

Come to my Country

Part I

Jyoti Sahi

Paintings by Jyoti Sahi. Sahi connects the mystic and esoteric symbols of art drawn from various wisdom traditions to the concept of the Thirta Yatra (Holy Pilgrimage).



Figure 1: View of Chorin Church Across the Lake



Figure 2: Spirit of the Migrant Bird

The idea of a voyage resonates deeply with a spiritual quest. Every culture encapsulates the 'rites of passage.' Cultures are never static, but rather like migrant birds, cross over geographic boundaries.

W.B. Yeats, in his poem "Sailing to Byzantium" says "Monuments of unageing intellect....gather me into the artifice of eternity."¹

What the poet is searching for is a place where "...images that yet, Fresh images beget...." (Byzantium). Here is a land of the imagination, where "birds on the trees....set upon a golden bough to sing....of what is past, or passing, or to come" ('Sailing to Byzantium'). The artifice has a timeless quality, which is beyond the "common bird or petal. And all complexities of mire or blood" ('Byzantium').²

The mystical poet Kabir of the 15th century, says:

The arrow of the song has pierced me!
Come to my country.

But what is this country of which Kabir repeatedly reminds us?

I'm a bird from another country, my friend
I don't belong to this country....

Like a migrant bird, or "Hamsa," the soul is forever restless for another land. Of this Hamsa, or swan, Kabir speaks:

Tell me, O Swan, your ancient tale.
From what land do you come, O Swan? to what shore will
you fly?
Where would you take your rest, O Swan, and what do you
seek?....
There is a land where no doubt nor sorrow have rule; where the terror of
death is no more.
There the woods of spring are a-bloom and the fragrant scent 'He is I' is
borne on the wind;
There the bee of the heart is deeply immersed, and desires no other joy.
Poems of Kabir, translated by Rabindranath Tagore, XII

The poet, or artist, longs to discover the land of the imagination. Here the forms that embody dreams, are not temporal like the "complexities of mire or blood." And yet, this inner landscape of the spiritual quest, has its own alchemy, of

...sages standing in God's holy fire
As in the gold mosaic of a wall....
(Sailing to Byzantium)

Flames that no fagot feeds, nor steel has lit,
Nor storm disturbs, flames begotten of flames. (Byzantium)

Wrought in this inner furnace of the heart, base metal is transformed into deathless gold. The elemental is given a new meaning in the icon, and sacred architecture, built from the natural substances of clay, rock or timber, reach upward to a spiritual world, transforming the physical reality of the world in which we live and die. The voyage is itself a passage into another subtle world of symbol, and the “sign within the sign” (Kabir).

A Presence Speaks



Figure 3: The Spirit of the Place

There is a close connection between the imagination and what some artists have called the “spirit of a place.” This link goes back to the primal roots of culture, when wandering peoples felt that certain places were inhabited by a Presence. It is this Presence in a place which speaks

to the imagination. I have often played with the idea that a Site, that is a geographic place having very specific features, also has a kind of Sight. We speak of 'sight-seeing.' The traveller goes in search of a site. But it is not only we who see the site, the place also sees us. Mircea Eliade speaks of places having a hierophany. That means that a place is also the location for a vision—an epiphany. Through entering a place, and deeply engaging with that geographic site, we realize a new kind of vision.

Culture has arisen out of this engagement between a particular community and a place. The early emergence of the concept of 'nationhood,' was from a deep-seated feeling of belonging to a particular place, so that blood and mire, as W.B. Yeats puts it in his poem about Byzantium, get intermingled. Blood, symbolizing the forces of life that run through the body of an individual, become part of the earth where the individual lives and dies. The redness of the earth, what the poet William Blake understood as "Beulah," the red clay from which the Creator fashioned the body of the human being, is linked symbolically to the colour of human flesh. In fact the body itself is a "place."

The poet Kabir often uses the metaphor of an earthen vessel to describe the body. "Come to my land" is an invitation to experience what his body senses—to see the world as his body sees it. "Come to my land" is thus a passage into the physical world of those who inhabit the land, for whom the land is their way of seeing, listening, tasting, and touching. It is a communion with the other, by sharing not only the home of the other, but also eating the same food that nourishes the physical body of the other. This is the essence of that human culture of hospitality.

And yet, as Yeats reminds us in his two poems on Byzantium, a country, or its culture, is not just something material, or tangible. It is also a vision, which reaches out to a shore that is a step "into the artifice of eternity"

Once out of nature I shall never take
My bodily form from any natural thing,
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
Of hammered gold, and gold enamelling,
(Sailing to Byzantium)

"Byzantium" is not just a place on the Bosphorus, a place that represented a vibrant culture for more than a thousand years. Byzantium is for Yeats, a city of the mind, a memory that is also a way into his own inner world of imagining. This city becomes for him a heavenly city, an image of a place that lies beyond this world, and its mundane geography.

People nowadays tend to speak of a “global culture” and this seems to imply an art which has no local roots, being rather like some modern airport, or shopping mall, a place that is like every other place. But we all know that such places have no culture, they are really nowhere, and no-thing. Culture, like a living tree, always has its roots in a particular place, with its own very unique geographic setting. The uniqueness, and creativity of a particular vision, emerges out of this “sense of place,” be it the place where we live or visit as a place of pilgrimage; or that inner place, of the heart. It is through our body that we experience the world around us. Again as Kabir says:

Where did you come from?
Where are you going?
Get the news from your body!

That is why it is important that no matter where we travel, we must always listen to what our own body is telling us. We experience the outer world through the body, and so it is the body that mediates the world to our consciousness.

The Message of the Voyage

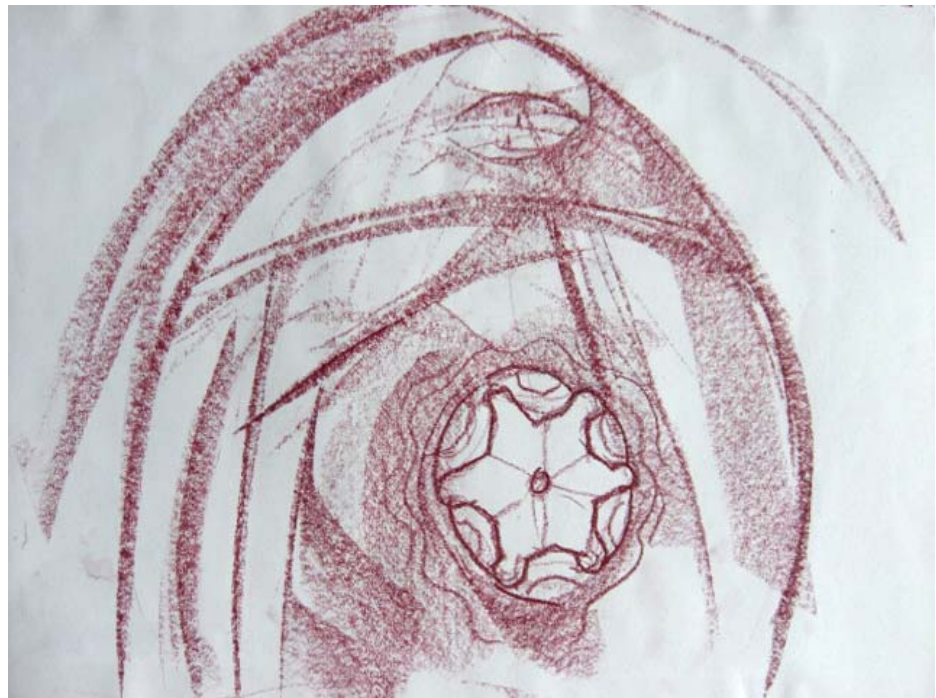


Figure 4: Voyage into Space

Henry Corbin has written an essay on “the theme of the Voyage and the Messenger.”³ It was Corbin who coined the term “the imaginal.” He discusses “The Story of the Bird” as it appears in Iranian mystical Sufi literature.

In an ecstatic ascension of the mind, it crosses the valleys and ranges of the cosmic mountain of Qaf. It was this story of Avicenna’s which Fariduddin Attar orchestrated so magnificently into the mystical epic entitled ‘The Language of the Birds’ (p.145).

The modern playwright and director, Peter Brook, developed this ‘Conference of the Birds’ (as it is also sometimes called) into an understanding of story-telling and dramatic action. For Peter Brook the ‘space’ in which the actors play their parts, is the cosmic space, the ‘empty space’ which is also like the prayer carpet that the devout Muslim carries with him.⁴ It is like a portable mosque, something that can be rolled up and transported by a migrant people. But it is a place that can be rolled out anywhere, at any time. As Shakespeare was to say, the stage is at once a specific site, but also a microcosm, a universe of its own.

More and more modern individuals are becoming nomadic like their primal ancestors. The period of settlements, more or less permanent, which defined the individual, is disappearing. An urbanized, shifting population, is no longer rooted to an agricultural plot of land. We become birds of passage, but this does not mean that we no longer communicate with the land. The four elements of fire, earth, air, and water continue to be the medium through which we are able to listen to the voice that speaks to us through our bodies.

There is a deep link between bio diversity and cultural diversity. A culture emerges out of the contact between a human community and the landscape that enfolds a settlement. Culture and nature are not opposed to each other; rather culture is the response that human beings make to nature. The fact that natural environments differ from one geographic context to another, means that cultures as they have emerged historically have also assumed very different forms. But still these cultural differences do constitute a challenge to human unity, and dialogue. Where human communities are on the move, the cultural forms that they evolve in their historical journey from place to place, give rise to tensions and misunderstandings.

Cultures are, as we have already remarked, never static. Constantly people are meeting and interacting in new ways—and this changing pattern of relationships constitutes the vitality and adaptability of cultures. But in the process of exchange, there is always the resistance brought about by the very need to evolve new forms of culture. Cultural growth, or evolution, is itself a process of parturition, of having to come out of the past in order to embrace the future. That is why culture is intimately connected to rites of passage. This is an essential way of understanding the life journey of the individual, whose path through the various stages, beginning with birth and concluding with death, mirrors in a way the life cycles that we find in nature. Every living form passes through stages of inception, germination, and growth followed by decline, and concluding in disintegration and dissolution back into the common humus from which life emerges, and to which all living beings return. Thus a philosopher like Aristotle related all forms of conscious evolution to biological rhythms that we find in nature. Civilizations rise and fall in the same way that natural processes develop, only to finally disintegrate, and give rise to new life forms.⁵

But whereas in nature these rhythms of life take place without the resistance brought about by the individual will to oppose change, in human cultures what we call a “tradition” is always in dialectical conflict with what is new, and questioning past solutions in the light of new conditions. Creativity is a perennial challenge to the structures of tradition. Tradition is often equated with what is dead and outdated, whereas the vibrant and living aspects of a culture look towards the future, and value the necessity to change with the times.

Not all Change is Good



Figure 5: The Ruins of Memory

Of course, change is not always good. There is a change that is for the worse, a change that is the beginning of a decline. To be sick, is to change in a negative sense. Cultures degenerate, and there a radical approach to re-vitalizing a culture has to discriminate between what is living, and what is dying in a cultural tradition. Coomaraswamy once made the rather misunderstood comment “from primitive man to modern man—what a decline!” Gandhi was also accused of condemning modernity, and wanting to go back to the past. To be “modern” is not necessarily to be better, or more healthy. There is much in modern society that is clearly a loss of integrity, involving a loss of culture. Globalization, for example, involves radical and far reaching processes of change. But these are not necessarily for the better. But this is not because change in itself is bad. Change is necessary, as the world in which we live, indeed the very natural environment in which we are, is constantly in a process of change. The Buddha was to point out that nobody can enter the same river twice. The flow of life giving waters in a river, mean that what we might perceive as the same river, is in fact constantly changing. We need, however, to understand change, in the context of life, rather than disease and death. What remains as a

connecting thread, is the will to live; culture needs to be renewed, and in that process, to be transformed.

Pilgrimage as a Process of Change and Transformation

From ancient times to go on a journey is itself a rite of passage. Thus the symbol of the boat, to take one example, is an invitation to embark on a voyage. Civilizations have their origins in the will to go on a quest, to reach out to further shores. “Mission” properly understood, is the call to cross over boundaries, to set out for a land that we do not know, to meet people that we have never before encountered. If we look carefully at the spirit underlying what is known as the “Acts of the Apostles,” we find that there is a call to go beyond what is known, to reach that which we do not know, and do not understand. It is a call to encounter, and dialogue with the “other.” There is an apocryphal saying of Jesus which has been inscribed over the gate that Akbar built at Fatehpur-Sikri, near Agra, which reads: “Jesus, on whom be peace, said: The world is a bridge—cross over it, but do not build your house on it.” Life, as we understand it in this mortal state, is a transition. It is a time in between two states of being. It is the Way, or ‘*Marga*.’ It is not the goal. It is this understanding of the human journey that underlies the sacramental nature of taking to the road, on a pilgrimage.

The cultural hero, as in the Mahabharata, has to go into exile, visiting the wilderness of the forest, mountain, or desert. The passage into the unknown is called a “Thirtha Yatra,” or pilgrimage to the sources (*Thirtha*) from which the life of a whole landscape comes. The Thirtha is a spring, and in Jainism the cultural hero is a “Thirthankara”; one who crosses over the source to find the further shore. But what the seeker is seeking is not just a living source of water, which evolves into a stream, and eventually flows like a great river to meet the ocean. What the seeker is journeying towards is not just a place in the landscape, that is a sacred ground, but rather the quest is for an inner place of meeting (*sangha*) where traditions flow together, creating a new entity. Many little streams contribute to the great river that we might link to a civilization, and this river itself finally merges with the ocean. Unity here is not a negation of diversity, but a discovery of diversity in unity.

Crossing Over, as a Way of Finding



Figure 6: Stepping into Sacred Space

The mysterious principle underlying the quest, the call to visit another “country” from the place where one is born and bred, is that only by travelling far away to another land, can one find oneself. There are many stories like this that indicate it is only possible to find the treasure that lies buried in the center of one’s own home by stepping out to look for it, in answer to a dream that calls the seeker to another land. In Indian art theory, to dance is to “step over” or to “trans-gress.” The Lord of the Dance, Shiva, is the one who steps over the demon of blindness (*Andhaka*) who lies beneath his foot, resting on the ground. The lifted leg of the dancer is a sign of ‘*Moksha*,’ or liberation. The dancer plays with what is firm, rooted in the particular place where the dancer stands, and the dancer’s will to step forward into the unknown. In the Islamic tradition, the whirling Dervish, is like the door, or ‘*Darvaza*,’ which also is attached to the vertical beam of the doorway. The door swings to and fro, allowing the seeker to pass from the outer to the inner, from the visible world to the invisible mystery.

Dance is the sacrament of movement; it is also the transforming liberation of the body. To dance is to recreate the universe. It is a cosmic expression. The Creator is a dancer—and the dance is also the mystery of destruction. Creation and destruction come together in the dance—life and death. Dance is energy, action, but also stillness. To be a dancer is to know the secret of repose. In the same way that music revolves around the eternal Silence, dance hinges on the axis of stillness. It is in this image of the dance that all opposites come together:

Where blood-begotten spirits come
And all complexities of fury leave,
Dying into a dance,
An agony of trance,
An agony of flame that cannot singe a sleeve.
(‘Byzantium’)

The Image of the Ruin



Figure 7: Ruined Temple

From the time of the Romantic poets in Europe, the ruin has evoked a sense of culture finally returning to nature. The romantic artist Caspar David Friedrich made many pictures in which the ruined edifice of a Gothic church seems to crumble back into the primal forest from where many of its architectural forms derive their symbolic force. The Holy Ground, whether in Europe or in India, carries the significance of the primal sacred grove. The Temple, with its hall of a thousand pillars, reminds one of the garden of Cyrus, here turned to stone.⁶ The image of the 'Garden of Cyrus' was developed by the philosopher and alchemist Sir Thomas Brown as a basis for his understanding of culture as a way of cultivating nature, of discovering in nature the underlying structures of the whole universe. The gardener, like Adam, is the archetypal ruler, or Prophetic King, whose task is to maintain the order that underlies the whole universe, of which the enclosed garden or Paradise is a microcosm.

In the Koranic story (18: 61-83, known as 'The Cave') we hear the legend of Moses and Khidr. Moses goes on a spiritual quest with his disciple to find the mysterious Khidr, who is a teacher of the prophets.⁷ (In Arabic the honorific title '*al-Khidr*' means 'The Green One.') Moses finds Khidr where two oceans meet, and Khidr agrees to take Moses on a spiritual quest, as long as he refrains from asking questions. They have various adventures together, and repeatedly Moses is shocked by the strange actions of Khidr, and cannot help challenging him by asking him the meaning of what he does. Finally they arrive at a small village, where none of the inhabitants are willing to welcome them. Khidr discovers a ruined wall, which he proceeds to repair. Moses cannot help remonstrate with Khidr. "If you had wanted, you could have demanded wages for doing this!"

Khidr finally loses his patience with Moses, saying "This is where you and I part ways, but I will now give you the explanation of the things to which you could not forbear objecting." Khidr now reveals that under the ruined wall there lies a treasure. This treasure has been buried there by a devout man, whose two sons are now orphans. Khidr is repairing the ruined wall, so that when the boys come of age, they can come to this place, and dig up the treasure which has been buried for them there.

The story of Khidr is itself a parable relating to the spiritual quest. Often this strange spirit of the Green seems to be linked to that which is destroyed. He probably represents the spirit of regeneration in every cultural tradition. Under the ruin lies hidden and buried the seed-treasure of the future. Khidr is the guardian of that which has yet to be revealed, but which remains hidden in the unconscious. In the Sufi traditions of Islam he is linked to water, and also to Jesus, who according to one account had the power to walk on the waters, and to save those who were drowning. The strange, incomprehensible acts of Khidr are related to the genius of the unconscious. Finally, he tells Moses, the lawgiver, who is shocked by the apparent irrationality of Khidr's symbolic acts: "I certainly did not do this of my own accord." He, like the spirit on Nature, acts in accordance with the hidden purposes of the Divine Creator, whose compassion we cannot understand.

Cycles of Time



Figure 8: Doorway into Mystery

The ruin seems to be the end of all that human industry has laboured to erect. In harmony with the cycles of time, what humans achieve, has finally to crumble and return to the soil from which these edifices arose. Nature moves in, and takes over the proud constructs that human beings have made. Nature teaches us humility. In fact, according to one tradition, the reason why the great prophet Moses was sent by God to find Khidr, arose from his own assertion that he, Moses, was the wisest man of all. God shows Moses that there is someone wiser than him, who can be found at the “confluence of the oceans.” Here he discovers a primal vision, which is far older than prophecy, but which holds the mysterious key to the meaning of life.

Today we live in what appear to be apocalyptic times. Kabir, the mystic, speaks of a mystery that lies beyond the human constructions of Temple or Mosque. Kabir cries:

It's just as well, my pitcher shattered—
I'm free of all that hauling water!
The burden on my head is gone....

A single well, Kabira—
And water-bearers many!

Pots of every shape and size
But the water always One.

'Bhala Hua Meri Gagri Phooti' by Kabir

Here the artist becomes the iconoclast. Beyond the created form, lies a mystery that no words can contain. The image has to be destroyed to discover the formlessness that lies beyond all form. There is an elemental beauty in these images, which reminds us that all forms of Culture have to return to the sources of Nature, which are like the primal golden egg—what the Islamic tradition referred to as 'Sifr,' the 'Nought' from which all number derives. This is the Sypher that art points to—what the poet Yates calls "the artifice of eternity" (in 'Sailing to Byzantium').

The Elemental Place

Part II



Figure 9: Chorin Church Westfront Face

Reflections of an Indian Artist Travelling Between Continents

It was quite a culture shock. I had flown directly from Bangalore's newly constructed International Airport to Berlin via Frankfurt. I had come to attend an artist's "Pleine air" to commemorate the 750th anniversary of a Cistercian monastery at a place called Chorin, an

hour's drive from the city centre of Berlin, in the direction of the Polish border. This was a centre of the ancient principality of Brandenburg. Here, the Ascanian Margraves of Brandenburg had their burial place. Earlier, this area known as the Marches of Brandenburg, had been settled by Slavonic tribes. When the Cistercian monks came to develop this part of the land, there had already existed an older church and castle near to the small lake called Amts See. The new monastic foundation was established in 1258. The monastery probably rose up on the earlier ruins created by tribal conflicts between Ascanians, Pomeranians, and Danes at the turn of the 12th century.

Passing through the villages and neighbouring town of Eberswalde one has a sense that here was one of the frontiers of a Christian culture reaching towards the North, about a thousand years ago. Those were unsettled times when wandering tribes off the steppes of Russia were moving South towards Europe, and the warmer climes of the Mediterranean. The process was one of transformation of nature, being humanized by culture

Here, in the northern reaches of Europe, the landscape had changed as the ice melted. These gently undulating planes, with pockets of water left over from the ice age, form an interlinking pattern of inland lakes, around which were thick forests. A new energy of light and warmth was already in the process of changing nature into a biosphere fed by waters that now offered a hospitable environment for vegetation and animal habitation. The waters of the melting ice had over centuries broken down primordial rock formations, creating a rich loam of clay and water. Deposits of sand, gravel, and lime also provided the basic natural ingredients for building new settlements, constructed in clearings made by nomadic tribes in the primeval forest. But for this to be possible, yet another elemental energy had also to be harnessed—the transforming power of fire

Fire is an ambivalent source of life, being both creative and also destructive. One third of the ancient hymns of the Vedas are dedicated to the Lord of Fire, the god known as *Agni*. It is with the help of fire that clearings in the forest could be made by early settlers. But not only did fire work to create a space for human habitation, it also gave the technology for transforming the earth. A Bronze Age gave place to an iron culture that now had the technological skills to smelt iron from the bedrock, and so forge implements that could be used both for agriculture and war. Weapons, which seemed to have an almost magical power, were manufactured and this technology fed the myths about heroes who were men at arms.

It was in the form of dragons we find images of the struggle against mysterious monsters of the primeval vegetation. This culture of conflict with the dark forces of the forest gives rise to a rich symbolic world that the early monks built into the structures of their new places of worship. Intricate carvings of leaf patterns and heavy braces that support stem-like pillars that resemble the shape of a chalice, involve knotted interlacing patterns that are thought to represent eternity.

Myth and the Landscape

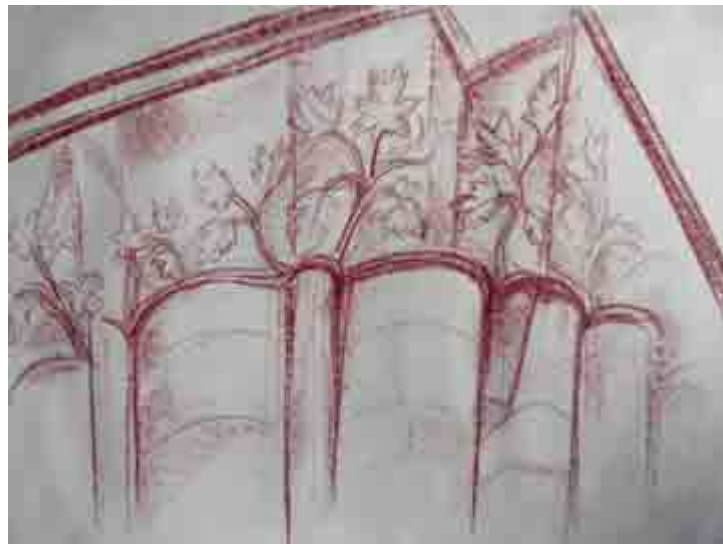


Figure 10: Leaf Motif on Capital

As an artist I have been interested in the way that myths have arisen out of a particular landscape. About 25 years ago, I began to make a particular study of folk and tribal myths in India. I found that these myths spoke to my imagination, and opened up a whole inner world of my own psyche.⁸ I have been particularly fascinated by the ideas of the psychologist Carl Jung, who suggested that myths, which form the basis for religious symbols across the world, are in fact profoundly human. In that sense myths are universal, or what he termed archetypal, because people all over the world use the imagination to understand reality. The way they make meaning out of their geographic and political reality follows patterns that are common to all human beings. So, even though myths express very local concerns, and memories, they also reach out to

speaking a universal language that can be meaningful in very different human conditions

The work I did on the tribal myths of Chotanagpur, for example, seemed to have a wider application than could be explained simply by understanding how these legends had arisen out of a particular community, rooted in a very specific locality. I felt that one of the reasons for this was the way in which myths articulate the relationship between culture and nature, between human life styles and the materials that are readily available in the local landscape. The elemental materials with which human cultures work, are local realities, but also universal in that they provide the basis for all cultures. This interplay between the local and the universal is an age-old question that applies to the diversity not only that we find in nature, but also in cultures. Every culture is unique, and yet every culture interacts with other cultures, and is enriched by the cultures of people who live far away.

I was surprised to note the way that art forms, and the mythic world view that underlie all cultures in India, have aroused a deep interest among artists in Europe. Reversibly, Indian artists have also been inspired by western movements in art. I myself have, since the time when I studied art in London, been fascinated by the way the 'expressionist' artists in Europe used symbols and myths to explore the inner world of the psyche.

The very fact that I had travelled so far to participate in this workshop with artists in a distant part of Europe indicates that art can be a form of communication, of learning, and also sharing what shapes the inner world of the imagination in every human being.

Ruins and the Landscape as Memory

Out of the ruins of an earlier age, the monks were able to find a new synthesis of subconscious myth and knowledge as to how nature could be transformed into a fruitful culture. The monastic garden contained healing herbs that the monks gathered from the rich diversity of the local vegetation, representing these herbs in the decoration of the Church to symbolize the healing power of the Mother Mary to whom every Cistercian monastery is dedicated.

Cistercian architecture had developed in France, where sand stones were readily available, allowing craftspeople to make the light traceries

which could soar to great heights, but also allow light into the interior space of the Church nave. The plentiful supply of wood, which was cut down to enable agriculture, fuelled fires in which metal was extracted from stone, and furnaces burned the shaped clay bricks that provided building materials.

But here in the northern part of Germany, the monks had to rely on another material—brick. And so a distinctive style of early Gothic architecture can be found here which is made from carefully moulded and cut brickwork. The monastic impulse converts not only nature, but also the concept of the warlike hero into another type of brave conflict—now no longer directed against an outer enemy, but inwards as a form of asceticism. Human nature is moulded and transformed, as much as the materials found outside in the landscape.

This process of internalizing a cultural process was also very important in India, where *Kshatriya* clans evolved the concept of the “renouncer” or *Sanyassi*, who represented a new form of heroic ideal. Buddha, for example, came from the same fighter clans who used outer weapons to establish their political power.

But in the figure of the sage or monk, an outer mission turned inwards, to achieve a new kind of consciousness through yogic meditation. The Cistercian understanding of the ancient monastic motto “Ora et Labora” (Work as Prayer) was understood as a commitment to manual labour in the fields combined with intellectual effort in the scriptorium where manuscripts were copied, and a new form of learning brought to the unlettered populace.

The Myth of the Iron Smelters

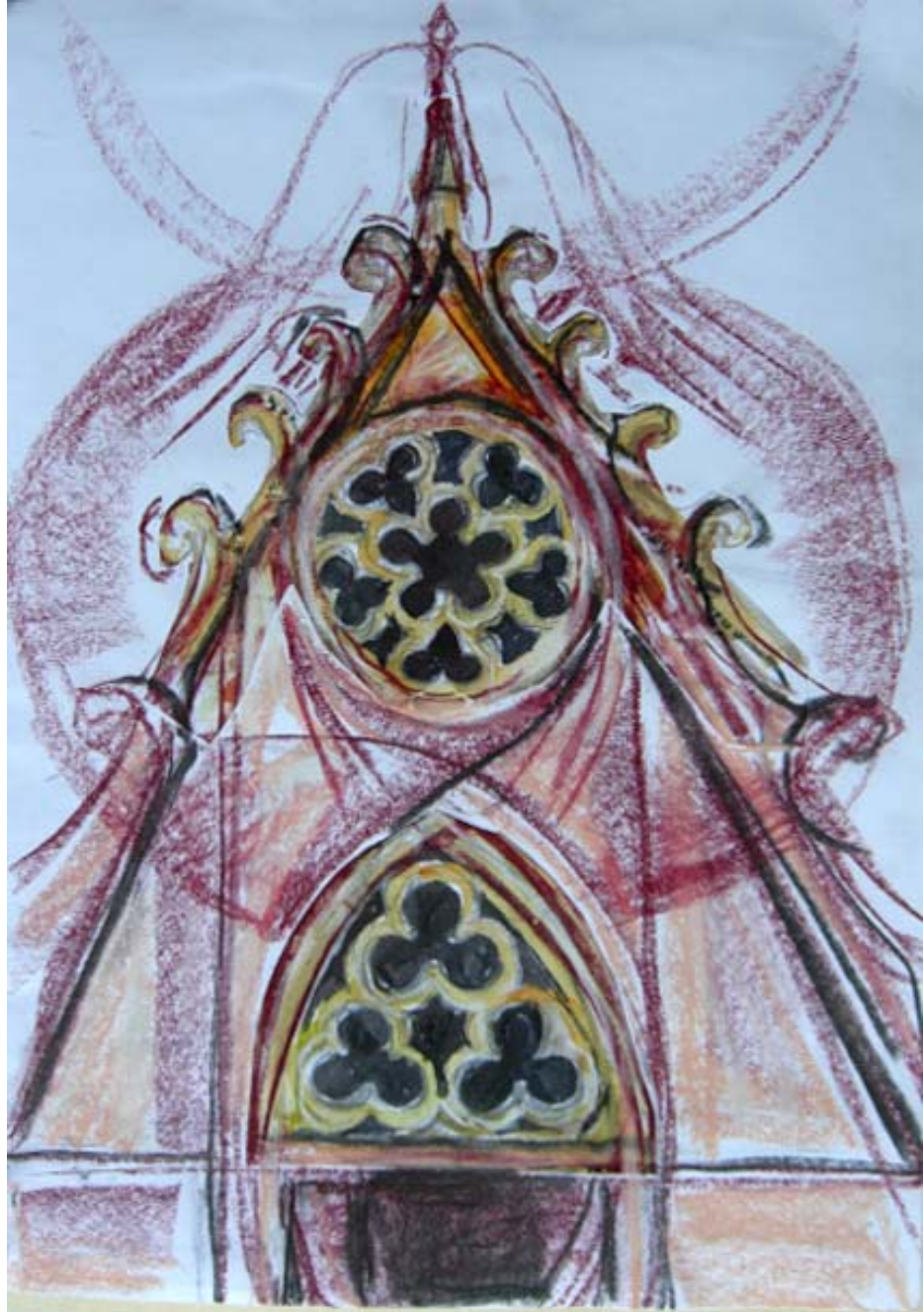


Figure 11: The Spirit of the Past

The ancient myth of the Iron Smelters, or Lohar Kahani, probably dates back to the axial age (the period from 800 BCE to 200 BCE) when

Buddha wandered the forests near to the Damodar River. It was here that ancient tribes first practised iron smelting. Some ancient sites where ironworks have been found seem to belong to around the fourth to second centuries BCE. According to legend, the peoples who developed this form of technology were also responsible for the mysterious steel column that we see near Kuthubh Minar in Delhi. Some even suggest that the chariot wheels and weapons used by the warring tribes described in the Sanskrit epic, the *Mahabharatha*, were fashioned by the same tribes of the Indo-Gangetic plains who later became experts in iron technology. It is in this same region of what is now called “Jharkhand” that the Tata Iron and Steel Company began large-scale modern iron industries.

Exploring this mythic world of ancient Adivasi communities, I was very much struck by the symbols that I found in this myth, which I felt related to the role of the Iron Smith that we find in many cultures. This figure of the Smith is closely associated with a Shamanistic tradition, where the primal technology of obtaining metal from elemental rock was seen as an alchemical process that could be also understood in psychic terms. In the Arthurian legends we hear of the hero finding magical weapons embedded in rock, from which it is the task of the chosen knight to draw a magic sword. This act of releasing the steel weapon from its rock case becomes a metaphor for an inner process of finding the psychic power to change natural substance into a cultural tool.

In the series of paintings that I worked on in the late 80s I tried to interpret the pre-historic myth in the light of an emerging concern about what industry was doing to the natural environment, and how this could be interpreted today as referring to ecological issues. Of course, within these myths about the Iron Age (kali-yuga in Indian mythic terminology) people did not know about ecology. But essentially what the myth addresses is the relation between human work and industry to the rhythms of nature. In many cultures around the world, iron is considered to be a dangerous or inauspicious metal. Those who worked with iron created not only the tools that played a vital part in agriculture, but weapons that felled trees and fought wars. Iron workers were regarded with fear as both magicians and harbingers of a new dark age.



Figure 12: Broken Stillness

One could perhaps trace the link between this work of transforming natural resources to create a whole civilization, to the kind of work that

early monastic foundations accomplished in the late Middle Ages. Perhaps one could find a connection between what became an important stride in the founding of our modern world, and a spiritual or psychological search for the transformation of nature into culture. What has been called the axial age, was also the age in which the different Metacosmic belief systems crystallized, whether in Greece, the Middle East, the Indian subcontinent, or China. One could, perhaps, trace a cultural trajectory that at first saw nature and its primal forces as manifestations of a Divine Presence in the elemental world that we perceive with our senses, to a later belief that the Creator exists beyond creation.

When the monks settled in Chorin, they wanted to follow the new artistic and architectural principles that were proposed by their founder-monks in Citeaux—particularly the ideas formulated by Bernard of Clairvaux. The new cultural awakening in Europe, heralded by the mystical and practical vision of thinkers like St. Bernard, was able to bring together various spiritual impulses coming both from the East and the West. What were the monks trying to do? The spiritual vision behind the dictum “ora et labora” (human physical labour can be a form of prayer), was that manual work has the capacity to transform the natural environment, and can also inform a deep spiritual awakening. Gandhi believed that work, being a purely physical activity, was not degrading but a way of initiating a deep spiritual transformation. “Ora” understood as “prayer” could be related to the Indian concept of “Sadhana.” Work is a spiritual path, if it is undertaken not out of personal egotistical greed, or a desire to conquer either human beings or nature, but is desirable of working with creatures towards a common goal. This was the approach to “karma” or action that we find outlined as a Karma Yoga in the Bhagavad Gita. It is this approach to art as hand-work, and not only intellectual or conceptual imagining, that has been the basis for an Indian approach to the various crafts and performing arts, like dance, music or drama.

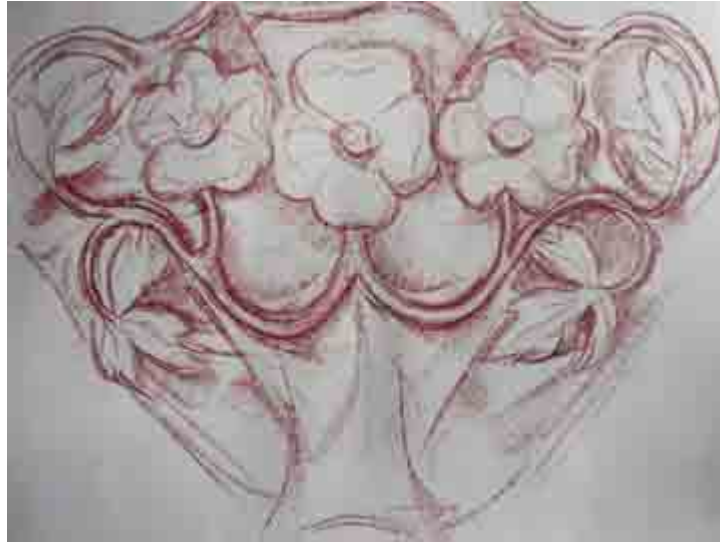


Figure13: Flower Motif on Capital

In a way, the making of an artifact is like a process of alchemy. In his book on “Sadhana,” Tagore describes a work that goes beyond human effort, and is in harmony with the cosmic work of creation. This was his way of seeing the artist as a Vishwa Karmi, or one who continues the work of the Divine Craftsperson, the architect of the whole universe. The Cistercian monks who settled down at Chorin were faced with many practical tasks. Bernard of Clairvaux wanted his monks to live in valleys not hilltops. They should be close to water, and should work with the energy that lies latent in flowing water. Here in this region, the rocks scattered on the ground are lumps of granite broken up by a receding ice cap that had come from the north across Sweden and Denmark. These rocks could be used for foundations, but were not suitable for the fine intricate structures that now characterized Gothic architecture. For this, a malleable material had to be obtained. So the peculiar nature of this northern early Gothic building work is that it is made from fired bricks. The monks made the bricks themselves from the local clay that they formed in special wooden moulds. Then, as wood was plentiful in this forested country, kilns were constructed in the fields to fire the bricks.

The construction of the bricks for building involved all four elements. Water mixed with the clay of earth would be dried in the open air, and then fired. Fire transforms the earth into a new compound, which is now water resistant—a vessel that can contain water and air. But ultimately the inner spiritual purpose of the building is to act as a vessel

for light. The outer form embodies this inner light. This is the essential mystery that the vessel of the Church is meant to incorporate.



Figure14: Pillars of Life

Work with clay and the process of forming a place in which light can be enshrined is the essential purpose of culture. The built form is not understood only in terms of walls, but rather in relation to the spaces that the walls contain.⁹ The Gothic form of architecture is characterized by its use of windows, but also niches that help to lighten the structure of the wall, and allow for openings where light can give life to matter. The niche is used as a place where a lamp can be placed, and is in this sense an extension of the lamp itself, offering a protective holder for the flame.¹⁰

It has the character of a hearth, which is the oldest feature of the inhabited human dwelling place. At night a few of us went into the vast empty space of the uninhabited nave of the ruined Church. There we sat in the darkness and allowed the luminous stillness of the night sky to penetrate the dark interior of the empty nave, through the tall windows. Then a small candle was lit and placed in a niche. The shadows that this small flame cast in the rib-like cage of the dark fluted columns of the Gothic building, gave a new perspective to its massive form. We realized that the built structure was enlivened not only by the light, but by the shadows cast by its many surfaces.

The construction of such a work represents, I believe, the creation of a social and individual sense of self-identity. What is being built is not just a place to live, and pray, but an experience of the Presence: individual, communal and also cosmic. The Self finds its being by embodying the Being of a Divine Presence in the natural environment. The building becomes a living form in which to be, and in which communicate with a spiritual reality incarnated and sacramentalized in this geo-political and historical context.

As an artist coming from the Indian context, and also involved in the creation of ceramic works, I was particularly interested to understand the significance of this brick constructed early Gothic style, in which ceramic work has played a defining role.

Creation Myths and the Elemental

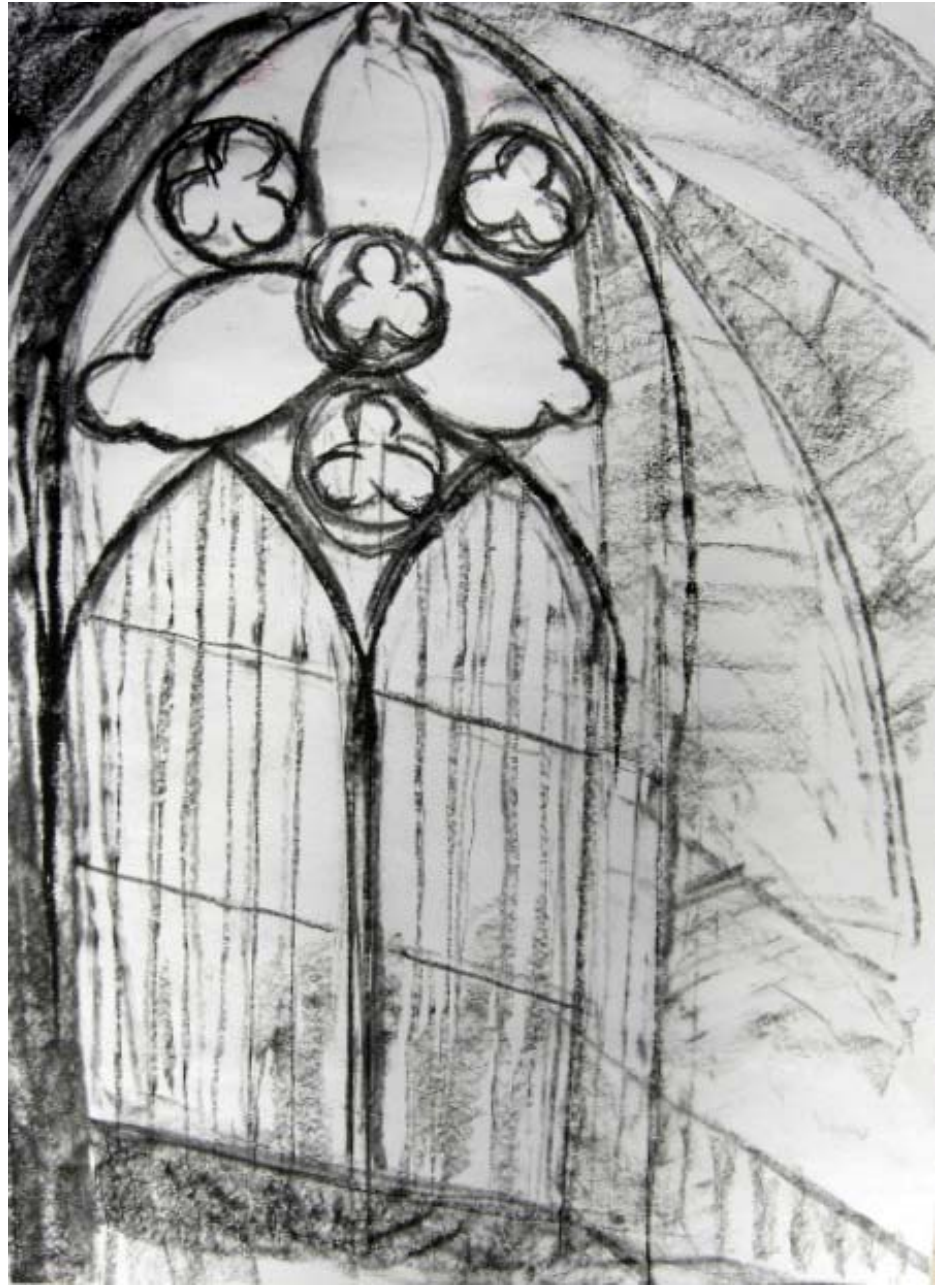


Figure 15: Light into Darkness

All over the world we find myths that relate how the first human beings were made out of clay. Adam was created by God out of the red clay, and when Cain murdered Abel, it was the earth that received the body

of the slain brother, and cried out for justice. In the tribal traditions of Chotanagpur, we also hear of the human couple formed out of clay and left to dry in the sun. But in this myth, we are told that to begin with the horse of the Creator, called Hamsraj Pankraj, trampled over the first clay creatures, destroying them with its hooves. The horse, or Aswa, has been related to the wild and often fierce forces of the cosmos, Viswa. The taming of the horse, and later the tradition of horse sacrifices, seems to relate at a psychic level, to the harnessing of these elemental energies, by human culture.

The work of art helps human beings to come to terms with those elemental forces that lie hidden in the psyche. We are very conscious of the destructive forms in nature. There are floods, storms, and earthquakes that destroy life. But these very manifestations of change in nature, also determine the way in which the landscape has been shaped by shifting structures of the earth's body. Climatic changes are not only seasonal, but they affect the way we are conscious of our environment, linking the individual to great cycles of time which have formed our landscape, like the Ice Age. It has been pointed out that these great forces of transformation that have changed the very chemistry of our planet Earth, have also given us the raw materials on which culture depends. It is these cycles that have created deposits of fossil fuels, have brought about concentrations of metallic elements in the rocks, which have influenced our technologies.

Movements on the earth's surface have crushed together materials giving rise to the very clay, sand, and soil that is the basis for agriculture, providing also our building materials. Without these cosmic changes, culture could never have even begun.

Notes

¹ 'Sailing to Byzantium' from *The Tower*. (1928) by W.B. Yeats, *Selected Poetry*.

² 'Byzantium' from *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (1933) by W.B. Yeats. *Selected Poetry*.

³ 'The Voyage and the Messenger: Iran and Philosophy' by Henry Corbin translated by Joseph Rowe, 1998. Chapter: 'The Theme of the Voyage and the Messenger' pp. 135-163

⁴ Cf ‘Conference of the Birds: The Story of Peter Brook in Africa’ by John Heilpern. Routledge 1999

⁵ Cf “The Preference for the Primitive” by E.H.Gombrich. 2002. Section on ‘Aristotle on Growth and Decay’ , 15-16.

⁶ Cf “The Garden of Cyrus, or Net-work plantations of the Ancients, Artificially, Naturally, Mystically Considered” by Sir Thomas Brown (1658).

⁷ The following notes are derived from ‘Khidr: The History of the Ubiquitous Master’ by Shawkat M. Toorana.

⁸ Cf: “The Child and the Serpent: Reflections on Popular Indian Symbols” by Jyoti Sahi. 1980.

⁹ Cf The Tao Te Ching of Lao Tzu: Clay is moulded to make a pot, but it is in the space where there is nothing that the usefulness of the clay pot lies. Cut out doors and windows to make a room, but it is in the spaces where there is nothing that the usefulness of the room lies. (11 or 55).

¹⁰ Cf The Sura of Light in the Holy Koran:
God is the light of the heavens and the earth. The likeness of His Light is a niche wherein is a lamp. The lamp is in a glass. The glass is like a brilliant star lit from a blessed tree, an olive neither of the East nor of the West, whose oil would almost give light though no fire touched it. Light upon Light.