



Symbolism in the Works of Modern Indian Artists: Visual Language, Identity, and Cultural Memory from the Bengal School to Contemporary Practice

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Abstract

Symbolism has been one of the most persistent and transformative threads running through modern Indian art, connecting the anti-colonial imagination of the early twentieth-century Bengal School to the globalised installation practices of the twenty-first century. This paper examines how modern Indian artists have used symbolic imagery — drawn from mythology, folk tradition, the human body, and everyday objects — to negotiate questions of nationhood, cultural identity, gender, memory, and social change. Beginning with Abanindranath Tagore's allegorical Bharat Mata (1905) and Jamini Roy's return to Kalighat and patachitra idioms, the study traces the symbolic vocabularies of Amrita Sher-Gil, the Bombay Progressive Artists' Group (M. F. Husain, S. H. Raza, and Tyeb Mehta), K. G. Subramanyan, and Bhupen Khakhar, before turning to the reinvention of the symbolic object in the installation art of Subodh Gupta and Bharti Kher. Drawing on art-historical scholarship, exhibition literature, and semiotic theory, the paper argues that symbolism in modern Indian art functions less as a static inventory of motifs than as an evolving, dialogic visual language through which artists have continuously renegotiated the relationship between tradition and modernity, the sacred and the everyday, and the individual and the collective. The paper concludes that symbolism remains a vital strategy for modern and contemporary Indian artists seeking to speak simultaneously to local cultural memory and global artistic discourse.

Keywords: Symbolism, modern Indian art, Bengal School, Progressive Artists' Group, Iconography, cultural identity, semiotics.

Introduction

Symbolism has shaped Indian visual culture for centuries, from the lotus and dharmachakra in Buddhist art to the many-armed deities of Hindu temple traditions. With the emergence of modern Indian painting in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these symbolic traditions did not disappear. Instead, artists transformed them in response to colonial modernity, anti-colonial nationalism, social change, and international artistic exchange. Modern Indian art is often understood to begin with the Bengal School's resistance to academic realism, to develop through the cosmopolitan experiments of the Progressive Artists' Group after Independence, and to continue into the heterogeneous practices of the contemporary period. Across these transitions, symbolism remained a powerful means of articulating ideas that exceeded literal representation, including nationhood, spirituality, trauma, gender, memory, and



everyday experience. This paper examines symbolism not as a fixed iconographic system but as a living visual language shaped by historical context, artistic intention, material practice, and collective cultural memory. It moves chronologically from Abanindranath Tagore and Jamini Roy to Amrita Sher-Gil, M. F. Husain, S. H. Raza, Tyeb Mehta, K. G. Subramanyan, Bhupen Khakhar, Subodh Gupta, and Bharti Kher in order to show how symbolic form has been continually reimagined within Indian modernism.

Symbolism as Visual Language

The study of symbolism in modern Indian art benefits from a semiotic framework, in which images, colours, forms, and materials function as signs rather than merely decorative elements. Their meanings are not self-evident; they emerge through cultural memory, literary reference, religious association, and the interpretive participation of viewers. In this context, a motif in modern Indian art is rarely only private or idiosyncratic. Even when artists assign deeply personal meanings to recurring forms, those meanings often resonate with broader visual traditions already familiar within Indian cultural life. A bindu, a horse, a courtyard, a roadside shrine, or a kitchen utensil carries symbolic force because it exists simultaneously as image, object, memory, and cultural sign. To interpret such works adequately, one must therefore attend both to inherited iconographic meanings and to the historical pressures that reshape them, including colonialism, Partition, migration, sexuality, class, and globalisation. Symbolism in modern Indian art thus operates as a mode of mediation between tradition and invention, collective memory and individual expression, the sacred and the ordinary.

The Bengal School and the Iconography of the Nation

The Bengal School, led by Abanindranath Tagore, laid an important foundation for modern Indian painting by developing an indigenous visual language in opposition to British academic realism (Mitter, 2007). Tagore's *Bharat Mata* (1905), created during the Swadeshi movement, depicts a saffron-robed, four-armed female figure holding symbols of food, clothing, learning, and spiritual knowledge. Originally conceived as *Banga Mata*, the image became a broader symbol of India (Kumar, 2024; Britannica, n.d.-a). By combining Hindu goddess iconography with Mughal and Japanese-inspired techniques, Tagore transformed the idea of the nation as a mother into a sacred political symbol. Nandalal Bose further developed this symbolic approach through murals and illustrations, drawing on folk, temple, and pan-Asian traditions. His simplified linear style helped establish symbolism and indigenous traditions as alternatives to European naturalism, influencing later modernists such as Jamini Roy and the Progressives. If the Bengal School used symbolism to visualise the nation, Jamini Roy used it to reclaim an indigenous cultural ground for modern art. Trained in academic European painting, Roy gradually rejected illusionistic naturalism and turned instead to the formal resources of Kalighat pat, Bengali patachitra, and terracotta temple reliefs. His mature style, characterised by flat colour, bold black contours, simplified forms, and frontal composition, functioned symbolically in itself. It signalled a refusal of colonial academic conventions and affirmed the aesthetic authority of folk and vernacular traditions. Roy's subjects, including Krishna, gopis, Santhal dancers, village mothers, and episodes from the Ramayana, reinforced this orientation by locating modern Indian art within a shared reservoir of popular memory rather than elite Westernised taste. Even his materials carried symbolic weight, as he increasingly employed woven surfaces, earth-based pigments, and local supports rather than imported



oil paint. In works such as *Cat and Lobster*, Roy demonstrated how a highly reduced folk-derived image could condense humour, appetite, vitality, and cultural familiarity into a compact symbolic form. His contribution to modern Indian art lies in showing that modernity could emerge through the reinvention of local visual traditions rather than through imitation of Europe.

Amrita Sher-Gil: The Female Body as Symbolic Field

Amrita Sher-Gil introduced a different mode of symbolism into modern Indian art by making the female body and women's social spaces central to pictorial meaning. Educated in Paris and shaped initially by European modernism, she underwent a major transformation after encountering South Indian painting and the Ajanta murals. Thereafter, she turned toward Indian subjects with renewed seriousness, painting women not as decorative accessories but as psychologically charged presences. In works such as *In the Ladies' Enclosure*, the enclosed courtyard functions as more than setting; it becomes a metaphor for intimacy, social regulation, and the emotional architecture of women's lives. Her repeated use of paired or grouped female figures similarly opens a symbolic field in which questions of identity, interiority, and relationality unfold. Sher-Gil's treatment of the female nude was equally significant. Rather than conforming to the objectifying conventions of the male gaze, her figures appear self-contained, introspective, and emotionally complex. Through domestic rituals, female companionship, and bodily presence, Sher-Gil created a symbolic language that linked gendered experience to broader questions of modern subjectivity in colonial India.

The Progressive Artists' Group and Post-Independence Symbolism

Founded in 1947, the Progressive Artists' Group sought to break from both Bengal School revivalism and colonial academic realism. Yet its members did not abandon symbolism. Instead, they reconfigured it through highly personal visual vocabularies shaped by modernism, Partition, urbanisation, and postcolonial nation-building. In the work of M. F. Husain, S. H. Raza, and Tyeb Mehta, symbolism became less collective and allegorical than psychological, philosophical, and existential, while still drawing energy from Indian cultural memory.

M. F. Husain: The Horse as Vital Motif

Among the recurring images of Indian modernism, M. F. Husain's horse is perhaps the most recognisable. Rendered in dynamic movement, with elongated limbs and muscular force, the horse became a recurring emblem of vitality, momentum, grace, and freedom. Its resonance derives partly from its deep roots in Indian visual and textual traditions, where the horse appears in Vedic ritual, epic narrative, royal iconography, and miniature painting. Husain reactivated these associations within a modern pictorial language marked by speed, improvisation, and expressive line. The horse in his work can be read at once as a sign of national aspiration, masculine energy, and the artist's own restless mobility across regions, styles, and identities. Its enduring power lies in its flexibility: the motif moves easily between mythology, autobiography, and public symbolism while retaining an immediate visual intensity.



S. H. Raza: The Bindu and Sacred Geometry

S. H. Raza developed one of the most philosophically articulated symbolic systems in modern Indian art. After early experiments in landscape and gestural abstraction, he turned toward geometric compositions centred on the bindu, the primordial point associated in Indian metaphysical traditions with origin, concentration, and the generative seed of creation. In Raza's mature paintings, the bindu is not a mere formal device; it is a locus of energy and stillness around which colour, geometry, and cosmology are organised. Circles, triangles, and squares draw upon the visual logic of yantra and mandala traditions, while chromatic intensity reinforces the spiritual and elemental charge of the compositions. Raza's symbolism is distinctive because it insists on metaphysical content without relinquishing modernist abstraction. His work shows how Indian modernism could reconcile international formal experimentation with a sustained return to indigenous philosophical concepts.

Tyeb Mehta: Violence, Constraint, and Transformation

Tyeb Mehta forged a darker symbolic language shaped by the traumatic afterlife of Partition and by a sustained engagement with violence as psychic and historical condition. His recurring figures, including the falling body, the trussed bull, and Mahishasura, are not narrative illustrations but condensed symbolic structures. In Trussed Bull, the animal's traditional connotations of strength, virility, and sacred presence are deliberately inverted: bound and immobilised, it becomes an image of blocked energy and violated power. Mehta's Mahishasura paintings similarly destabilise mythic certainties by collapsing the boundary between aggressor and victim, human and animal, violence and transformation. In these works, symbolism no longer stabilises cultural meaning; it unsettles it. Mehta's art demonstrates how inherited motifs can be reworked to register fear, fracture, and existential unease within the history of modern India.

K. G. Subramanyan: Myth, Craft, and Vernacular Modernity

K. G. Subramanyan expanded the possibilities of symbolic practice by refusing the hierarchy that separated fine art from craft, folk production, and pedagogic play. Working across painting, printmaking, glass, terracotta, mural, and toy-making, he treated symbolic form as something mobile, layered, and socially embedded. His murals often juxtapose mythological beings, epic references, local craft idioms, and scenes from contemporary life, allowing multiple registers of meaning to coexist within the same visual field. This density reflects his conviction that Indian modernity does not require a break from tradition; rather, it emerges through the continued transformation of vernacular and artisanal forms. The symbolic richness of Subramanyan's work lies in its refusal of singular meaning. A figure may simultaneously evoke deity, puppet, folk toy, and modern social actor. In this way, his art reimagines symbolism as a dialogic and materially grounded language of cultural continuity.

Bhupen Khakhar: The Symbolism of the Everyday

Bhupen Khakhar brought symbolism decisively into the domain of the ordinary. Drawing on the visual environment of small-town India, including trade signs, domestic interiors, roadside shrines,



and middle-class routines, he developed a language in which the everyday became a vehicle for desire, vulnerability, irony, and self-revelation. His paintings do not rely on grand mythological motifs; instead, they grant symbolic density to barbershops, balconies, accountants, and neighbourhood temples. This shift was especially important in relation to sexuality. As Khakhar began to address his homosexuality more openly, architectural thresholds such as windows and balconies acquired symbolic importance as spaces of exposure, distance, self-display, and social judgment. Even his religious imagery remains rooted in vernacular life rather than transcendental abstraction. Khakhar's achievement lies in demonstrating that the intimate, local, and socially marginal can serve as powerful symbolic material within modern Indian art.

Symbolic Objects in Contemporary Installation Art

In contemporary Indian art, symbolism has expanded from painted motifs to objects, installations, and everyday materials. Artists such as Subodh Gupta and Bharti Kher transform familiar cultural objects into symbols of identity, memory, gender, migration, and globalization.

Subodh Gupta: Everyday Objects as Symbols

Subodh Gupta uses stainless-steel utensils such as thalis, tiffin carriers, milk containers, and cooking pots in monumental installations. These ordinary objects evoke home, domestic life, labour, migration, aspiration, and consumption. By enlarging and rearranging them, Gupta transforms everyday Indian material culture into powerful symbols within the context of global contemporary art.

Bharti Kher: The Bindi Reimagined

Bharti Kher reinterprets the traditional bindi as a contemporary artistic symbol. Traditionally linked with femininity, marriage, spirituality, and the female body, the bindi appears in her works in thousands, creating cellular, cosmic, ornamental, and cartographic forms. Kher uses it to explore gender, identity, embodiment, hybridity, and cultural transformation, demonstrating how a familiar cultural sign can acquire new meanings in contemporary art.

Conclusion

From Abanindranath Tagore's Bharat Mata to Bharti Kher's proliferating bindis, symbolism has remained one of the most resilient and adaptable modes within modern and contemporary Indian art. Across generations, artists have used symbols to address changing questions of nationhood, spirituality, identity, sexuality, violence, memory, and social transformation. What emerges from this survey is not a single symbolic system but a plurality of symbolic strategies, each shaped by distinct historical pressures and artistic commitments. Whether through the sacred icon, the folk image, the female body, the geometric sign, the wounded animal, the vernacular shrine, or the domestic utensil, Indian artists have repeatedly shown that cultural memory is not a static archive but an active resource for invention. Symbolism in Indian modernism therefore remains vital precisely because it enables continuity without repetition, and reinvention without cultural amnesia.



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