of execution. Philosophers take this symbol as a source of light and energy. "It has also been used to define a point of meditation where you focus all your energies on that one point or dot."<sup>28</sup> Indian contemporary artist Syed Haider Raza, is an Indian artist who lived and worked in "France since 1950"<sup>29</sup>, but keeps strong attachment with India, who came into limelight during nineteen-eighties due to his exploration of geometric symbols in search of self expressions and these symbols related to the traditional tantric forms and ideas as for example "Bindu"<sup>30</sup> "had made a symbolic pattern with the orb of sun, which is represented as a black circle with geometrical fractions with symbolic representation."<sup>31</sup> (Appendix: plate-12) S.H. Raza included the Bindu symbol along with other geometric forms also to create a new abstraction in his painting design's wholeness depends on these dots or bindus. Some other prominent Symbols like "Shri Yantra"<sup>32</sup>, "Shatkona"<sup>33</sup> and "Mandala"<sup>34</sup> etc. Zimmer explains that Yantra, consists of three important sections "(i) a square outer frame, composed of straight lines broken according to a regular pattern, (ii) an enclosed arrangement of concentric circles and stylised lotus petals, (iii) a concentric composition of nine interpenetrating triangles".<sup>35</sup> G.R. Santosh, his paintings sometimes show closely linked with that of tantric philosophy and considered as the vanguard of Neo-Tantric waves in modern Indian paintings. Symbols like yantra and mantra, the definite symbolic form of his images become a means of experiencing the cosmic forces of nature. Another member of this group is from tantra is mandala consists a basic square with circle symbolizing the intersection between the earthly world and the spiritual. "Mandala is a spiritual and ritual symbol in Hinduism and Buddhism representing the universe"<sup>36</sup>. P.T. Reddy and Mahirwani Mamtani are called veteran painter who initially captivated some forms, derived inspiration from the manifestation of tantric documents, particularly of the mandala concepts for achieving centrovision. Another symbol belongs to the tantric ideology is Shatkona used by Indian painters like K.C. Panikker (Appendix: plate-13) and G.R.Santosh (Appendix: plate-14). "Shatkona is a "six-pointed star", is two interlocking triangles; the upper stands for Shiva, purusha and fire, the lower for Shakti, prakriti and water".<sup>37</sup> Nirode Majumdar of the Calcutta artists group has initiated experiments with colour and form symbolism with the ritual practices associated with the cult of mother Goddess...."<sup>38</sup> (Appendix: plate-15) Another artist Biren Das tries to simplify every form of his compositions. A central point which is to be found in each of Biren Das's design reveals a light or energy from that point to explore the tantric meditation philosophy (Appendix: plate-16).

Due to the unique design remarkable use of tantric symbols by Indian painters have provided a distinctive abstraction for Indian contemporary paintings. These above mentioned painters are generally considered as exponents of tantric symbols in their art.

### Symbolic Presentation of Man-Maid Items

War episodes have been considered very important events in Indian mythology. The war weapons of divinities are also considered as equally important as other iconographic symbols related to them. Generally, almost every image of Gods and Goddesses in India holds at least one weapon in his or her hand respectively. The most prominent one out of them is *Trishula*. The *Trishula*, “the weapon symbolizes empire and the irresistible force of transcendental reality. The *Trishula* (also spelled *Trisula*, Sanskrit for ‘three spear’) especially considered the emblem of the God Shiva. The three prongs of the trishula represents Shiva’s three aspects of creator, preserver, destroyer as well as the three shaktis will, action and wisdom”.<sup>39</sup> The fearsome goddess Durga also bendishes a trishula in one of her seven hands, often seen to holds this weapon while killing the demons in the Indian paintings such as Anjali Ela Menon’s painting “Sakti” (Appendix: plate-17) and Ratan Parimoo’s Mahishasur Mardin (Appendix: plate-18) as appearing goddess to demolish the evils finally by attacking demon with a trishula.

Some of others symbols dragged from Indian mythological episodes appear in Indian paintings in a highly regular form such as *the flute*, indicates a instrument of Lord Krishna, most often painted by Manjeet Baba (Appendix: plate-19). Generally the painting of “*Lord Krishna playing his flute awakens devotion in the hearts of Hindu devotees, because it reminds them of God calling the soul to eternal wakefulness in Him*”.<sup>40</sup> Krishna, the youthful and delightful flute-player: as Murali-manohar, "the handsome one with a flute" is often depicted standing beneath a sacred tree, with his flute to his lips, in a graceful leg crossed pose, a garland of flowers round his neck, a milk cow at his side affectionately licks his foot.

### CONCLUSIONS

Indian Mythology is wide, takes time to understand the subtle facts related to it. Indian arts always try to connect an easy and visually possible way to interact with the mythological elements. Hence Indian paintings borrowed a symbolic vocabulary from Indian Mythology to explore intensity of the conception and increase the value of long existing traditions. Artists used these symbols either to attempt the narratives or take it as design only. In both ways they succeeded to connect the Indians with their traditional roots as well as create a unique method of presenting a wide area through limited signs. So these signs and symbols play a significant role to describe the diversity of Indian myths in at a glance. The present paper puts an emphasis on those paintings which are motivated by the role of Indian mythological symbols. The study deals with the all time artists, their techniques and methods, who were involved in mythological paintings.

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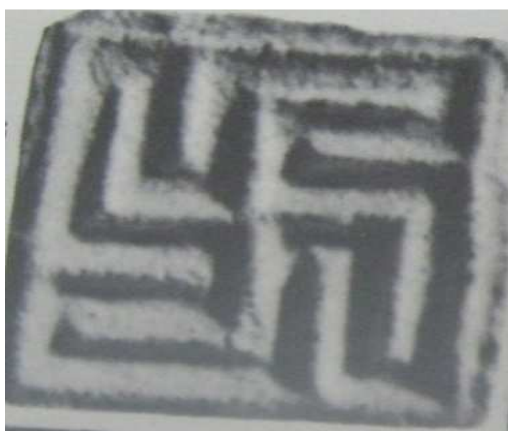
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## APPENDICES



(Appendix: Plate-1): Harappa Civilisation, Second Millennium B.C. British Museum.)  
 Painting Source: Indian Mythology, Ions Vernica, Bounty Books, 2004, ISBN- 10:0753709481. P-9





(Appendix: Plate-2): “Under the Bodhi Tree” by Nanda Lal Bose, Tempra on Paper, 16×26 cms, Courtesy: Collection of B.K. Birla. Painting Source: Tradition and Modernity in Indian Arts, during the Twentieth Century, Neelima Vashishtha, Aryan Books International, New Delhi, 2010



(Appendix: Plate-3): “Buddha and his disciplines” by Venkatappa, Courtesy: G. Venkatachalan, Painting Source: Tradition and Modernity in Indian Arts, during the Twentieth Century, Neelima Vashishtha, Aryan Books International, New Delhi, 2010



(Appendix: Plate-4): Painting Showing Krishna Uprooting a Branch of the Parijata Tree from Indra’s Garden, Placed it on Garuda’s Back...(Miniature, Chamba c. 1720, 210×269 mm with Borders, Chandigarh Govt. Museum (Ref. 12921).) Painting Source: The Blue God, Published, P Banerjee, Published by Lalit Kala Academy, Rabindra Bhavan, New Delhi, 1981, 1999, ISBN: 61-67507-01-2



(Appendix: Plate-5): “Padampani Bodhistava”, The Colour and the Monochrome Reproduction of the Ajanta Fresco Based on Photograph by G. Yazdani, Published under the Special Authority of His Exalted Highness The Nizam, Pined in Great Britain by Messers Henri Stone and Son Banbury



(Appendix: Plate-6): Arpana Kaur “The Great Departure” Lalit kala contemporary edition-48, page39



(Appendix: Plate-7): Ramchandarn, A. “Lotus Pond (night)” 216×182. 9 Diptych. Oil, 1998, Private, New Delhi, Painting Source: Tuli Neville, “The Flamed-Mosaic, Indian Contemporary Painting, HEART in Association with Mapin Publishing Pvt. Ltd.”, 1997, ISBN:8-185822-45-X (Mapin), Page-56



(Appendix: Plate-8): “Sour Grapes” by Atul Dondia, Oil on acrylic Canvas; 175×122 cm, 1997.  
*Painting Source:* Contemporary Indian Art: Other Realities Edited by Yashodhara Dalmlnia, Marg Publication, Vol.53 Number 3, March 2002, 2008



(Appendix: Plate-9): “Untitled” by Laxman Gaud Pen, Pencil and Water Colour, 12×12 cms.  
*Painting Source:* Lalit Kala Contemporary Edition-48



(Appendix: Plate-10): “Untitled” By Thota Vacuntam, Acrylic on Canvas,  
*Painting Source:* Kala-Dirgha, October 2011, Vol.12, No.23



(Appendix: Plate-11): Hebbar, k.k.: “Pandits” 762×89.Oil, 1948 , Private, Bombay. Painting Source: Tuli Neville, “The Flaned-Mosaic, Indian Contemporary Painting, HEART in Association with Mapin Publishing Pvt. Ltd.”, 1997, ISBN:8-185822-45-X (Mapin), Page-108



(Appendix: Plate-12): *Bindu and Earth* (1993) Acrylic on canvas; 160.0×80.0 cm. Painting Source: Tradition and Modernity in Indian Arts, during the Twentieth Century, Neelima Vashishtha, Aryan Books International, New Delhi



(Appendix: Plate-13): “Untitled” by K.C.S. Paniker, Picture in Gold, Oil on Canvas 211×122.5 cm Acc. No. 2501. Painting Source: *Lalit Kala Contemporary Edition-48*







(Appendix: Plate-16): De, Biren.; You July 1970, 132×132. Oil, 1970 Chester Et David Herwitz, USA  
*Painting Source:* Tuli Neville, “The Flaned-Mosaic, Indian Contemporary Painting, HEART in Association with Mapin Publishing Pvt. Ltd.”, 1997, ISBN: 8-185822-45-X (Mapin), Page-221



(Appendix: Plate-17): Anjaolie Ela Menon : “Shakti”, Oil on Masonite Board with Gold Leaf 91×61 cm.  
*Painting Source:* Lalit Kala Contempotary Edition-48





(Appendix: Plate-18): Parimoo, R. “Mahishasur Mardini” , Oil on Canvas, 1991. Painting Source: Kala Dirgha, April 2002, vol.2, No. 4



(Appendix: Plate-19): “Pink Field and the Flute Player” by Manjit Bawa, Oil on Canvas 172.5×137 cm Acc. No. 3840. Painting Source: Lalit Kala Contemporary Edition-48

