

THE ASYMMETRY OF SYMMETRY: THE LEFT AND THE RIGHT IN HINDU PHILOSOPHY, ART AND LIFE

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Abstract: *Indian world-view holds the cosmos to be holonomic and symmetric, but within that symmetry the existence of two opposite and complimentary principles as the fundamental constituents of the cosmic phenomena is maintained. The Purusha-Prakriti and Shiva-Shakti pairs of Indian thought also represent passive and active, matter and energy, gross and subtle, and the right and the left. The Right is Dakshina: saral (straightforward), honest, impartial, amiable, compliant and submissive. It is also the South. The Left is Vama: crooked, reverse, contrary, opposite; yet lovely, beautiful, and charming.*

The differentiation of the left and the right has been a favourite subject of representation in Indian Art. The representations which occur in paintings, ritual diagrams, sculptures, icons, and in architecture are illustrations which explain the different qualities and attributes of these two components of one composite reality. They are also stylized and symbolic information diagrams presenting abstract philosophical concepts in concrete, visual form.

The distinction between the right and the left is scrupulously maintained in Indian culture. In daily life, the use of left or right limbs is prescribed for various functions.

The proposed presentation will illustrate through visual examples drawn from rituals, art and life in India, this distinction between the left and the right; and link it to the philosophical concepts underlying the representations.

Hindu Cosmology: Duality of Unity

The Hindu world-view holds the cosmos to be holonomic and symmetric, but within that symmetry the existence of two opposite and complimentary principles is recognised. The Supreme Reality is an indivisible whole, but within that unity of the whole is a fundamental dualism: of a male principle *Purusha* and a female principle *Prakriti*. The Nyaya-Vaisheshik school of Hindu philosophy holds the cosmos to be composed of two halves (*dvikapalah ghatah*: the cosmic pot is made of two halves). Variouslly represented and described as *Purusha-Prakriti* and *Shiva-Shakti*, these two complimentary principles also represent the passive and the active; the matter and the energy; the gross and the subtle; and the right and the left.

The cosmic process is an ongoing dynamic cycle Ð an ascending phase follows a descending phase. Evolution leads to a peak and then dissolution to the beginning point, when the cycle repeats again. The description of *Vratya* (the Cosmic Order) in Atharvaveda brings out this inherent duality:

The right eye (of the *Vratya*) is the shining Sun, the left eye is bliss giving Moon. The right ear is all-pervading *Agni*, the left ear *Vayu*; the two nostrils are day and night; and the two parts of the skull are *Diti* (impermanent creation) and *Aditi* (permanent cosmic matter); and the head is the sense of Time. Ð *Atharvaveda* 15.18.1-5

In Hinduism, the direction of the life-sustaining Sun Ð the East Ð has a special significance, and all orientations are with respect to the East. With East as the top/facing direction; North becomes the left and South the right. The words for the left and the right are *Vama* and *Dakshina* (which also means South). The Right is *dakshina* : *saral* (straightforward), honest, impartial, amiable, compliant and submissive. The Left is *vama*: contrary, reverse, crooked, opposite, yet lovely, beautiful, sweet and charming. The right and the natural direction of movement is clockwise. Anti-clockwise movement is contrary and unnatural. The time itself, as represented in a clockwise, circular, cyclic motion has a descending and an ascending phase.

The *Pinda-Brahmanda* theory of the micro-macrocosm correspondence of Hindu philosophy presents the possibility of a spiritual awakening where one can realise the cosmos in oneself. Yogic and meditative practices make use of the differences between the processes of the left and the right side of the human body. The human body which is considered a microcosm is believed to consist of a *sthula*(gross) body and a *sukshma* (subtle) body. The subtle (etheric) body is a network of numerous subtle channels known as *nadis* (from Sanskrit root *nada* meaning vibration). The most important of these *nadis* are the central channel *Sushumna*; and the two flanking channels: the white, lunar channel *Ida* on the left; and the red, solar channel *Pingala* on the right. In the meditative practice of *Pranayama*, leading to spiritual awakening, these channels are cleared through breathing exercises to allow the free flow of subtle energies, which normally stay dormant. The two recognised paths of spiritual practice followed by the Shakta Tantrics are the *Dakshinachar* (right path) and the *Vamachar* (the left path); with totally opposite observances and practices. The *Dakshina* (right) path has social and religious sanction, and considered superior to the *Vamachar* (the left path) which breaks all established social norms and taboos in its practices; and is considered the contrary path. It is said in Shrimadbhagavadgita (a text

sacred to Hindus):

There are only two eternal paths: *Shukla*, the path of light; and *Krishna*, the path of darkness. Those who go with the light do not return again; while those who go with darkness have to come back. 8.26

The Left and the Right in Hindu Art

The differentiation of the left and the right has been a favourite subject of representation in Hindu art. These representations, which occur in paintings, ritual diagrams, sculptures, icons and in architectural constructions, are illustrations which explain the different qualities and attributes of the two components of one composite reality. They are also stylized and symbolic information diagrams presenting abstract philosophical concepts in concrete, visual form.

The visualization of cosmic principles as anthropomorphic icons in Hindu art always includes the female counterpart of the main male deity. Shiva-Parvati, Uma-Maheshwar, Lakshmi-Vishnu in different configurations, postures, and with different gestures and implements in the hands are examples of such dualistic representations. The best known of these are the half-man, half-woman composites called *Ardhanarishwara* images. The joining of Shiva and Parvati in one body signifies the psychic oneness, where the conception of masculinity and femininity as two divisible qualities is shown to be as illusory as the idea of duality of matter and energy, body and soul. One is inherent and co-existent with the other in a dynamic process. The two principles are interdependent and exist simultaneously. As integral as *Vak* (utterance) and *Artha* (sense). Such composite icons show distinct visual features in the two halves. The left feminine half holds tools and implements of compassion and knowledge, while the male half holds weapons and tools of work.

The mystic *Yab-Yum* embrace of Tibetan art in which *Yab* and *Yum*, the Great Mystic Father and Mother are locked in embrace, mirroring and reflecting each other; represents the same concept of the unity of contrasts. However, the *Shakti* and the *Shiva* of the Hindu Tantras, are replaced by *Prajna* (knowledge, wisdom) as female principle, and *Upaya* as the dynamic male principle of the Buddhist Tantras. The sacred syllables *ŌOmŌ* and *ŌHumŌ* are also of significance in this context; as representative of ascent towards and descent from universality.

The Left and the Right in Daily Life

The distinction between the right and the left is maintained scrupulously in Indian culture even today. The female's place is on the left of the male. She is *Vama* ð the left half of the whole being, the half of the heart. However, in specific rituals and ceremonial worship, she comes to the right, because the right is pure and sacred. The practice of considering the left hand as profane and the right hand as pure (sacred) is strictly followed in daily life. Actions like eating, writing, offering, receiving are reserved for the right hand, and parents take extra care in the upbringing of left handed children to ensure that they use the right hand for these activities. All ceremonial rituals such as on the occasion of birth, beginning of education, marriage, pregnancy, death etc. prescribe in detail which limbs of the body ð left or right ð are to be used for various steps in the ritual . The *yajnopavita* (sacred thread) worn lifelong

by Hindus after the *Upanayana Sanskara* (thread ceremony) is always kept hanging down from the left shoulder, a position which is reversed only in death rituals. During a ritual (usually following death in the family), one has to change the position of the thread from the left to the right shoulder whenever the part of ritual involves addressing the dead ancestors. In the marriage ceremony, the seven stepped walk around the fire which solemnizes the marriage vows, and sanctifies the marriage begins with the right foot first, in each step.

In Hindu palmistry, the right hand is considered to be one's own while the left expresses the personality and the destiny of the spouse (male or female counterpart). The practice of considering right as correct is extended to circular motions where clockwise motion is considered right, and according to the order in the universe, while the counter-clockwise motion is against the order, and believed to lead to disorder. The *swastika* motif which is representative of the auspicious or benign universal order is always drawn clockwise. The auspicious *alpana* patterns drawn on the ground are made with clockwise movement. In cooking, spices are ground with clockwise motion, items are prepared using clockwise stirring to improve the quality of the food; spiral shaped food-items such as *jalebis* and *chaklis* always have clockwise form. In the preparation of Ayurvedic medicines, herbs are ground clockwise for better efficacy of the drug. Body massage is classified as solar massage with clockwise movement and lunar massage with counter-clockwise movement. Sleeping on the left shoulder is clockwise. Lord Vishnu, who signifies cosmic order is said to switch shoulders at regular intervals, in his deep sleep.

In a dynamic, living cosmos, the physical symmetry contains always an asymmetric element which comes from the movement of the life processes, from the movement of the mind, thought and consciousness. This asymmetry goes away only with death. Living life in harmony with the cosmic movement is the principle followed in Hindu thought. From *Vrata* (the cosmic order), comes *Vratya* (the cosmic being); and the idea of the individual as *Vratashtha* - one who follows the cosmic order.

The cosmic process begins from a neutral, null point; acquires motion in one direction to evolve fully, and reverses to dissolve and come to rest again. In Oneness there are Two, in Duality is Unity. Every point of view has an opposite point of view. To achieve a balance of these opposites is harmony, a state of dynamic stability. The quest of science consists in trying to understand the cosmos we can see, observe, study and analyse. Is there another, unknown half of it, invisible and unobversable? The *rishis* (seers) of Hindu philosophy ponder on this question in the Vedas:

**He created this half of himself as the world.
Where is the indication of his other half ?**

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(References are available by request.)