

# Impact of Context on Decorative Arrays in Religious Buildings in India

## Case Study: Decorative arrays; the Cattle

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### Abstract

Specific context of any ancient civilization, from the physical aspects up to its cultural and historical sides, distinct it from other civilizations. The special location and context of the land of India, is the basis of this different culture and the effects of it are seen in its historical buildings. Certainly the most important buildings that remained in India, like other great civilizations, are religious monuments. The predominated hot and humid climate in India as a side of context, for the people of this land has obtained relatively abundant resources. Fertile and lush natural areas of India had had a great boon for its people which became one of the most important factors in a high fantasy and stopping them to struggle hard for continuing life. Even in these times, it is also seen that natural substrate for the formation and growth of the social and cultural context, is balanced and has strong dependence of kind of their life. Now the question is: How does the context infect on of creating decorative embellishment and arrays in sacred buildings, as most examples to introduce the special culture of this land? Often, at the first glance, the outside aspect of the decorative arrays and patterns, according to the field observations in the sacred monuments of different historical periods in different Indian cities, looks repetitive and resembling. The cow, as a painting or sculpture, is one of the formations which have been seen the most in religious monuments. And nowadays, it still exists in the same amount in cities live landscapes. With precise attention to this array, we realize that this is not merely a decorative aspect, but also each of its various effects has a specific meaning, which due to the social context- cultural, religious interpretations and levels of holiness, is changing. This article with assumes of the influence of context in creating decorative arrays in religious buildings of India and a the major role of natural elements as a symbol of upper power and repeating them as their original forms, is trying to reach this probable conclusion through the field observations and Library studies, which in general, there are many animals, plants and other natural elements in the context, that are repeated exactly in arrays and decorations of sacred buildings of different religions in India, but with different definitions. This repetition confirms their holiness, and that surely comes from a context that forms the specific culture of this land.

### Keywords

India, Religion, Context, Sacred monument, Decorative array, The cattle's array, Holy cow.

## Introduction

Each social group at the time of initial formation and over a period of time, depending on the area of its establishment and residence substrate, try to figure out how to communicate with the context, to be formed. With time passing and practical experience, matching the context of life, becomes the best way to survive. And gradually, the natural elements and the climate which are the basics of the people's lives formations and social and cultural contexts of each society, become valuable for human being; as he will attempt to discover the governing laws which lead to a better life. Threats or rewards that he gets from the outside, will be important and sacred. He'll find them as a sign of superior sanctity and even sometimes he converts them into different Gods. Ornament and embellishment are as a memento that remained from the past, one of the important sources for understanding the attitudes and beliefs of the ancient nations.

Symbolism Ornamental or decorative emblems are as one of the wisdom tools and methods for expression and enduring ideas of a nation. Indeed, the motifs that we know as decor of building today had further concept for its builders and was not appended only for its beauty. All religions have their symbols that not understanding them will make the left decorative arts meaningless and perhaps superstitious.

The religious art is a main identity display of each ancient civilization, and religion as the most important part of the life of a traditional human still has a wide power in India's society. On the other hand, in India, the progress of human's life from the beginning to be civilized still is seen.

To reach an accurate comprehension and complete understanding of symbols and motif's meanings and their usage reasons, it's requisite to become aware of Indian's vision and their way of thinking, which sometimes is also linked with the history of ancient Iranian.

One of the entrances to know their way of thinking and religious believes is to study the temples and their ornaments with the sacred patterns. Symbolic motifs are derived from the context and background of social and religious life Indians. The cow is one of the most repeated elements in the Hindu temple, which has a strong presence in people's lives.

## Hypothesis

Decorative arrays in religious Indian buildings; as the foremost representative of this civilization dur-

ing centuries, are originated from the context of India's land. Dependence of human's material and

## Spiritual life to the context

Accompanying the nature is essential for human's life. And wise human being puts consistent with its primary nature as his first aim to survival. On the other hand, social relationships and persistence of it for better individual's life is not possible, without creating peace and harmony between the man and nature. Thus, for establishing a basic social relationship due to form a great civilization needs making peace with nature and context which social life will get shaped on it. And the man in attempt to gain peace and harmony with nature should be in balance with the empyrean, and ultimately with the font and source of all creation.

The person who is at peace with God will also be at peace and truce with his creatures, whether human or nature (Nasr, 1997: 186). This mystical view throughout history has been and is repeated in different societies among past tribes. So that the material and spiritual life of human beings always continued along with his ancestors' life and their methods to interact with their bedding areas. Natural forces were necessary for his survival and he was afraid of nature's threats or opportunities which did lead him to happiness or adversity. The Religion has been born in height of souls' dread and fear of nature and sacred edifice also has been raised in this crisis too.

The primary man had a simple religion and in face of different kinds of crisis in his individual or social life, he worshiped incarnations of nature's power and according to his natural habit and social instinct he had appealed to GODs or natural fables. Early humans have been faced with the main crises of life such as birth, puberty, marriage, hunger, disease and ... and finally death. Certainly the farming communities had worshiped the GODs which had been linked to fertility and fecundity. So somehow, various manifestations of nature have been seen in old temples clearly. Not only the primitive man, even so nowadays some persons still worship righteous sources like the sun, moon and stars, and even they have God of rain and GOD of rivers full of water.

Great civilizations which have persist till now; have specific identities and characteristics that its people are identified with it. The fame of this identity owes the great remained civilizations to the ac-

curate relation which it has with special context of that place. Forensic context, climate and character of each location affect the lifestyle, social relations, culture and thus history over a time and pave the way for making different civilizations.

Swaffield has said that the regional identity depends on the specific characteristics of the location, which mentions us some matters about physical and social environment. This is what the location has, but only when it belongs to its own place not another one.

To understand the identity of each location, two main criteria must be considered: First, the natural processes of the area. It means what the nature institutions there. And second, social processes, it means what people have set there (Swaffield, 2011: 234). Considering this which human always gets the idea to produce and create the objects from his surrounding environment, which it is also created by God, then we can see a manifestation of the creation's imitate in a lower level. Man is the Caliph of Allah and his creations must be in continuing of imitation and reflection of God's creation and get done with the same purpose (Jalalian, 2010: 11).

In other words, every old civilization, after that its initial biological needs were supplied, in case to attempt to explore the metaphysical power, pays attention to the main and most obvious sign of the around context, which is God's creation, and in each period of time, depending on the model of communication and range of understanding and facilities, through the creation of different symbols taken from his surroundings, he had expressed it.

### **Indian religious art in relation to context**

The point that is very clear in land of India is its people's wide adherence to religion. Small and big temples that are seen in the street and alley; from a small sacred tree up to a great carving stone temple have confirmed this subject. The walls and doors of sacred buildings are decorated by Plant's, human's, and most of all animal's motif arrays, which come from people's life's context that is linked startling with animal's lives. Hence belief to sacred animals that are in their daily lives is being manifested in their sacred buildings.

So the art which is serving for the religion is influenced by the context in which animals have important role on it and we see them as paintings, reliefs and sculptures in their temples. Of course the presences of these motifs in temples have a meaning beyond the physical appearance and have

sacred and supernatural powers in a symbolic way. Indeed, the motifs or figures of sacred animals are allegories of reality and metaphysical values which have been substantiated.

The plurality of presence, repetition and the beauty of motifs of animals are another signs of its value. While physical appearance is not the principal, the beauty and appearance's perfection is very important. Coomaraswamy believes that the diversity of image's statements, in the monotheistic Hindu religion, have various causes that they all arise from the different needs of different ethnic groups. Historically, this diversity stems from the many transcendental manifestations of God. The repetition in arts in this country is the result of religious teachings (Coomaraswamy, 2003: 156). The holy inscription is a symbol of sacred power that should be shown in the best shape.

### **The cow, holy array**

As the same as the cow is important and useful in people's lives, it has a special place in the Indian's holy motifs so it has been brought in the Gods' row. Animals, due to having various features, embossed distinctive colors and movements, and because of their relations to human, have the most importance in symbolism's knowledge. This symbol has very close relationships to totem<sup>1</sup> worship and praise of animals. Symbolism of every animal, according to its specific situation, is different in symbolic and contextual designs which are portrayed (Cirlot, 2009: 350).

These inscriptions are the most perdurable phenomenon that shows culture and identities of each nation with different meanings (Fig.1). Holiness and worshipping a cow as a domesticated animal; that a life of many communities is dependent on it have existed in almost all religions and ancient civilizations in different ways. The cattle were the first -born animal in many primary religious beliefs. The geographic and climatic characteristic of various animal and plant diversity in India is special and unique.

As yet this that some of the Hindus<sup>2</sup> have known nature as God, without no doubt is kind of worships which are belonged to very ancient times. However, the idea that other creatures are from God and return to his nature is considered as a sacred natural world among the Hindus. One of the animals that religiously are important to the Hindus is the cow. In India from ancient times, the cow was symbol of several gods and worshiped as the Goddess. The





Fig.1. Cow as a sacred animal in arrays of Hindu temples in the Elora Caves, India. Photo: Padideh Adelvand, 2012.



Fig.2. Cow and man in urban life in India. India: Udaipur, Photo: Samaneh Rahmdel, 2012.

basic reason for this opinion seems to be harmless and beneficial to mankind (Jalali Naeini, 1996: 510). The cow associated so much with people's urbanization and still is a sacred animal. Even the educated class has also pay attention to it. Indians always tend to keep the original beliefs and use these beliefs, sometimes distorted over time, in new philosophical ideas and social conditions (Ions, 2002: 9). In India, we are witnesses of how this animal influences on their lives, social relations, and even their driving so much. People's driving in this land with its complex order, is mixed to the cattle's movements in general approaches of their city (Fig.2).

That plays an important role in religious ceremonies, and many symbols of this animal are being seen in sacred buildings in different states. However, the array of cow as a sacred figure in temples is very different from that animal which is seen in the city. This array as an ornament is the same with cow just in the appearance. Basically, Animal's motifs in mythological arts don't show the ground side (Madadpour, 1992: 148). Sacred and supernatural's power aspects, which has made the life of this land's people dependable on it during the time, is the cause of the presence of cattle in their temples (Fig.3).

In fact, a manifestation of divine attributes in order to material position has sacred it. Swastika<sup>3</sup> as a symbol on the reliefs of cow is an effort to sanctify and glorify this animal. Praise of cattle in different civilizations, which each of them are derived from a different background, has different effects. Iranian cattle, Spanish and Hindi are all three holy, but the kind of view to it and its reflex among people of its cultures becomes different. Cattle in India, is "Totem" and today is in form of the sacred animals that do not eat its meat, "Totem is an expression of great grandfather's spirit" and eating the meat of "Totem" for his followers is forbidden (Mobaleghiy Abadani, 1994: 219).

Many images of cows are seen on a variety of Indian handicrafts such as utensils, objects and fabrics. Since a major portion of the Indian population life was dependent on agriculture and animal's life, and still, in today's society of India, they use the cow for providing food, fuel, ink and also for transportation, so the concept and cause of cow's sanctity is at the root of their specific living type (Fig.4). Animals that transfers "good character" are eternal and symbol of peace (Schuon, et.al, 2004: 99). In other words, goodness is the reason of its sanctity. The cow is the most sacred animal for Hindus, as



the incarnation of all gods and all things from of its body are sacred. They believed that the cow has a great place in, Brahma has created the cow and Brahman in same day and sacred both of them equally, so killing this cow are the same crime as killing Brahman. Have worshiped all of "Sette" and forth classes communions, and eating her meat is as

cardinal as eating human's flesh. But her mouth is dirty. Narrated when a quarrel broke out between Brahma and Shiva, Brahma, accuses Shiva some verbs that did not conform to reality.

The bull affirmed incorrectly there and lied, Shiva cursed her mouth and just that part of her became unclean (Hekmat, 1958: 300). In Hinduism, the



Fig.3. Nandi, the sacred white bull which serves as the mount of the god Siva, is located at the entrance of Siva's temples. Jaipur, India. Photo: Zohre Shirazi, 2012.



Fig.4. In natural context of India and Indian people living on agriculture, "The Cow" plays an important role. Pushkar, India. Photo: Zohre Shirazi, 2012.



witch Clergymen are named Brahman, and knows orders and immolation manners and have right to act personally or by representatives of their own and are received the reward which is frequently precious animals or one or more cattle. Song number ten in tenth book of "Rigveda"<sup>4</sup> provided that, in face of cattle, which are given to Brahman, the whole world will be rewarded (Mobaleghiye Abadani, 1994: 210).

Cows associate different meanings in different states; bull, cow, bull horns or no horns, zebu or hump, white or black, half of body of cow... Repeating this decorative role as a symbol, is a confirmation of its great value to the people that sacred it. Different sectarians of Hindus revere cows because of different reasons; as Krishna was employing as a pastor and herding at the beginning of life and Nandi's bull as amount of Shiva is praised in Shiva's faith (Hekmat, 1958: 301). It's known that "Krishna was exchanged with a cattleman's daughter and he grew up among cattle." "Go" (meaning cow), the epithets of Krishna, showing the importance of this animal in the Hindu. The goddess that guards livestock and it takes attention and praise of people of Rajput nation (hero and warrior nation) and has been known "Gopal", "Goband" (Azam Lotfi, 2011: 220 & 217).

Amount of Shiva in entries Shiva's temples is a

white zebu cow. Bull as a male cattle sex in nature is the symbol of strength and power of reproduction. Black cattle, is amount of "Yama", goddess of death (Hall, 2004: 85 and 88) and Cow is the Great Mother. All of Goddess of the moon have alimentary role. The cow is both extraterrestrial and material (Fig. 5).

Also, combine cattle with other gods gives it a different meaning and value for example, when the moon goddess are on the eve of the bull zenith, it means the masculine and wild side of animal's nature is daunted (Cooper, 2000: 300); (Fig.6).

In Buddhism that its beginning was in the country of India like there is in Hinduism, cattle are being important. Birth of Buddha is imaged with symbols such as the lotus flower (lotus), bull or elephant (Coomaraswamy, 2003: 74). Indian Muslims prefer to eat bison's meat to cattle and this matter indicates the influence of religion on each others. Of course sacred of cow is more important in Hinduism religion among the other religions in India and to brings the arrays of cattle in religious buildings is selfsame of their religion.

As mentioned, there are all kinds of cattle in the context and nature that over time, became the same with the needs of people and been praised as a sacred symbol is sometimes out of fear or respect. Cattle as a metaphors of mountain till amount of



Fig.5. The water that pours from the mouth of the Sacred Cow into the small lake becomes sacred. Sacred lake in Pushkar, India. Photo: Zohre Shirazi, 2012.





Fig.6. The moon goddess is mounted on a bull taming nature and masculine. Albert's museum, Jaipur, India. Photo: Zahra Askarzade, 2012.

gods, symbolizing from the birth of a divine birth up to birth and continuation of generation or spread misery, disease and death, as a holy offering appears in Hindu religious buildings and with different meanings in their places of life and in coordination with this for survival, is very bold. Conceptualism in three course of physical, social and historical - cultural places special allow special value for a place (Shirazi & Hojjati, 2012: 66).

Over time, the historical context, social and cultural aspects surpassed the physical and material needs and religion became inseparable side of each civilization. In Jacques Derrida's view, in this concept "there is nothing outside the text", perception features are all celestial, that are the relevant part of the text field, not due to self-imposed receipts (Talaie Minaei, 2004: 522).

## Conclusion

Throughout history, cultural- social context of India for life, have had direct effect on beliefs and religion of the inhabitants and decorative arrays on religious monuments from past to present, as the most representative in introduction of Indian civilization originating from this same context. People's life is mixed with animals' life, especially cattle, and it's not detachable. Besides, religion is present in all moments of man's traditional life and its manifestation is apparent in architectural religious decoration. These arrays are association of extremity of aspirations of every individual religious believer from his outside environment; better life, health, guarded from disaster and guarantee of the preservation of the breed. Holy cow that is offered in religious arrays and designs, (especially in the Hindu religion) is not only the physical and external appearance, but it goes more beyond and has found spiritual value. But at the final view to it, something dependable to the kind of life has formed the society and culture of India which is not separated from their lives. The cow that is worshiped is required in their lives on the natural and ritual context and the other cattle because of all servings which have done are respected. The array of cattle doesn't provide any additional decorative array and it's an important part of the sacred edifice. In other words, sometimes the importance of cow is the same of their religion.

On the other hand, progressing over time, dependence on context and diversity is the reason of repeat this important array. Although apparently the same things are repeating in most sacred secular motifs, but no one will construe them as the same. It's like the difference in definition of cattle, in different civilizations, that the context leads to different interpretations of the same thing. In general, context and background (more specifically natural context) is the original material to create designs that over time and coexist with it, it'll be admirable and holy for an Indian.

## Endnote

1. Totems are symbolic objects that native kinfolk of more mainlands have ritual usage. It's usually act as a monumental from ancestors of ale or tribe and peoples of clan have known totem having a power of advocacy and maintenance of family. Totem tribe or clan usually serves as a memorial to the ancestors and the clan totem as a force for the protection of the tribe.
2. Hindues: plural word Hindu Religion Hindi.
3. Swastika: or Symbol of wheel of seals or broken cross. The symbol of the deity, the sun, and blessing and bounty, order of entity, immortality and ... Which is found in many ancient civilizations, including India.
4. Rigveda: One of four original songs in assemblage songs (sruti) of holy Hinduism is considered that collectively are called Vedas.
5. Jacques Derrida: French -born Algeria philosopher and creator of the philosophy of deconstruction theory, postmodern philosophy and literary criticism he had great influence.

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