

Shastric Texts and Iconography in India

By

Mr. Shashi Dhar Kumar

shashidharkumar@outlook.com

Abstract

Indian iconography developed within a dense textual tradition that shaped the making, meaning, and ritual life of images. From early sculptural programs at Bharhut and Mathura to the refined bronze icons of the Chola period, visual forms were informed by shastric texts such as the Agamas, Puranas, Shilpa Shastras, and Vastu Shastra. This article traces the historical relationship between textual prescription and artistic practice from the early centuries BCE to the late medieval period. By examining specific examples and referencing key textual sources, it argues that Indian iconography represents an ongoing dialogue between scripture, workshop practice, and regional aesthetics.

Keywords

Shastra, Iconography, Agamas, Shilpa Shastra, Gupta Art, Chola Bronzes, Temple Architecture, Indian Aesthetics.

1. Early Foundations: Narrative and Symbol (3rd century BCE–3rd century CE)

The earliest surviving examples of Indian religious art, such as the railings and gateways of Bharhut (2nd century BCE) and Sanchi (1st century BCE–1st century CE), reflect an emerging visual language shaped by religious literature. At this stage, the Buddha was often represented aniconically—through symbols such as the Bodhi tree, empty throne, or footprints. These visual devices correspond to early Buddhist textual traditions preserved in the Tripitaka.

By the Kushan period (1st–3rd century CE), anthropomorphic representations of the Buddha appear in Mathura and Gandhara. The iconography of these images aligns with emerging

textual codifications of the Buddha's physical marks (lakshanas), described in texts such as the *Lalita Vistara* and other Mahayana sources. The urna (tuft of hair), ushnisha (cranial protuberance), and elongated earlobes become standard features.

Although formal Shilpa Shastra texts are preserved from later centuries, these early examples demonstrate that textual ideas about sacred bodies already influenced visual practice.

2. Gupta Synthesis and Classical Codification (4th–6th century CE)

The Gupta period (4th–6th century CE) is often described as the classical age of Indian art. During this era, iconographic conventions matured and became standardized.

A standing Buddha from Sarnath (5th century CE) exemplifies this synthesis: smooth modeling, downcast eyes, and the dharmachakra mudra (gesture of teaching). These features correspond to ideals articulated in aesthetic and religious literature. The *Vishnudharmottara Purana* (c. 5th–7th century CE), especially its *Chitrasutra* section, provides one of the earliest systematic discussions of painting, proportion, and iconographic representation.

Similarly, Vaishnava and Shaiva images from Udayagiri and Deogarh reflect Puranic descriptions. The *Vishnu Purana* and *Bhagavata Purana* describe Vishnu's four attributes—conch (shankha), discus (chakra), mace (gada), and lotus (padma)—which become fixed elements in sculptural representation.

The Gupta period marks a turning point when textual codification and sculptural practice visibly converge.

3. Agamic Traditions and Temple Systems (6th–10th century CE)

Between the 6th and 10th centuries, the Agamas and Tantras became central to temple worship across India. Shaiva, Vaishnava, and Shakta Agamas provided detailed instructions on:

- Iconometry (tala system of measurement)
- Mudras and postures
- Installation rituals (prana pratistha)

- Temple layout and orientation

Texts such as the Kamikagama, Karana Agama, and Suprabhedagama describe the precise forms of Shiva, including Dakshinamurti, Lingodbhava, and Nataraja.

For example, the rock-cut temples at Ellora (8th century CE) and Elephanta (6th century CE) present monumental forms of Shiva such as the Maheshmurti (three-faced Shiva). The iconographic program aligns with Agamic theology, where Shiva embodies creation, preservation, and destruction.

At the same time, architectural treatises like the Mayamata and Manasara (c. 7th–10th century CE) codified temple design. The placement of deities in cardinal directions followed Vastu principles, integrating architecture and iconography into a single cosmological scheme.

4. The Chola Zenith: Text into Bronze (9th–13th century CE)

The Chola period in Tamil Nadu offers a clear example of shastric prescription translated into artistic excellence. The famous Nataraja bronzes (10th–12th century CE) follow Agamic descriptions closely.

According to Shaiva Agamas:

- The upper right hand holds the drum (damaru) symbolizing creation.
- The upper left hand holds fire, symbolizing destruction.
- The lower right hand displays abhaya mudra (protection).
- The lower left hand points to the raised foot, symbolizing liberation.
- The dwarf Apasmara underfoot represents ignorance.

A Chola bronze Nataraja from the 11th century in the Government Museum, Chennai, perfectly embodies this textual iconography while achieving remarkable aesthetic grace. The circular halo of flames (prabhamandala) visually encodes cosmic rhythm.

The Shilpa text Shilparatna (c. 16th century but preserving earlier traditions) and other South Indian manuals detail bronze casting techniques using the lost-wax process (cire perdue), linking textual knowledge with metallurgical practice.

5. Eastern India and Tantric Imagery (8th–12th century CE)

The Pala-Sena period in eastern India (Bihar and Bengal) produced sophisticated Buddhist and Hindu images informed by Tantric texts.

Stone sculptures of Tara, Avalokiteshvara, and Hevajra from Nalanda and Kurkihar reflect iconographies described in Vajrayana texts such as the *Sadhanamala* (c. 11th–12th century CE). These manuals provide meditation-based visualizations that specify the number of arms, attributes, and accompanying deities.

Here, textual visualization practices directly shape sculptural form. The icon becomes a three-dimensional manifestation of meditative description.

6. Iconometry and Proportion: The Tala System

Shilpa Shastras prescribe mathematical systems of measurement. The tala system divides the body into proportional units, often based on the face or finger measurement (*angula*).

For example:

A Vishnu icon may be eight or ten tala high.

The distance between chin and hairline defines one module.

Limb ratios are fixed to ensure harmony.

The *Manasara* and *Mayamata* describe these systems in detail. These proportions do not aim at naturalism but at idealization. The divine body becomes a diagram of cosmic order.

7. Ritual Activation: From Object to Presence

Texts emphasize that an image becomes sacred only after consecration. Agamic manuals outline the *prana pratistha* ritual, where mantras and ceremonial acts symbolically infuse life into the image. The ritual “opening of the eyes” marks the final stage.

This practice is documented in medieval temple inscriptions and continues in contemporary temple traditions. The textual-ritual framework ensures that iconography is not merely decorative but liturgical.

8. Continuity and Regional Variation (13th century onward)

Despite political changes following the 13th century, shastric traditions continued to guide temple construction and icon-making in regions such as Rajasthan, Odisha, and South India. The Sun Temple at Konark (13th century CE) reflects Puranic descriptions of Surya riding a chariot drawn by seven horses. The sculptural program integrates textual mythology with architectural symbolism.

In later periods, illustrated manuscripts such as the Gita Govinda (15th–17th century) show how textual narratives informed painting traditions in Rajasthan and Odisha. Though stylistically distinct from earlier sculpture, the iconographic foundations remain textual.

9. Text and Practice: A Dynamic Relationship

While shastric texts prescribe norms, artists exercised interpretive freedom. Regional styles differ in ornamentation, bodily modeling, and emotional expression. For example:

Chola bronzes emphasize fluid movement.

Hoysala sculptures (12th–13th century) display intricate surface detail.

Pala images emphasize linear refinement.

These differences show that texts functioned as frameworks rather than rigid templates. Workshop traditions transmitted knowledge orally alongside written manuals.

Conclusion

From early Buddhist symbolism to medieval temple bronzes, Indian iconography evolved in close dialogue with shastric texts. The timeline from the 2nd century BCE to the 13th century CE reveals increasing codification, especially during the Gupta and medieval periods. Texts such as the Vishnudharmottara Purana, Manasara, Mayamata, Agamas, and Sadhanamala shaped not only visual form but ritual function.

Indian sacred art is therefore best understood as embodied scripture. The image is theology made visible, geometry made sacred, and ritual made permanent in stone or bronze. Text and icon remain inseparable components of India's artistic and cultural heritage.

References

- Agrawala, V. S. Indian Art
- Banerjea, J. N. The Development of Hindu Iconography
- Kramrisch, Stella. The Hindu Temple
- Rao, T. A. Gopinatha. Elements of Hindu Iconography
- Saraswati, S. K. A Survey of Indian Sculpture
- Vishnudharmottara Purana
- Manasara and Mayamata
- Sadhanamala

About the Author

Mr. Shashi Dhar Kumar is an author, poet, and IT consultant based in Greater Noida. He is known for his Hindi poetry and writings.

