



Original research

Tantric Symbolism and Pictorial Allegory: An Analysis of Syed Haider Raza's Artworks

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Abstract

The study investigates an analogy between Tantric philosophy and the pictorial metaphors established by Syed Haider Raza (1922–2016), specifically in the paintings executed during the 1980s and beyond. Raza is one of the most celebrated Indian modernist painters, who developed a distinct visual language, thereby contributing significantly to Modernism in Indian Art. Encouraged by the visual standards of Raza's oeuvre, particularly the pictorial foundations of the 'Bindu', 'Mandala', 'Yantra', 'Kundalini', 'Nada' and 'Pancha-Tattva' series of paintings, the study analyses how such expressions resonate with Tantric symbolism. It also explores the pictorial allegory, materiality, and metaphorical connotations within the frameworks of Tantric philosophy and geometric extraction. Although the artist himself did not favour the inclusive self-definition as a 'Tantric artist', the paintings constitute a significant mise-en-scène that outlines the contemporaneous Neo-Tantric genre of Art. Methodologically, the study is engaged with the explicit Neo-Tantric progressions that Raza's work identifies with. This notion emerged amid the intensification of the Progressive artist group's neo-Tantra inclinations within the broader context of Indian modernism. Based on demanding visual and qualitative analysis, accessible scholarly interpretations, correspondence, and critical writings, the study concludes that Raza's paintings create a nuanced and aesthetically idiosyncratic articulation of Tantric visual language and philosophy, synthesised with the formal rigour of European abstraction and Indian Modernism.

Keywords: Abstraction, Indian Modernism, Neo-Tantrism, Syed Haider Raza, Tantra, Yantra.

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1. Introduction

Syed Haider Raza was born on 22 February 1922 in Kakaiya, a village in Mandla district, Madhya Pradesh, to a Muslim family, and developed a liberal outlook toward other religious traditions. His father, Mohammed Razi, served as a Deputy Forest Warden in British India, and the family resided in forest wardens' quarters surrounded by the sublime wilderness of central India. During his middle school years in Damoh, Raza was introduced to sacred Hindu texts, including the Ramcharitmanas. It was at Damoh that he began his serious Art Journey, capturing the forests and the Ghats of the Narmada River. These visual experiences would later shape and define his Symbolism in Art Practice. The enigma of the forests in Kakaiya, the chirping of the birds in the wilderness, the sacred river, and the temples cumulatively left a deep imprint upon Raza's psyche (Vajpeyi et al., 2015, p. 22). Nature in its subtle notion became a recurring theme in Raza's work. Raza conceived nature through the lens of the five basic elements: water, fire, earth, air, and ether (Vajpeyi et al., 2015, p. 45).

A significant memoir in Raza's formative years was engrossed during his schooling at Kakaiya, when his school headmaster, Shri Nand Lal Jharia, instilled in him the need to meditate in silence, withdrawing his senses from the clutter of thoughts and focusing on a single dot drawn on the classroom wall. Though it did not have any immediate profound impact on Raza's thought process, apparently, it later took the form of his Subconscious personality, as Jung defined it, shaping Raza's artistic consciousness. Jung (1969). Simultaneously documented by Vajpeyi (2005), "This pedagogical practice of leaving the mind behind worldly concerns and focusing exclusively on the 'dot' became a lifelong pursuit for Raza, the genesis of what would later manifest as the Bindu, the central motif of his mature work" (Vajpeyi, 2005, p. 12).

1.1 Tantra and Cosmic Interpretation

According to the theoretical premises of Sanskrit, Nature is not just an acquisitive and biological phenomenon; it has metaphysical significance, as the term '*Prakṛti*' permeates. Nature and human corporeality are fundamentally understood as comparative forms of the ultimate one and the same, rather than as separate or superior entities. As *Prakṛti* sustains all vitality, it is regarded as sacred and inviolable. Apart from an abstract philosophical idea, *Prakṛti* is a lived, everyday reality that actively shapes and vitalises human life. *Samkhya* Philosophy defines *Prakṛti* as an energetic, eternal principle that is the source of creation and is conjugatively imbued with *Puruṣa* (Consciousness), the male principle (B.A., Sanskrit, 2011). Creation began when the Absolute Principle agitated the unmanifest *Puruṣa* and *Prakṛti*, producing the omnipotent creative principle, also known as *Mahattva* or *Iswara*, which then unfolded the universe. The five fundamental elements: space, wind, fire, water, and earth, evolved sequentially from subtle and cosmic sound vibrations; each inherits prior qualities cumulatively. This, assumed to be sound or vibration, permeates all physical existence primarily (V. H. Zaveri, 2011). Ancient Scripture belonging to *Samkhya* Philosophy, *Sāṃkhyakārikā*, *Kārikā* 22, propounds *Mahattva*, the Great Principle, or intellect, as the first axial point of *Prakṛti* (primordial nature), where the sense of Individual consciousness, or *Ahaṃkāra*, as defined in Sanskrit nomenclature, emerges. The classical canons of *Sāṃkhya* are found in *Īśvarakṛṣṇa's Sāṃkhyakārikā* (ca. 350 CE), a condensed account in seventy-two verses that emphasises: creation arises from the merger of *Prakṛti* (Nature) and *Puruṣa*.

Subsequently, Tantra distinguishes 24 paradigms to explain the evolution of the cosmos, including instincts such as intelligence, ego, mind, and senses, as well as both subtle, positive elements and gross, negative elements. As mentioned in the 'Mahabharata', *Santiparva, adhyaya* 310, which records the dialogue between Sage *Yajnavalkya* and King *Janaka*. The conversation enunciates that the twenty-four principles of creation can be categorised into eight elements (Tattvas) of nature (Prakriti) and sixteen modifications or transformations termed '*Vikaras*'. (M.V., S. 2017, October 25)

aṣṭau prakṛtayaḥ proktā vikāraścāpi ṣoḍaśa |
tatra tu prakṛtīraṣṭau prāhuradhyātmacintakāḥ ||

2. Methodology

Drawing upon the visual language of Raza's celebrated series *Bindu, Bija, Naad, and Kundalini*, which reinforces discourse on its pictorial symbolism, materiality, and metaphorical connotations within the theoretical frameworks of Tantric philosophy and iconography as significant contexts. The study analyses the visual language of Raza's works that emerged during the intensification of Indian Modernism alongside neo-Tantra inclinations, through textual, visual and ethnographical analysis. Primary data comprised informal, in-person interviews with gallerists, collectors, and art historians. In contrast, secondary data consisted of literature relevant to the study, procured from various journals, articles, blogs, and books.

3. Formative Pursuits of Raza

In the late 1940s, Raza emerged as one of the significant contributors to the Progressive Artists Group, Bombay (hereafter, PAG). Raza joined the PAG but maintained a distinctive position within the group, as he partially disengaged from its ideological structure. While the PAG broadly distanced itself from the Bengal Renaissance, Raza was convinced of its significance for understanding the roots of Indian art. With the arrival of European artists in India in the late 18th century, perceptions of art began to shift. The establishment of Calcutta's Government School of Industrial Art initiated Western artistic traditions among Indian students. In response, efforts emerged to reclaim a distinct Indian artistic identity. Mitter (1995) identifies two phases in colonial Bengal's art: a westernised period (1850–1900) and a nationalist counterpart (1900–1922) steered by the *Swadeshi* movement. Abanindranath Tagore emerged as a nationalist artist but maintained his creative voice, whose personal artistic journey merely coincided with political nationalism (Mitter, 1995). He played a pivotal role as a teacher at the Government School of Art, where he laid the foundations of the Bengal School. Over time, the notion developed as the first wave of the new art movement, soon to be called the Bengal School.

Raza, exposed to both European and Indian aesthetics, studied Rajput, Pahari, and Jain miniatures, as well as Western Academic Style, during his student years at Nagpur Art College and the J.J. School of Art. However, he was drawn to the principles of abstraction in Indian miniature painting traditions, such as Rajput, Jain, and Pahari, which reflected the indigenous philosophical systems of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Jainism (Menezes, 2016). In 1948, the legendary French

photographer Henri Cartier Bresson sparked his passion for learning the essential fundamentals of European Art. Bresson encouraged Raza to study French painting, particularly the constructional exertion of Paul Cézanne, which thus catalysed his departure for Paris, and Raza carefully articulated French Art and excelled in it (Vajpeyi, 2005). Gradually, he realised that his Art was not rooted in his primal nature or Prakriti, which once again reminded him of the necessity to look back. This was evident when he imbued in his work the legendary verses of Hindi poet Ashok Vajpeyi, "*Ma lautkar aaunga, to kya launga*" — Mother, what would I bring, on my return (Dalmia, 2021). This longing kindled his passion to once again explore the Visual Culture and the bridging philosophical nuance rooted in Indian soil. The works that emerged over time metaphorically evince an engagement with Tantric visual imagery, but the researchers differ on their true affiliation (Nair, 2016).

4. Raza, Neo-Tantra and the Indian Modernism

Indian Modernism sprang from the works of Rabindranath Tagore, Jamini Roy, and Amrita Shergil, among others. The maverick quality of Tagore's visual expressions surprised the German Expressionists; shorn of any academic art training, he kept his art untainted by any visible Art-Isms. Jamini Roy, on the other hand, was trained in the Western Academic Style, which he discarded completely in search of Identity. Jamini Roy's exploration of vernacular art traditions found a new voice tuned to the wave of Modernism in India. Shergil, who initially received academic training in Paris, chose the mundane life of Rural Indian Women as her subject, thereby challenging the elitist-dictated art practice of 20th-century India (Mitter, 2001). Their contribution to defining Indian Modernism was significant, paving the way for more radical Art groups like PAG, 1890, the Calcutta Group, and contemporary Art groups. The post-independence period was tumultuous across the socio-political and cultural spheres. Artists such as F. N. Souza, J. Swaminathan, Ghulam Mohammad Sheikh, and Jeram Patel emerged as radical voices in the Visual Art genre (Singh & Parthasarathy, 2016). However, a vital question regarding Identity and Indigenouness remained unanswered until the advent of Neo-Tantrism.

Art historians such as Phillip Rawson, Ajit Mookerjee, and Madhu Khanna introduced the West to a treasure trove of previously unseen ancient Indian iconography. The landmark exhibition titled "Tantric Art" at Hayward's Gallery, London, in 1971 astounded the Western World (Mookerjee, 1966). It became the guiding light for several Indian artists who aspired to create an idiosyncrasy in their work without relying on the Western Notion of Modernism. The Neo-Tantric Art style in Indian art, which emerged in the 1960s and included artists such as K.C.S Panicker, Sohan Qadri, Biren De, G.R. Santosh, and Prafulla Mohanty, among others, was basically an artistic tendency that employed the visual metaphors of Tantric art without direct ritual adherence. It defined Modernism through its exploration of Indigenous roots. Panicker's exploration of the abstract forms in Astral diagrams, Santosh's exploration of iconography related to Kashmiri Saivism, and Biren De's interpretation of the trance state during Tantric Meditative practice created a distinct vocabulary. These artists incorporated ritualistic diagrams such as *Yantras*, *Mandalas*, and Chakras; they did not use them according to the prescribed rules of tantric practice, but rather employed them as metaphors to define their own Idiosyncratic Art Style (Lalit Kala Akademi, 1985; Kaul, n.d.; James, 2004).

In 1996, Rupika Chawla curated a show titled the Neo-Tantric exhibition, which did not merely replicate ritualistic Yantras and Mandalas but adopted their visual logic for a contemporary aesthetic (Chawla, 1998). Meanwhile, Art Historian and Collector Ajit Mookerjee's Show "Tantric Art" at Hayward's Gallery, London, introduced the Western World to esoteric and intense art, which inspired towering figures such as Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns. Critics identified affinities between Tantric art and the work of Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, and Ad Reinhardt (Mookerjee, 1967, p. 11). The epistemological inquiry focusing on Raza's engagement with Tantric art in the formal sense is complicated by his own flamboyant resistance to this categorisation. In the year 1983, Raza declined an offer to participate in a Neo-Tantric exhibition organised by the National Gallery of Modern Art; he acknowledged his use of geometric forms, and the titles of his works implied Tantric affinities. However, he responded that "he knew too little about *Tantric Daršana*, its beliefs and rituals, to qualify as a Tantric artist" (Dalmia, 2001, p. 315).

Essentially, it should not be understood as a disavowal of Tantric philosophy but as a resistance to being confined within a specific artistic movement or 'ism'. The spirituality that Raza represents is not religious in a traditional sense; It is something about spirituality in aesthetics, which Indian philosophy terms "*Roop Adhyatma*"; the spirituality of form. Raza's philosophical perspective was closer to the *Shakta* tradition, which he explored through the lens of aesthetic experience rather than ritual practice. His works thus partake in Tantric visual philosophy at the level of deep structure and symbolic resonance, without being reducible to it (Germain, 2016). Despite Raza's objection to the nomenclature, his philosophy and symbolism closely resemble Tantric representation, particularly the "*Bindu*". In Tantra philosophy, *Bindu* represents the eternal union of the male static principle (*Puruṣa*) and the female kinetic principle (*Prakṛti*), and their cohesion manifests both the world of spirit and the world of matter. The intertwining geometric configurations in Raza's paintings signify the same duality of female and male energy (Dalmia, 2021, p. 177).

5. The Bindu: Cosmic Centre and Artistic Criterion

Bindu has been a recurring subject of research and contemplation throughout Raza's Art and Life. It germinated very early in his childhood days when he was exposed to this Subtle Yogic Philosophical concept. A simple pedagogical exercise introduced during his childhood -A simple dot on the wall- became a lifelong pursuit, or, in a more serious Sanskrit nomenclature, "*Sadhana*". The concept of Bindu represents the Vedic conception of the universe as a cosmic egg, referred to as "*Brahmanda*", in both Hindu and Buddhist traditions. It is the embryonic form prior to the process of creation, which encapsulates the entire manifest of the universe and to which it will ultimately return after a cycle of creation termed Kalpa, ultimately dissolving (Woodroffe, 1952; Bhattacharya, 1996). This sublime concept can be traced back to his early experimentation during tutelage at Ecole De Beaux in a work titled "Black Sun" (1953), which Nair (2015) classifies as a prelude to Raza's lifelong Bindu-centred compositions. The black sun can be interpreted as a double metaphor for both creative and destructive forces, symbolising the dual nature of solar energy in tropical cultures. It becomes the central pivot around which Raza's later geometric compositions are organised. In the work "*Mandala*" (1975), this becomes very evident, where the

Bindu is conceptualised as a connecting force of cosmic dynamism, capable of reverberating throughout the entire universe (Dalmia, 2021).

Raza's Seminal work *Bindu* (1980) consists of a central black orb, which acts as the axis of the composition, and vibrant red and black streaks radiate around it within a square frame. Raza's other Pivotal work, *Bindu* (1987), reveals concentric circles of dense black, pulsating with flames of yellow, red, blue, and white, a visualisation of Raza's *Tama Shunya*, the subliminal void from which all light originates (Bhattacharya, 1996). The black core is not an absence of colour but an infinite abyss of all known colour and form.



Figure 1: Bindu, year: 1989 (S.H. Raza)

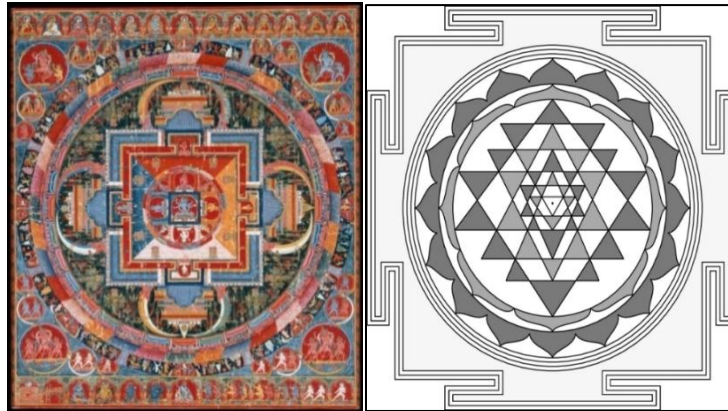
Notes: Bindu, year: 1989, Acrylic on Canvas, 39.37 x 39.37 in. Image Source: <https://www.mutualart.com/Artwork/Bindu/E4A36CAB6C432598DB8D457408F6CD79>

In Tantra philosophy, the *Bindu* holds a cosmogonic significance, as exemplified in his work of the same title. It represents the minutest unit saturated encapsulated form, beyond which energy cannot be further concentrated, and simultaneously the '*Vishva Bija*', the source seed from which the world originates and into which it dissolves (Dalmia, 2021, p. 177). Raza's visual conception of the *Bindu* thus partakes in one of the most ancient and fundamental structures of Indian metaphysical thought.

6. Mandala, Yantra, and Temple Geometry

Sacred Geometry of *Yantra*, and *Mandala* in Tantric philosophy symbolise the square, triangle, and circle as the fundamental geometric structures from which all *Yantras*, sacred ritual diagrams, are constructed. The circle represents the manifested form of the Bindu, signifying time as eternal and without origin or end. The triangle, as the primal enclosure of space, represents *Prakṛti* (nature): with apex downward, it denotes the female principle; with apex upward, the male principle. The triangle is the prototype figure of a sacred enclosure, since fewer than three lines cannot confine space. In this regard, it is believed to be the root of the manifested nature, known as *Prakṛti*. The Harmonious pattern of creation is encapsulated in this primal form. The tripartite structure of the triangle is construed over multiple levels. Some of these conceptions are: (1) Creation,

Perpetuation, and annihilation, symbolised as Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. (2) The three tendencies of human nature: the neutral, the positive and the negative, signified by the terms Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas. (3) The three Vedas: *Rig*, *Sam* and *Yajur*. (4) Past, Present, and Future. (5) The three seasons: Spring, Winter and Summer (Stanford University, n.d.; Mookerjee & Khanna, 1977). The square represents material reality, which Tantric practice aims to transcend (Bhattacharya, 2005, p. 346; Bienemann, 2003).



Figures 2 & 3: Sri Yantra & Mandala of Jnanadakini, Tibet

Notes: Late 14th century, distemper on cloth. Image Source: Researchgate.net / Asia researchnews.com. Image Courtesy: Gérard P. Huet / Shivani Gandhi.

Ritually, Mandala and Yantra do not confine themselves to mere illustrative representation; they usher in the domain of sacred cosmography. Rather, *Mandalas* are considered the sacred geometric forms in Vedic and Tantric traditions, corresponding to cosmic principles and consciousness through specific geometric relationships. The basic structure of the *Mandala* is an axis point surrounded by concentric circles and geometric forms, which reflects universal principles of cosmic organisation and spiritual development (Jung, 1973). The Hindu temple plans are originally *Mandalas*; they encompass various aspects of both collective and individual worship, and their internal structure derives from *Mandala* design (Agnihotri, 2004, p. 255).

American Art historian Geri H. Malandra has further argued that the Ellora caves' plan is based on *Mandala* design, and that the intrinsic geometry of Bodhisattva sculptures represents a three-dimensional instantiation of *Mandala* iconography (Malandra, 1993; Bhattacharya, 2005). The Sanskrit term '*Yantra*' originated from the root syllable '*yam*', signifying sustenance, or to hold. Hence, in spiritual terms, a *Yantra* is conceptualised as a reservoir of the highest spiritual essence. A *Yantra* is a sacred geometric pattern, constructed of basic primordial shapes. A quest for geometric order articulates the vitality of Tantric imagery. It represents a particular energy pattern whose vitality depends on the diagram's precision and is rendered around its centre in several levels. The major elementary forms that constitute *Yantras* are the point, circle, line, square, triangle and the lotus symbol. These shapes and forms, in their combination, intersection and repetition, produce the desired *Yantra* diagram (Mookerjee & Khanna, 1977).

"*Sri Yantra*", which underlies the structural conception of the Hindu temple, represents the celestial dimension referring to the dwelling place of the divine. As Bhattacharya (2005) asserts, the concrete mount of a temple symbolises the outer materialisation of the *Sri Yantra*, and its form

is known as *Meru Prastara* (p. 346). The human body is conceived in this spiritual tradition as itself a temple, the abode of divine energy, and the temple, in turn, is an architectural frame of *Śaktī*.

7. Scriptural and Visual Analysis

7.1 Tantric Symbolism in Raza's Visual Language

Raza's articulation of Visual symbolism is centred on the elemental and cosmic circles, squares, and triangles, thus extending into this broader tradition of sacred geometry, which encompasses temple architecture, Ritualistic diagrams, and Yogic practice. These are precisely the forms that organise Raza's mature compositions. His works, such as *Ankuran* (1986), *Bija* (1988), *Kaliyan* (1990), and the *Panchatatva* series, recurrently include these geometries in configurations that resonate unambiguously with *Yantra* and *Mandala* iconography. In *Bindu* and *Bija* imagery, twenty-five square forms executed in the primary colours yellow, blue, red, black, and white are presumably arranged to denote the five basic elements (earth, water, fire, air, and ether), which in turn correspond to the five senses (Basu, 2018; Zutshi, 2018). Raza's geometry has a cosmological significance; his radial compositions are particularly resonant with the '*Chakra*' diagrams of the Tantric tradition. These paintings indicate a direct resonance with ritual diagrams, *Mantra*, *Yantra*, and *Chakra* and their potential for esoteric evocation (Dalmia, 2021, p. 176). Critic Rebecca Heald noted the affinity in the 2019 exhibition "Raza/Tantra: Black and White Aesthetics" at Grosvenor Gallery, London, where she observed that Raza's forms display a spirituality which has been nurtured since his childhood, and that their resemblance to Tantric *Mandala* and *Yantra* imagery extends beyond mere formal coincidence (Heald, 2019, p. 4).

7.2 Śaktī, Kundalini, and the Feminine Principle

A central characteristic of Raza's practice was a sustained interest in the feminine principle. According to the *Shakta* philosophy of Tantra, the primary text '*Paranandasutra*' (900 C.E.) states that woman is the manifestation of *Śaktī* and is to be regarded as Brahman (the supreme, eternal principle). *Śaktī* is the embodiment of consciousness itself and the blissful state of pure awareness from which all *Praṛti* emerges (Woodroffe, 2007, p. 127).

"striyo devāḥ striyaḥ prāṇāḥ striya eva hi bhūṣaṇam"

The interpretation of the above verse implies that women are the manifestation of *Śaktī*, the very '*prāṇāḥ*', vigorous or life-giving principle, and the precious of all living beings (Bose Dey, 2025; Bhattacharya, 2005, p. 113; Wisdomlib, 2018). Raza's reverence for this philosophy is evident in his ongoing discourse on Kundalini, the subtle feminine energy believed to reside in a dormant state at the base of the human spine and to be activated through meditative practice. In an interview recorded by Dalmia (2021), Raza deliberated on his discourse and concepts of Kundalini and feminine energy, which remained a sustained point of interest for him (p. 178). His *Kundalini* series appeared in his canvases over several years, and the composition gradually moved towards minimalism, as witnessed in *Kundalini* (2013) rather than in the more decorative *Kundalini* (1996). The '*Bija Mantra*' series refers to the tradition of Mantra chanting, where certain syllables seem to activate energy centres in the human subtle body after repeated chanting in a pattern. Raza adapted this principle in his art practice, which he also defined as *Sadhana*, through the meditative

repetition of form, his way of meditative chanting whereby the same geometric patterns emerged across numerous canvases as a means of approaching the absolute reality, or Brahman, through sustained contemplative practice (M. Fic, 2003; Vajpeyi et al., 2015, p. 49).



Figure 4: Ankuran, 1987 (S.H. Raza)

Note: Ankuran, 1987. Medium: Acrylic on Canvas. Image Source: <https://www.wikiart.org/en/s-h-raza/ankuran-1987>

7.3 The Ankuran (Germination) Series and the Yoni Symbolism

One of the significant affinities with the Tantric dimensions of Raza's Art practice is the 'Ankuran' series, which originated in the late 1980s. The conceptual origin of this series is documented in detail by Dalmia (2021):

Raza discovered a stone in the garden of his studio at Gorbio, in southern France, which bore a striking resemblance to the Yoni-shaped stones he had witnessed beside the Narmada Ghats in his youth and to those excavated at Harappa by archaeologist John Marshall (p. 182). Raza installed the stone at the studio entrance, filled it with soil and seeds, and observed as plant shoots sprouted — a living emblem of the creative potential latent in the Yoni.

In Shakta-Tantric cosmogony, the female procreative organ, also symbolised as Yoni, represents the abstract form of the goddess *Śaktī*. It is the source of all creation. Historically, traces of this cult are linked to the Harappan civilisation, where conical and undulant stones symbolising the *Linga* and *Yoni* were excavated (Bhattacharya, 2005, p. 130). Tantric texts profoundly describe *Śaktī* as the primordial womb from which all matter emanates and to which it returns (M. Fic, 2003, pp. 28–29). In Raza's Germination series, the *Bindu*, or *Bija* (seed), is positioned at the compositional centre, similar to a foetus in the womb, surrounded by layers of colour and form that enact the process of unfolding and becoming. In *Bija* (1988), triangles with their apex downward, the traditional Tantric symbol of the female organ "*yoni*", shift from umber to sienna to brown, deepening toward an abysmal darkness from which a black circle emerges within a white triangular form, with an orange hue creating dynamic resonance across the entire surface. In a letter to Krishen Khanna cited by Dalmia (2021), Raza described his obsession with

Germination as 'a logical outcome of Bindu and the Bija,' noting the profound difficulty of interpreting the gesticulations of energy through the medium of art (p. 181).

7.4 "Panchatatva", the Five Elements

Panchatatva, the five basic elements of earth, fire, water, air, and ether, is a vital principle which paradigms Tantric philosophy. Raza's work explicitly demonstrates this philosophy. In ancient Eastern philosophy, the world is constituted by the dynamic interaction of these five elements. Raza's canvases employ the visual schema of five colours: red, black, yellow, blue, and grey, which is basically mapped to the concept of *Panchatatva*. Continuing from the fertility worship of Mother Goddesses of the prehistoric era, the Tantric form of worship also places special importance on menstrual blood, termed Kha-pushpa, for the same purpose. Here, the use of the colour red/vermilion, evident in almost all Indic religious traditions, is evident. The Bhil tribes, before sowing their fields, followed the tradition of setting up a stone smeared with vermilion. Dey (2025) posits that vermilion, or red, colour symbolically refers to menstrual blood, and that smearing vermilion implies the passing of procreative energy to the earth, thereby facilitating its fertilisation. Mother Goddess figures excavated from Mohenjo-Daro are found with a slip of Vermillion colour; so are the Venus figures of Willendorf (Austria) (Marshall, ed., 1931).



Figure 5: Panchatatva Naga (S.H. Raza)

Note: Title: Panchatatva Naga. Medium: Acrylic on Canvas. Size: 39/39 inches. Image Source: Saffronart.com

Tucci notes that Pure Consciousness manifests through five distinctly coloured faces, each corresponding to a cardinal direction and associated with the five families recognised within Buddhist schools of thought. '*Sadyojata*', white, is associated with the West, '*Vamadeva*', in yellow, with the North, '*Aghora*', in black, with the South, and '*Tatpuruṣa*', in red, with the East, all oriented around the central green face of '*Isana*'. Beyond their directional significance, these five colours carry elemental associations: white with water, yellow with earth, red with fire, green with ether, and blue with space (Tucci, 1949/1961, p. 51). In Raza's composition, black refers to the element of earth; consistent with his broader philosophy, which holds that black is the mother of all colours and contains within its depths all other chromatic possibilities. *Panchatatva* series apparently

articulates these five colours arranged in geometric configurations, which are mapped to the elemental constitution of the cosmos.

8. Key Findings

Syed Haider Raza's artistic journey constitutes one of the most remarkable syntheses in twentieth-century art: the integration of French Modernism's formal rigour with the deep cosmological discourse of Indian philosophical expansion. From the luminous cityscapes of his Paris years to the concentrated geometric abstraction of his *Bindu*, *Kundalini*, *Germination*, and *Panchatatva* series, Raza progressively dematerialised his experience of existence, personal, aesthetic, and philosophical distinction, into a visual language of the Avant-Garde. *Bindu* is related to Hindu Tantric philosophy as the point of all creation. Evolved from the Tantric concept of shunya and the beginning point of Creation, Raza's *Bindu* (1980) was perceived as the centre of all creation and existence. *Kundalini* (1989) series transcends mere aesthetic principles of Modern Art; it embodies a deep philosophical exploration of consciousness. The coil of painted circles in a Kundalini format symbolises this primal source of energy, inviting spectators to reflect on their own paths to self-discovery and the universal quest for deeper understanding and connection. The title *Ankuran* (1980–1994) means "germination" or "sprouting". The painting typically features organic forms and rich, earthy colours that symbolise fertility and the birth of consciousness. *Panchatatva*, the five natural vital elements of *Bhoomi* (earth), *Vayu* (air), *Jal* (water), *Agni* (fire), and *Akasha* (ether/sky), are represented by thick and thin lines of colour that imbue Raza's fundamental palette: black, red, blue, yellow, and white.

9. Conclusion

The analysis led to the deduction that Tantric symbolism is visually conveyed at multiple levels within Raza's oeuvre, such as: the South Asian cosmogonic significance of the Bindu, as both point of origin and axis of dissolution; the elemental geometry of circle, square, and triangle; the structural elements of *Yantra* and *Mandala*; and the resonances with the *Shakta* philosophy behind the *Ankuran* and *Yoni* series. Furthermore, in the *Kundalini* series, there is an association with subtle feminine energy, and in the *Panchatatva* series, the five cosmic elements are mapped onto a chromatic schema. All these associations cannot be reduced to mere incidents but are structural, deliberately built over years of sustained engagement with Indian philosophical understandings, sacred imagery, and the experiential learning of India's landscape, music, and poetry. Raza's denial of the nomenclature as 'Tantric artist' reflects not repudiation but a negation of being self-confined. His works of the above series of the 1980s synthesise '*Roop Adhyatma*' (Spirituality of form) and European Modernism, transcending ritual function while retaining symbolic vitality. His oeuvre ultimately embodies the Tantric verity of the many emerging forms and their return to the one.

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