

# Mind, Immortality and Art

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What does science say about the nature of mind? Are there many minds or just one that manifests itself through the individual's experience? Do masks used in ritual or secular performance tell us something about the nature of mind? Is the archaic mind close, in some manner, to the sensibility of the postmodern age and where does the Indian evidence stand on it? How might ideas of mind's powers and their artistic representation have travelled in the old world? How have notions of immortality been represented in myth and art? What is the story of the evolution of these ideas in India? These are some of the questions examined in this paper.

## 1 Mind and Rational Thought

We begin with the current state of the scientific thought on the question of mind (Kak 1996b). Although scientific orthodoxy considers mind to be an emergent property of matter, its very definition intimates paradox and freedom from causal chain. A consideration of a universe with free individuals makes closed descriptions impossible because each thought and intention changes the universe! No wonder, many have argued that mind will forever remain outside the framework of science.

Nevertheless, much progress has been made in the scientific examination of the nature of mind. The rational method, exemplified by the framework of classical physics, separates subject and object and addresses only the latter. But modern physics has shown that at the deepest level of description such a separation is false. In quantum physics, the act of observation reduces the many potentialities of a system to a specific one. The quantum reality is a simultaneous existence of many possibilities but its observation structures it into an ordered, logically structured experience. It is not surprising then that the workings of quantum mechanics have been called “mystical”. In the words of the great American quantum theorist Richard Feynman, “I can safely say that nobody understands quantum mechanics.” The workings of quantum theory cannot be captured by a machine based on binary logic or, consequently, by a linear discourse. We see many paradoxes in contemporary physics, although it has barely scratched the question of observation and cognition.

We see other paradoxes when we use the perspective of neuropsychology. In certain traumas to the brain, as in a stroke, a single specific ability is lost even though general processing of information may be unimpaired. Thus in visual agnosia (or prosopagnosia), a person can see perfectly well but not recognize faces including one’s own. In alexia, one’s sight or general intelligence is unaffected but, nevertheless, one is unable to read letters although one can write!

This suggests that cognitive ability, seen as a higher-level processing in computing terms, has a certain uniqueness that cannot be reduced to a simple aggregation of lower-level processing. It appears that this insight was known to the ancient seers who spoke of various gods within the individual’s inner firmament. These gods are just the various cognitive centres.

It can be argued that scientific theories ultimately do no more than describe mind, since it is mind that structures the outer reality. So if the fundamental nature of the outer reality is quantum mechanical, the same should be true for the underlying nature of mind. Just imagine, how much more it muddies up the picture!

These observations are just to stress that the idea of mind as a rational computing device is not just simplistic but plainly wrong. This warning is important because this fact is often ignored in academic studies. The ancient man, in his artistic expressions of the terror and beauty of human life, used paradoxical representations to express the basic human mystery. In

the study of masks the question of information being revealed or concealed is likely to be of less relevance than the question of the transformations that mind can perform. These transformations often relate to transcendence of natural order and immortality.

Literary imagination and mystical visions suggest that the human mind can think of matters that have no proper historical anchor. The Mahābhārata mentions embryo transplantation (as in the case of Balarāma who is transplanted into the womb of Rohiṇī), multiple births from the same fetus (the hundred children of Gāndhārī), battle with extra-terrestrials who are wearing air-tight suits (in Book 3 called “The Razing of Saubha”), and weapons of mass-destruction. The Rāmāyaṇa mentions air travel.

There are several accounts of time slowing down or speeding up. In the Brahma P. we have the story of the ascetic Kaṇḍu for whom time speeds up in the company of the apsaras Pramloca. The Bhāgavata P. has episodes related to different passage of time for different observers which is very similar to what happens in the theory of relativity.

The notion of self in the Upaniṣads embodies a very subtle understanding of observers and of reality. Yoga Vāsiṣṭha and Tripurārahasya present a deep discussion of the nature of consciousness.

Purāṇic cosmology gives an age of the universe that is in close agreement with the modern value. We find examples of accurate astronomical numbers in the early texts. Perhaps, this accuracy was due to the knowledge of biological cycles that reflect astronomical processes, such as menses according to the period of the moon (Kak 1996b). The understanding of the outer was helped along by an understanding of the inner.

Are the other examples similar to the science fiction imagination of our own times? There is no evidence of a material science that could have spawned such imagination. The Indian texts are either full of the most astonishingly lucky guesses or we have not yet understood their knowledge framework.

The Indian literature has many narratives on the mystery of mind. The question of the chronology of this literature and the ritual described therein remains open. The fact that the Ṛgveda describes the Sarasvatī river as its main river has been interpreted to mean that Ṛgveda should be prior to about 2000 B.C.E. because that is when this river dried up. A recent study (Kak 1997) has shown that the ritual of the Vedic period may belong to a time prior to about 7000 B.C.E., although the texts describing it may be

much, much later.

In the Vedic view of reality, there is a tripartite connection (*bandhu*) between the stars (*devas*), the worldly creatures (*bhūtas*), and the inner landscape (*ātman*). This view opens up many new ways of looking at Indian texts (Kak 1994, 1995, 1996a). It becomes possible to go beyond literal meanings, that are often paradoxical, to a much textured narrative which has astronomical, psychological and historical subtexts.

The human mind may be seen at two levels. At one level, it is just a mechanical recall of associations. But true comprehension or perception is made possible by the universal self present within. This self transcends time and space and personal identity. One is able to comprehend the world only because such comprehension is reflected in the nature of mind.

The universal self can take any form. In particular, each mask worn by the universal self becomes one unique aspect of the transcendent reality. The mask brings attention to the *bandhu* across the three worlds.

This is why the Vedic gods are such shadowy figures and they wear different disguises. In fact, the various gods are, in turn, the disguises of the same reality.

Indra seduces Ahalya in disguise. There are disguises of form and then there are disguises across space and time. The story of Indra and the ants in the *Brahmavaivarta P.* speaks of countless Indras in previous aeons who are now ants.

The asuras are also adept at changing forms. *Vāmana P.* speaks of how once the gods lost to the asuras led by Maya who has the magic to assume many different forms. When the gods flee heaven, Bali became Indra, Bāṇa became Yama, Maya became Varuṇa, Rāhu became Soma, Prahlāda became fire, Svarbhānu became Sūrya, and Śukra became Bṛhaspati.

## 2 Of Immortality

Masks are powerful because they do not disclose any emotion of the wearer by freezing the visage to a single archetypal form. Since they don't countenance change, masks intimate immortality. On the other side, narratives of immortality represent transformation of self. Here we recall Kāvya Uśanas, the chief priest of the asuras, who knows the secret of immortality. Uśanas is also the planet Venus, and in the hymn RV 10.123, Vena is described as

being born of the sun. This hymn has Vena of the Bhrgus as the seer and Vena is also the deity of the hymn. This clearly expresses the connection between Bhrgu and Vena. There is mention of Śukra cups in a ritual that points to its astronomical origin and its being a planet that waxes and wanes (Kak 1996c).

The identity Vena=Venus suggests that the Romans had knowledge of Venus before their interaction with the Greeks. We should then consider the Greek astronomical myths as just one of the many system of such myths and not a precursor to those of other European tribes. Such a view is in general agreement with the astronomical interpretation of ancient myths by de Santillana and von Dechend (1969).

In later Indian mythology Vena is described as a wicked king. This ascribed wickedness echoes the affiliation of Venus with the asuras (demons or titans), the dual to the gods. This duality is mirrored in other dichotomies such as spiritual against material; mental against physical; higher against lower; bright against dark.

Vena is called Gandharva in the R̥gveda. Gandharva is the lover who is married to the Apsaras (water-nymph), alluding to love and to residence in the sea of heavens. Vena, like Aphrodite, is associated with the waters or with the sea, which is the sea of heaven, from which he is born.

Elsewhere, the story is told how Venus in the form of Kāvya Uśanas deprived Kubera of his wealth. Kubera complained to Śiva who punished Uśanas by swallowing him. Eventually, he let Uśanas come out of his semen passage which is why he was now called Śukra, “shining”. For this reason, Venus is also called the son of Śiva or that of the sun.

There are many “astronomical” reasons for associating Venus with the asuras. One of these is the fact that Venus is the brightest inferior planet and it is in opposition to Mars. Also, it is possible to see the crescent form of Venus with the unaided eye. It is reasonable, therefore, to assume that the “horns”, together with the apparent rebirth after each disappearance against the disk of the sun, led to the myths that Śukra belonged to the party of the asuras and he possessed the secret of immortality. The immortality of Vena is mentioned in RV 10.123.4, where as Gandharva, he knows immortal names; and in Atharvaveda 2.1 where it is claimed that Vena sees the supreme secret which leads to immortality.

Pliny in his *Naturalis Historia* (2, 37) represents Venus as a human figure with two horns. It has been discovered that Astarte, the Assyrian Venus,

was shown as bearing a staff tipped with a crescent. The image of a horned woman appears to represent the fusion of the images of the asura (demon) and the apsaras (water nymph). Aphrodite is the water nymph who rises from the foam of the sea of the heaven quite like the apsaras who longs for Vena.

The other opposition is between Mercury and Venus. Being inner planets, they are found always close to the sun. Hermes as Mercury is the messenger of the gods and the inventor of writing whereas Venus is the goddess of love. In India, the dichotomy is more symmetric: Budha (Mercury) is Viṣṇu, the younger brother of Indra, the great god, the sun who is also later represented by Śiva; whereas Śukra (Venus) is the teacher of the asuras (demons).

It is noteworthy that the Śiva/Viṣṇu split can be best understood in the interiorization of the astronomical frame. Śiva now represents the “sun” of consciousness and Viṣṇu represents the cognitive category of intelligence which ultimately draws its “light” from the sun; this explains the etymology of *budha* as intelligence.

Immortality is a central theme of Indic texts and the Vedic ritual. One would expect that the ancient Indian ritual would have included masked performances to represent the “stilled time” of the gods. But how far back does the concern with immortality, masks, and transformation go in India?

### 3 Indic Art and Myths

Let us consider the earliest Indic art (Figure 1), as preserved on rocks in the paleolithic, mesolithic and neolithic stages (40000 B.C.E. onwards) and the seals and the sculpture of the Indus-Sarasvati phase (Feuerstein et al 1995). According to Wakankar, the beginnings of the rock art have been traced to 40,000 years BP in the decorated ostrich eggshells from Rajasthan, dated using radiocarbon techniques. Subsequent phases have been determined using evolution of style and other radiocarbon dates. The mesolithic period has been dated as 12000 to 6000 BP.

The earliest drawings of Figure 1 are characterized by dynamic action, vitality in form, and an acute insight into abstraction and visual perception. Figure 2 shows several masked figures in rock art (Pandey 1992) in a chronological sequence. There are several suggestive drawings. In 2.1, the body of one individual has been marked by six dots, that recall the *cakras* of the

psychosomatic self. In 2.2, one of the persons shows a sun right at the top of the head. This unusual representation is of significance because classical Indian thought considers the mind to be illuminated by an inner sun. Below the sun are three dots which could stand for the two eyes and a third middle eye of “inner” sight. There are many iconic representation of individuals like the wheel in 2.3. Does this represent the wheel of time? In 2.4, one of the figures looks like wearing a goat mask. One should remember the importance of the goat in the Vedic sacrifice. The goat as representative of Pūṣan also played an important part in the ritual of burial.

The drawing 2.6 is the “Gilgamesh” or “hero” motif with a god or goddess holding back two beasts on either side. The beasts are without their front ends, so clearly the depiction is symbolic. As in later hero pictures, it could represent a god or goddess triumphing over demonic opponents. The iconic nature of the drawing indicates that a mythology existed.

We show three views of a mask from Mohenjo-Daro (Figure 3). This is a “goat” mask. Other masks (not shown here) include that of a peaceful horned deity and another which appears to be the ferocious face of the same deity. These masks suggest an unchanging kernel away from the fluidity of the external form.

Figure 4 has a hero seal from the Harappan era. Here the person in the middle has been taken to represent the sun overcoming the forces of darkness. But it could be the goddess battling the twin demons Caṇḍa and Muṇḍa. Further support for this view comes from a terracotta molded tablet (Figure 5) from the Harappa Museum (H95-2486) that shows a goddess, standing above an elephant, battling two tigers. The reverse of this tablet shows what could be the goddess killing the buffalo demon with one foot pressing the head down and one arm holding the tip of a horn. A gharial is shown above this scene and a yogic figure, wearing a horned headdress, Paśupati or Śiva, looks on. In Atharvaveda 2.34, Paśupati rules over all bipeds and quadrupeds.

Another contest image is a cylinder seal (Figure 6) from Kalibangan (K-65) that shows a goddess holding back two warriors; here, using a very clever, representational style, the goddess is also shown separately merging into a tiger suggesting that the tiger is the mount of the goddess. Durgā as Mahiṣāsura-Mardīnī rides a lion or a tiger in the Purāṇas.

We see a very significant continuity of motif suggesting that the Harappan civilization has an unbroken link with the paleolithic and the mesolithic

cultures of India.

Figure 7 shows tessellations from the ancient rock art of India. G.S. Tyagi (1992) has argued that these designs occur at the lowest stratum of the rock paintings and if that is accepted they belong to the upper paleolithic period. These designs are unique to India in the ancient world. Tyagi has suggested that they may represent a “trance experience.”

The basic feature of these tessellations is infinite repetition. This repetition may occur for a basic pattern or, more abstractly, the lines extend spatially in a manner so that a basic pattern is repeated in two directions. An understanding of this abstract concept must have been a part of the thought system of the artists. This is another continuity with the central place of the notion of infinite in later Indian thought. It appears that the “yogic” tradition in India may be much older than has been hitherto assumed.

Likewise, there is fundamental continuities between Vedic myths and the Harappan art. The Mahābhārata 13.149 speaks of Viṣṇu as śṛṅgi, “the horned one”. The Vāyu P. has ekaśṛṅga, “unicorn”, as one of the names of Śiva. We see the unicorn as one of the most common figures in the Harappan seals.

Further support for this comes from an amulet seal from Rehman Dheri (2400 B.C.E.). The seal shows a pair of scorpions on one side and two antelopes on the other (Figure 8). Ashfaque (1989) has argued that this seal represents the opposition of the Orion (Mṛgaśiras, or antelope head) and the Scorpio (Rohiṇī) nakṣatras. There exists another relationship between Orion and Rohiṇī, this time the name of  $\alpha$  Tauri, Aldebaran. The famous Vedic myth of Prajāpati as Orion, as personification of the year, desiring his daughter (Rohiṇī) (for example Aitareya Br. 3.33) represents the age when the beginning of the year shifted from Orion to Rohiṇī. For this “transgression”, Rudra (Sirius, Mṛgavyāddha) cuts off Prajāpati’s head. According to Ashfaque, the arrow near the head of one of the antelopes represents the decapitation of Orion, and this seems a very reasonable interpretation of the iconography of the seal. The interpretation of the Prajāpati/Rudra myth as representing the shifting of the beginning of the year away from Orion, which is generally accepted, places the astronomical event in the fourth millennium B.C.E.

It is a well-known theory that the “Paśupati” seal from Harappa may represent Śiva. The fact that the astronomical myth related to Rudra-Śiva preceded this representation lends credence to the theory.



A new view is emerging that the primary purpose of the Harappan seals was religious. These seals are square in accordance with the Vedic dictum that assigns this shape to the gods. Square altars represent heaven. The significance of the square in the Indian sacred arts has been very rightly stressed by Kapila Vatsyayan (1997).

It should also be noted that there are significant connections between Vedic ritual and Harappan technology. For example, the bricks of the ritual are kiln-fired like the Harappan bricks, and unlike the sun-dried bricks common in Mesopotamia. Fire altars have been found in the Harappan sites.

Libation vessels made of the conch shell *Turbinella Pyrum* have been found at Mohenjo-Daro. One of these is filled with vermillion filled incised lines. As we know such conch vessels have been used in the Vedic ritual and for administering sacred water or medicine to patients.

The abstract and the iconic elements in Indian rock art are different from the more naturalistic ancient European cave paintings. There is also difference in the nature of the community and state in the Western and the Indian civilizations in the earliest urban phase. The West has monumental temples, tombs, palaces whereas the society in India appears to have been governed by a sacred order.

## 4 Old World Connections

It is significant that the themes and motifs of the rock art and the later Harappan seals are repeated in the Near East and in Greece. The image of the “hero” is repeated in Babylonian iconography. Napier (1986, 1982) has shown how the image of the Gorgon, so central to the beginnings of the Greek art, must be viewed as an intrusive Indic idea. This is supported by the fact that the name of the Mycenaean Greek city Tiryns is the same as that of the most powerful Indian sea-faring people called the Tirayans (Krishna 1980). Tiryns is the place where the most ancient monuments of Greece are to be found.

Alvarez (1978) has suggested that Vedic themes of afterlife are sketched on Etruscan tombs. We also have the Gundestrup cauldron, found in Denmark a hundred years ago. This silver bowl has been dated to around the middle of the 2nd century B.C.E. Figures 9 and 10 present the decorations on the cauldron together with their corresponding Indian originals. That

the iconography must be Indic is clear from the elephant (totally out of context in Europe) with the goddess and the yogic figure. According to the art historian Timothy Taylor (1992),

A shared pictorial and technical tradition stretched from India to Thrace, where the cauldron was made, and thence to Denmark. Yogic rituals, for example, can be inferred from the poses of an antler-bearing man on the cauldron and of an ox-headed figure on a seal impress from the Indian city of Mohenjo-Daro...Three other Indian links: ritual baths of goddesses with elephants (the Indian goddess is Lakshmi); wheel gods (the Indian is Vishnu); the goddesses with braided hair and paired birds (the Indian is Hariti).

This also means that the originals of the representational forms of Lakṣmī, Viṣṇu, and, by extension, of other gods developed quite in accord with Coomaraswamy's observation (1927) "that both temples and images must already have existed certainly in the second century B.C. and perhaps earlier."

For the continuities between the Harappan and later Indian art also consider the small repousse gold plaque bearing the figure of a nude female, which has been dated to the seventh or the eighth century B.C.E. (Zimmer 1955; 68). The bathing pools of the Harappan cities appear to be the model on which bathing ghats in India have been designed in historical times. There is the continuity in the religious symbol of the pillar, the axis of the universe, represented anthropomorphically as the phallus. In Harappa and later India we come across the goddess with the lotus in her hair. Elephants and bulls are sacred in both phases. The famous "priest" image from Mohenjo-Daro is wearing a headband with an ornament at the centre which seems to be the model for a similar headband worn by the yakṣī from Didarganj which is dated to about 200 B.C.E. Zimmer (1946; 168-9) even saw the prototype for Śiva as Naṭarāja in a torso found in Harappa:

The head is lost; so are the arms; so are the knee, shank, and foot of the left leg. All of these extremities were wrought separately and then fixed to the trunk by means of plugs which have since disintegrated. But the holes into which they were inserted are

clearly to be seen. Evidently, it was for the sake of convenience that the figure was not carved from a single block of stone... Particularly significant is the point at which the left shank was affixed to the thigh: it is above the knee. The position suggests that the foot cannot have rested on the ground; it must have hung uplifted, as though in a posture of dance. In fact there is every reason to believe that this archaic torso represents a dancer, not very different in form from those of the much later Natarāja type. The probability here is that we have a precious symptom of a continuity of tradition over a period of no less than four thousand years.

The later idea of the stūpa and its hollowed-out variant, the caitya-hall may also be viewed as steps in a long evolving sequence. These were innovations on the old Vedic altar (citi) as described in the *agnicayana* ritual where the construction was according to certain astronomical ideas. At some point, perhaps in late 2nd millennium B.C.E., the connection with the astronomical basis was lost and the ritual ceased to be a living one. When it was resurrected, it took the shapes of the stūpa and the caitya-hall.

## 5 Concluding Remarks

This paper has been a broad survey of several issues related to mind and the artistic and mythic expression of immortality and its history in India. We note that the world of the imagination of the Indian texts anticipates many possibilities that have come within scientific understanding only in our modern age. This happened because the Indian tradition considered the question of the cognition of the outer reality as being deeper than that of a mere naming of physical objects. A preoccupation with the abstract is found in the mesolithic drawings of India as well.

The Indian texts remember very ancient astronomical events that mark the earliest neolithic period. If the legends of the Mahābhārata are viewed from an anthropological perspective, they recall a society very different from the later settled order of the high Vedic period.

I have examined connections between Indian themes and their later Western forms. This is not to be taken as implying that influences have only travelled one way between India and the West. Doubtless, there were influences

that flowed in the opposite direction as well. But the complex nature of the interaction between India and the West will become clear only with further research.

I have also presented evidence that indicates a fundamental continuity between the rock art of paleolithic and mesolithic India and the later Harappan and the still later classical Indian forms.

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