

## Indian Aesthetics and Christian Art of Jyoti Sahi

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### Abstract

Aesthetics is the science of the beautiful. Indian Christian Aesthetics is of recent origin. Christian painters in their own way have contributed in no less measure to the Indian cultural ethos. Among them one of the most celebrated and renowned painter, thinker, and writer is Jyoti Sahi. Jyoti Sahi (b.1944) is one of the most productive Christian artists today known in India and abroad. He himself describes his work as 'theologizing with a brush'; through his painting and writings he has opened a new horizon of Indian Aesthetics. Jyoti Sahi feels that what Christianity has to offer is a new vision, a new sense that every person, no matter what his or her status in society, has to participate in the creative work of God, and in this process, discover the self, the mission and God. Christian art for Jyoti Sahi is the festival of joy which brings the community together to celebrate. Art has a prophetic function too. The task of the artist is ultimately to communicate with the people, to express their inner self, their laughter and tears. Through his pen and the brush, he has opened a new vista in the Indian arena of aesthetics.

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Aesthetics is the science of the beautiful<sup>1</sup> and studies all arts. It studies how artists imagine, create and perform works of art, how people use, enjoy and criticize art – what happens when they look at paintings, listen to music or read poetry; and helps them understand what they see or hear. How people feel about art – why they like some works and not others, and how art can affect their moods, beliefs, attitudes towards life; are all part of the science of the beautiful.

The science of the beautiful cannot be restricted to any religion, region, culture or tradition. In fact, it expresses them all. Here, there is no conflict in terms of superiority, rather, it is the heart of the poet/ artist which lies beyond what is presented in canvas.

In India, art and aesthetics have their own purpose. It may be to entertain, to give joy, to create bliss. Poetry is an art and its immediate purpose and aim are to give delight and aesthetic pleasure. In ancient times, aesthetic presentations served as pass-time that would simultaneously be visual as well as auditory. Several other purposes that are served by poetry are enumerated by the works of poetics. They are: delight, solace, instruction, knowledge of religion, morality and philosophy, proficiency in the arts and the ways of the world.

### Jyoti Sahi – The Person

Jyoti Sahi is one of the most productive and well known Christian artists in India and abroad at present. He himself describes his work as 'theologizing with a brush'. He is well acquainted

<sup>1</sup> Anand Amaladass, *Introduction to Aesthetics*, Chennai, Satya Nilayam Publications, 2000, p. 6.

with the Indian artistic traditions. Jyoti Sahi is a master of both the pen and of the brush. Though better known for his paintings, he regards himself primarily as a writer – a poet rather than an artist/ painter<sup>2</sup>, therefore he assimilates Indian ideas into the Indian Christian ideas. His Indian experience is rooted in his Christian faith and life as a person and as a member of the community. Speaking about him Richard Taylor would say, Jyoti Sahi is by far the most cerebral of all the Indian Christian painters I know. Listening to his ideas is always stimulating.<sup>3</sup> Through his paintings and writings he has opened a new horizon of Indian Aesthetics. In this essay, I am focusing on the contribution of Jyoti Sahi to Indian Aesthetics.

Jyoti Sahi was born in Pune in 1944.<sup>4</sup> His mother was a British Unitarian and his father a Hindu from Punjab who was a teacher by profession. He was baptized into the Church of Scotland. Thus, he was genetically enabled to become a bridge builder between Europe and India, between Hinduism and Christianity. His talent for art became visible in his early childhood and so his parents sent him to study arts and crafts in England. Between 1959 and 1963 he went to London and studied at the Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts. There, in that atmosphere, after a culture-shock, he took interest in monastic life. In 1963, he met Bede Griffiths in England. Bede Griffiths, a Benedictine monk, had started a Christian Ashram in Kerala in the mid-fifties, called Kurisumala, and he invited Jyoti Sahi to visit him. After his return to India, he taught for one year in the America School in New Delhi. He then started a *yatra*, a pilgrimage across India and visited various *ashrams*. His frequent visits to Kurisumala affected him, and so he decided to give up the job of teaching art and went to live in the *ashram*. For a short time, Jyoti Sahi worked together with the famous Christian architect Laurence Wilfred Baker (famous for low cost buildings). While working there he met Jane Sadler, a British who had come to India to study Gandhian *ashrams*. In 1970, he married Jane in Shantivanam Ashram, a Christian *ashram* founded by Swami Abhishiktananda. In the same year, he started working at National Biblical Catechetical Liturgical Centre (NBCLC), Bangalore, which had been started in 1968 by the Catholic Bishop Conference of India to implement ideas about inculturation of the Church in India.

In 1973, he was invited by Mission in Aachen, Germany, to design Christian *mandala* patterns. Later in 1974 he designed the first Lenten Banner of Miserior and conducted various workshops in India and abroad using Indian symbols for liturgical use. He also designed the chapel of the National Biblical, Catechetical and Liturgical Centre (NBCLC), Bangalore. He is the founding member of the Asian Christian Art Association started in 1978.

Jyoti Sahi started an art *ashram* in the Christian village Silvepura, near Bangalore. The *ashram* is the dwelling and working place of the artist and his wife, who founded a school for village children and people who decide to stay there for a short or longer period time. A few important members of the *ashram* community and his disciples are Arun Pardhe, the Jesuit, Wendell D’Cruz, who has become known through Warli Art, and the well-known artist,

<sup>2</sup> Jyoti Sahi, *Stepping Stones*, Bangalore, Asian Trading Corporation, 1986, p. xi.

<sup>3</sup> Richard W. Taylor, *Jesus in Indian Paintings*, Madras, Christian Literature Society, 1985, p. 143.

<sup>4</sup> For biographical note, I have referred Mukti ParakashXess, Jyoti Sahi, in *Indian Christian Themes in Indian Art: From Nilayam Publications, 2005. P. 199ff*, Anand Amaladass and Gudrun Lowner, *Christian Themes in Indian Art: From the Mogul Times till Today*, New Delhi, Manohar Publications, 2013, pp. 268 -276 and also website <http://www.yorks.ac.uk/education----theology/faculty-of-ets/faculty-events/icpr-2012/keynote-speakers/dr-jyoti-sahi.aspx> (accessed on 06.06.2013).

Lucy D’souza-Krone. The life style in the *ashram* is very simple. People sit together on the floor and eat. Often seminars and retreats are conducted for Indian or foreign groups.

The artistic life of Jyoti Sahi can be divided into two phases. The first phase stretches from 1964 (his return to India) until 1982 and is dedicated to inculturation in the Sanskritic tradition and makes use of many Hindu symbols. In the second phase we see a complete change in Jyoti Sahi. From 1982 onwards his framework of reference becomes the little traditions of the tribal people and the Dalits. In 1982, he attended a workshop organized by Gurukul Theological Seminary and made first contact with the Dalit liberation theology. The transition from the first to the second phase was floating, but the two different influences can be clearly defined in his works.<sup>5</sup>

### Jyoti Sahi - The Philosopher

According to Jyoti Sahi, the artist is a missionary and art is the mission. As for Christianity he says, “Christianity has to offer a new vision of man, a new sense that every person, no matter what his or her status is in society, has a call to be creative, to participate in the creative work of God which to this day is bringing the world into life.”<sup>6</sup> Through active responsibility and cooperation with God, every individual discovers that s/he is made in the image of God.<sup>7</sup> Finally the image of God is not to be found in any object made by human hands, but in the human-self.

The artist confesses his faith through his works. Here by faith we do not mean a set of conventional dogmas to which the artist adheres to with his conscious, propositional mind, but something far more primal and intuitive. Faith here is a total fusing of the inner and outer, of content and form, whereby the artist aspires to being true to his inner being. Jyoti Sahi sees himself confronted with symbols and images endeavouring to interpret them.<sup>8</sup> Jyoti Sahi believes that the artist is on a mission. Sometimes people ask about what function art fulfils in the Church. Art helps to proclaim the Gospel by depicting Biblical narratives, as well as Biblical themes. In other words, images supplement the inspired word of the Bible, bringing home to people the Truth which the Bible proclaims. Images are easier to absorb than discursive propositions and help the mind to retain the message of the Bible. Another way of stating it would be that sacred images help to instruct and make events of the Bible visible and tangible to simple people, who may not find it easy actually to read the Bible.

Art helps through sacred images, to make Christ present to His faithful. Art not only represents, it also presents. It draws the mind into the Divine Milieu. The image is sacramental, in that it becomes a channel of grace. Art celebrates the incarnation, because it not only depicts what has happened in the past but also through the images, helps us feel that Christ is present and among us today. He lives and moves with us in our lives, and this we realize through our imagination, and through our capacity to see the Christ-likeness of our fellow human beings. This is the basis, properly speaking, of art in the service of inculturation.

<sup>5</sup>Anand Amaladass and Gudrun Lowner, *Christian Themes in Indian Art: From the Mogul Times till Today*, New Delhi, Manohar Publications, 2013, p. 268.

<sup>6</sup> Jyoti Sahi, *Stepping Stones*, p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Jyoti Sahi, *Stepping Stones*, p. xii.

The artistic works are an expression of the entire person. Hence, he illustrated the task of the artist in the following terms:

#### **Art is a Journey of Self Discovery**<sup>9</sup>

Through Christian art, the artist is not only trying to express the great insights and symbols of the religious tradition to which he belongs, but is also trying to discover himself. He is trying to find out his own identity, his own inner image or 'I am'. Speaking of art Jyoti Sahi says, "Ultimately the purpose of art is to reveal to the worshipper what he is. This is why we want an Indian Christian art."<sup>10</sup>

#### **Art is a Call to be a Co-Creator**

Creation is incomplete. Human beings essentially are creators and artists and are called by vocation to assist the fullness of creation. This vision of the human being as sharing in the creative life of God invests each individual with a glorious dignity and beauty. As every person and just not the elite, is called to be an image of God, even the lowliest is seen to have the glory or radiance of the divine beauty. The beauty of human beings is only a reflection of the beauty of the creator.

Through some ineffable mystery, man has been called to cooperate in the creativity of God, and thus he has been given a freedom to create, in some measures, the world in which he lives. By celebrating the beauty of creation, and in particular the beauty of man, the artist celebrates the eternal doxology, whereby creation glorifies, in playful joy, the glory of the creator - God.

#### **Art is Fellowship - Koinonia**<sup>11</sup>

Christian art for Jyoti Sahi is sharing: it is the festival of joy which brings the community together to celebrate. It is the total process wherein his art is used as an important element. The Christian artist does not just produce objects. Rather, he is involved in celebration. Of course working for a community has its limitations. The artist working for the church is constantly faced by the lack of understanding, and by the petty conversations of the community for which he is working. But the prophetic function of the artist is in fact playing an educative role. He speaks to the people, and ultimately for the people. He, like the prophet, has the role of an intercessor. His task is ultimately to communicate with the people in order to express their inner selves, their laughter and tears. The artist often has to try and communicate what most people do not understand - because it is a new word, a new vision, and we cannot understand what is really new. The artist must constantly remain with the people, and must consciously long to give birth to their deeper aspirations. In expressing the heart of the people, the artist finally discovers himself.<sup>12</sup> Christian artists therefore use the techniques developed within Hindu aesthetics in order to realize and manifest the world redeemed in the Risen Christ.

<sup>9</sup> Mukti Prakash Xess, *Jyoti Sahi, in Indian Christian Thinkers*, Chennai, Satya Nilayam Publications, 2005, p. 201.

<sup>10</sup> Richard W. Taylor, pp. 143-144.

<sup>11</sup> Jyoti Sahi, *Stepping Stones*, p. 5.

<sup>12</sup> Mukti Xess, *Indian Christian Thinkers*, p. 201.

#### **Art - A Sadhana**

It is easy to view the work of Jyoti Sahi in a spiritual context. As an artist, his task becomes a *sadhana*, a means towards a deeper interiority. Early in his days he felt the attraction to monastic life. This concern for a spiritual dimension remained with him also as an artist in a family setting. A meditative context for his artistic work seems natural to him and has led him to get deeply involved in the development of the Christian *ashram* movement in India. This interest has further resulted in the creation of an artists' *ashram*, called Indian School of Art and Peace.<sup>13</sup>

#### **Art and an Indian Christian Ecclesiology**<sup>14</sup>

For Indian thinkers, joy is crucial to the experience of art. Bliss is what binds people together; it is the inner spirit which gives life to all outer forms. Indian Aesthetics has stressed the importance of joy, *ananda*. The very essence of the artist's experience is this joy which leads both the maker of the images, and also the appreciator, or worshipper of the images, to liberation, *moksha*. Art arises out of the creative energy of joy. But the artist also depicts human sufferings. One cannot neglect the sufferings of human beings and the suffering humanity that finds greatest meaning in a suffering God.

The artist cannot be judged by the measure of ordinary mortals. He shares more directly in the creative power of the Father. Everything is unexpected and original. He bristles against regulation, monotony and routine.

The artist usually opens to the human values of justice and freedom. He cannot breathe the air of dictatorship. He is restive and feels the coming future. He speaks (each in his proper language, poetry, theatre, cinema, painting, sculpture, music) in the name of others who cannot speak.

The 'modern' artist is a prophetic figure that emerged at the beginning of the Renaissance in Western Art, when the aesthetic joy and freedom of the artist in some way expressed the essence of a new humanism. Man, in his true genius is an artist, because every man has been endowed with creative imagination; which is what distinguishes him from the rest of the creation. The creative imagination in man springs from an inner communion with the creative joy of God, which was breathed into man, and which was inspiring with a creative freedom.

In India, art has been described as yoga, a path of spiritual integration. In art, we find a movement from egocentric towards a spiritual self-hood. What begins as an erotic play (*kama*), and desire for personal fame and kudos (*artha*) becomes gradually a means to serving society (*dharma*) and finally liberation through a transforming spiritual joy (*moksha*). Thus, art is not merely an aesthetic field concerned with beauty, but rather a process through which truth and goodness are manifested in terms of a whole system of values in society.

It is for this reason that art can become a *sadhana*, which is a spiritual path, because it integrates truth with life. Those who learn to appreciate true beauty, educate the affective regions of the soul, and become more mature and able to distinguish between what is of true value and the mere show of appearances. Art is a discipline which renders the spirit wiser and also more responsible, seeking for the higher good in all sensory objects.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, pp. 8ff.

<sup>14</sup> Jyoti Sahi, *Stepping Stones*, p.xii.

### Art for Wholeness and Joy

People can only be joyful when they have a sense of wholeness and belonging. It is this sense that makes the individual truly human. By stressing the element of joy and celebration, we stress on the human.

### Art and Indian Culture

Jyoti Sahi refers his relation to Hinduism as a journey, a series of stepping stones. He views this journey as a development from a focus on Indian styles of art to forms of Indian experience. His Indian experience is rooted in his Christian faith, and life as a person and a member of a community. Finally, to remain in touch with the real Indian situation he transcends certain forms in order to be able to respond to India as it is now, an India which includes ancient traditions and modern situations, traditional symbols and new inspirations. He sees the need to understand crystallizations of past experiences afresh, in order to state them to and make them meaningful for the present-day contexts. His Indian experience is rooted in his Christian faith and life as a person and as a member of a community. He sees himself in the world of today, lived in a national context but at the same time exposed to international influences and cross-currents.<sup>15</sup>

### Jyoti Sathi – The Artist

Jyoti Sahi's contribution through his paintings is very extensive. He developed a new form of art expressed through his paintings. Hence an analysis of some of his paintings through which he has made a mark is in place here. Some of the celebrated works of Jyoti Sahi would include his painting *Jesus as Chandra*, the Resurrection painting at Kurisumala, the transfiguration, *Agony in the Garden*, *Holy nativity*, *Christ the dancer on the Cross*, *Yogi Christ*, *Nataraj–Christ*, *Trimurthi Christ*, a number of mediation postures, *mandalas* and many more.<sup>16</sup> His publications include *The Child and the Serpent* (1980), *Stepping Stones* (1986), *Holy Ground – Construction of Experimental Churches in India* (1988).

### Reflections on Popular Indian Symbols

In his book *The Child and the Serpent*, Jyoti Sahi reflects on many an Indian symbol: symbols of opposition, womb–tomb symbols, ecological symbols, symbols of authority, symbols of sacred space, symbol of life, symbol of sun, symbol of serpent, symbol of the tree and interprets them all according to the context of today. He looks at the symbols not as archaic representations but as something which has the power to explain today's reality.<sup>17</sup>

### Presenting an Indian Jesus

The importance of representing Christ as an Indian does not lie in our apprehension of the historical Jesus (who was a Galilean Jew), but in our need to see our fellow human beings as Christ-like, and therefore capable of being incorporated into the Body of Christ, which is His

<sup>15</sup> Jyoti Sahi, *Stepping Stones*, p. xi.

<sup>16</sup> For his list of paintings, you may visit the following website – the first part of the website which displays his paintings: [http://www.google.co.in/search?q=jyoti+Sahi&hl=en&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X-&ei=yRBbUaPqHcKqrAev\\_IHoBA&OCCOQ&BIW=1366&bih=667](http://www.google.co.in/search?q=jyoti+Sahi&hl=en&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X-&ei=yRBbUaPqHcKqrAev_IHoBA&OCCOQ&BIW=1366&bih=667)

<sup>17</sup> Jyoti Sahi, *The Child and the Serpent: Reflections on Popular Indian Symbols*, London, Routledge and Keagan Paul Publications, 1980.

Church. To represent Christ as having Indian features is an appropriate Christ for India: that is to say 'He is our Brother – He is one of us'.

### Christ as Chandra

This is a painting of the moon rising over the snowy peaks of the Himalayas as seen from Landaur in which that large part of the full moon which is over the mountains is His skull with His face painted below. His body seems surrealistic and looks temple-like. His right hand seems to gesture *Abhayamudra*, and holds something with a star on it, as Hindu gods hold symbolic things in their hands; while His left hand seems to gesture *varadamudra*, and holds something with an eye on it.<sup>18</sup>

### The Risen Christ

This picture shows hellish fields and a kind of hill cave. Three crosses are shown on a distant hill. Christ as a gardener is tending a hellish plot with a South Indian hoe. The fields are fenced with stone walls. The *deva* is white, sitting cross-legged and surrounded by a flame-like halo – it is a relief to a student of Indian Christ art to see a wingless angel. Of this picture Jyoti has written,

The Resurrection painting was painted at Kurisumala when I first began to experiment in religious painting and left teaching. At that time I thought that a religious art could perhaps develop out of our response to nature around us. This idea I have developed throughout my work – linking religious art to worship of the world in and through a presentiment of the Holy. The presentiment of the Holy in creation – Holy energies if one were to link it with the theology of St John Damascene – and these energies I link with *Devas*. But – and this is the intuition of the picture – the *Deva* who is found in the cave from which Christ rose – the cave from which flow the seven streams surrounded to Syrian liturgy – is in a sense a blind alley. The three Marines are not looking for the Holy, but for Christ Himself.<sup>19</sup>

### Presentation in the Temple

*Presentation in the Temple* takes place in an actual South Indian pillared–temple between giant door guardians, the priest wears only a cue of hair and saffron *lungi*; Joseph wears white *lungi* and is also bare above the waist.

### Christ the Dancer on the Cross

*Christ the Dancer on the Cross* is a crucifixion within a typical Nataraj flame–halo–circle and with arm and leg gestures; there is a multi-coloured background with a tree. This is a *mandala* – an object of mediation. Jyoti Sahi has represented Jesus as Nataraja or the Lord of the dance. The great Indian icon of the Nataraja or the Lord of the Dance represents Shiva dancing at the centre of a flaming circle. Would the ancient figure of the Cross of Light represent Christ as a dancer upon the Cross? This dance would be dance both of death and life.<sup>20</sup>

In the later part Jyoti Sahi took special interest in environment questions thanks to his interest in Dalit liberation theology. Then his style became more narrative and less symbolic. Sahi

<sup>18</sup> Richard W. Taylor, *Jesus in Indian Paintings*, Madras, Christian Literature Society, 1975, p.145.

<sup>19</sup> Richard Taylor, p. 147.

<sup>20</sup> Richard Taylor, p. 148

started to read with much enthusiasm the myths of the *Adivasis* and painted a whole series of their myths. He takes great interest in *Adivasis* in the Hazaribag region, who paint their houses with simple pictures. In his Meditations on the Rosary this change becomes slowly visible.<sup>21</sup>

The multi-faceted talents of Sahi include not only painting, but also wood carving, woodblock printing and architecture. He has designed many interiors and exteriors of churches. He designed the entire simple interior of the house chapel of the Jesuit Vidyajyoti College in Delhi with a huge mosaic behind the altar. In Bangalore, together with others, he designed the chapel in the National Biblical Catechetical Liturgical Centre, especially the grills, a chapel for the *Adivasis* in Sambalpur, Odisha, a chapel for Palatine Fathers in Mysore, and many more.<sup>22</sup> His *Dancing Christ* did not leave him from his first hunger veiled till today, but the artist has started his way in solidarity with the marginalized and has identified with them.

### **Conclusion**

Jyoti Sahi is basically a seeker. Seeking the Divine and the Human in his art through which he expresses himself. Through his art of painting, carving and architecture he has opened a new vista in Indian Aesthetics, and his contribution has enriched art not only in the arena of Indian Christianity but also in the world at large. This theologian with his brush has shown his skill not only in his work of art but also through his thought process. His preferential option towards the marginalized is seen by sharing their life in a village near Bangalore, and at the same time reflecting their thoughts and dreams through his artistic expressions he makes their voice heard and recognized. This shift is bound to create new waves not only in artistic creations but in the very reflections of art itself. As Sahi expressed, art today has become a medium to express one's self, completely. May the Jyoti (light) of Sahi ever keep burning bright not only in the Indian aesthetical arena but on the world stage, providing light to many more.

<sup>21</sup> See Jyoti Sahi, *Holy Ground: A New Approach to the Mission of the Church in India*, Auckland, Pace Publications, 1998.

<sup>22</sup> A list of his work is found in his book Jyoti Sahi, Eric Lott, *Faces of Vision: Images of Life and Faith*, London, Christian Aware Publications, 2008.