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A Study of Visual Interpretations of Christian Faith in Indian Art **Loveneesh Sharma**

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Abstract

Christianity and Christian faith in India developed around 52 A. D. when St. Thomas the apostle comes to Indian on the southern coasts. He propagates the Christian faith among the community there and converted people. He has also build churches in southern India which are now the pilgrim of the people reside in south India. In these churches we see depictions of Christian themes and imagery is done in the form of murals, paintings etc. The early references of Christian art that we see in south India were somewhat Indian because the artisans were local Hindus who build these churches. We also see elements of Hindu architecture in the very formative phases of making of churches in India. The other examples of Christian art that we can see are in the churches of Goa. Here we can see the amalgamation of Indo-Baroque art in the construction of churches. Moreover other art forms also got the influence of European art. Portuguese found that there was an Indian influence on the art work, they introduce a law in which head of guild should be the European so as the artist could come out the Indian influence and style. Doing this a lot of artisans converted to the Christian faith. May be this can be their propaganda for conversion. Missionaries also during this time with their effort propagate the Christian faith and were succeeded in conversions. In Mughal times Missionaries again took advantage of using visual aids for propagating the Christian to the Mughal emperor Akbar. It was during his time when artists imitated copies of European art specifically related to Christian faith. His successors Jahangir and Shah Jahan also motivated artists to imitate Christian art and to create in European manner. We see a lot of examples of Christian themes during Mughal times. Interesting was that painting was forbade in Islam but it was due the zeal and interest of emperor Akbar and other Mughal emperors till Jahangir, that art of paintings is both flourished and motivated during their times. After that with the advent of Britishers we see many artists from Europe come to India and Indian artists learned their techniques of paintings. During this time we can see the best examples of Christian faith in a very European manner. It was also the time when India artists attracted towards in making art work in very European style. Art schools also imparting education in European manner. There by artists learned European techniques of making paintings, and sculptures. Their themes were now from European mythology and religion. And it was during the eras before independence and after independence Christ and other biblical themes were done on the individual perception and approach of the artists either they were Christians or non-Christians. The following paper endows the reader about visual interpretation about Christian faith time to time in India history and its art. It also represents the approaches of artists that how they perceive Christianity and its spiritual leader Christ in their terms. It is their urge to how Christianity is portrayed on canvases with the spiritual touches of their brushes and colours.

Key Words: Artists, Christianity, Art, Paintings, India.

Christianity was introduced in India in A.D. 52, by St. Thomas. The apostle preached in several places in Kerala, travelled to Tamil Nadu, was martyred at Mylapore in AD. 72, and was buried at a place in Chennai, which was named after him- St. Thomas Mount. And according to western traditions these events are recorded in the most ancient record about the Indian Apostolate of St. Thomas named *Acts of Apostle Thomas*, written in the Syriac in the Edessan circle about the turn of the third century AD. The other thing is that when St. Thomas the Apostle came to India there were already the Jewish settlements residing on the south coasts of India. The Jews settled in Kodungallur (Cranganore) on the Malabar Coast where they peacefully traded until 1524. Jews have also acquired important positions under the Indian (Hindu) princes in the past and even after independence. They have risen to very high ranks in government, military and industry. St. Thomas was succeeded in his mission to preach Christianity and convert people into new faith. The converts by him are called the Thomas Christians. In earlier times of Christianity in India, the earlier churches resembles with the Hindu temples and having local features in their architecture because they were made by local artisans and craftsman. The style and manner of depicting narratives from the Gospels in church are also local. This is how an inculturation proceeds through the religion and philosophy which affect the dwelling or the native culture. It is clear that the first people to represent Christian arts were not Christians. Rather they were Hindus or the local artisans. Christian art was essentially a Liturgical art. That is to say that it is art in the service of the liturgical expressions of the community gathered to rejoice the Holy mysteries. Liturgical art depicted the incarnate Lord in the same way as he was presented in the bread and the wine of the Holy Sacrament. This was the basic assumptions that lay behind and to them we call the Icon art. Icon art is not so to say art for only art's sake. It was not projected to be something we esteem and pleased just due of the skillfulness of the artist. Rather, it was the visible presence of Christ in and among the believing community.

Examples of earlier references of Christian arts: Few churches have survived from the time before the arrival of the Portuguese, is in Kallopara/ Kerela, and shows beyond doubt the between 8th and 15th century A.D. a close link existed between the Hindu and Christian architecture. The first churches were built in teakwood and in front of them stone crosses were erected as sign posts. Further special features of the buildings of the St. Thomas Christians include the separation of the nave from the sanctuary by a curtain, mostly in velvet resembles with the *garbha-griha* of the temple, the presentation shows often Indianness. Some pulpits emerge from the mouth of a creature of the sea and other are designed like lotus flowers, are sign of purity and that is why in the other religious traditions the Buddha and goddess Lakshmi are placed on them. Moreover, the oil lamps are common in Hindu temples as well as in the churches in Kerala. Many churches had a huge suspended oil lamp often carrying a cross on the top and also birds.

In medieval times when Vasco De Gama sailed around the Cape of Good Hope in 1498 and reached Calicut on the coast of Kerala it starts sea trade between Europe and Asia. Gradually many of the lands of Asia were colonized by European powers. But the Kingdome of Vijayanagar burgeons in the main land on western coast of India with a very different cultural encounter. Goa which was the part of Vijayanagar empire for almost 100 years till 1470 A.D. was conquered by Portuguese in 1510 A. D. For the next 450 years the distant land of Portugal ruled Goa and here was created a unique blend of Indo-Portuguese culture. Portuguese came as traders and missionaries. And Portuguese kings had the right from the pope to send sufficient clergy in the occupied regions for missions and maintain church which was called the right of Padroado. But Portugal as it was a small country and lacked missionaries and at that time global prayer was invited so missionaries

from countries like Spain, Italy and England were sent via Lisbon to Goa. In 1542, St. Francis Xavier reached Goa and worked for three years in Goa, Tamil Naidu and other places in India and Asia. He was also called the Apostle of Asia. Also St. Paul College was opened in the 1542 for the education of local clergy. The evidences of Christian art can be seen in the churches in old Goa, for example: In the church of Bom Jesus, where the body of St. Francis Xavier is still seen in shrine made of silver and also depicts 32 scenes of life of saint. A law was passed in 1557 allowing only Christian artists to be heads of guilds in Goa to prevent certain “syncretistic” approach or influence from Hindu art in Christian art which results in conversion of a lot of India Hindu artists as Christians. Also these artists had a huge market in private sector for home market and for export to Europe and Latin America the influence of Indianness was not wiped out. When Goan habitants became Christians they simply replaced the statues in their houses shrines with Jesus, Mary and the saints in wood or ivory. Instead of Hindu Gods, Jesus, Mary and Saints were paraded through the streets in great processions on Chariots like those from the temple or were carried on shoulders. Certain Indianness was tacitly allowed in the Sixteenth and later centuries, because the clergy was interested that the new converts should feel at home in the new religion. The other examples where we can see the important Indo-European art are on the altar of the church of Se Cathedral, and also in the basement of the nunnery of St. Monica are some of the finest mural paintings of old Goa. The paintings of Goa bring to us a reflection of traditions of painting in Europe. This was the period of Braque in western art. A style characterized by drama and heightened emotion. We see here in the paintings of old Goa reflections of the earlier mannerist styles and Baroque of European paintings. We see the expression of suffering and passion of Christ and Apostles. Also the significant example from the museum of the Pilar Fathers in Pilar/Goa is the granite slab having an engraving of Mary Magdalene with a tree at her feet suggesting that the tree is a Bodhi tree the tree of enlightenment as the scholars suggests accord to Buddhist philosophy. She is also shown with the objects of her penitence and meditation. Carving in wood and in ivory was a craft already widely spread before the arrival of the Portuguese. It was mainly considered a craft and therefore remains anonymous. The only area where Indianness to a larger extent appeared were ivory statues, which had a large market in Goa, Daman and Diu, but also in Latin America, Portugal and Spain. As the converts were gone increased the demand of imported engravings with the Christian themes could not meet the demand. Then through the printing press which was first sent to sail for Abyssinia form Portugal, with the purpose of helping missionary work but circumstances prevented this printing press from leaving India, and consequently, printing was initiated in the country. Printing operations started in Goa during 1556 with the first printing press which was established in the Jesuit Saint Paul's College in Old Goa. In 1560, the first Christian posters showing Jesus on the cross with Mary and St. John on the sides were printed locally in Goa. It was said that those who got the picture received they kneeled, kissed the feet of the Crucified Christ and, in the traditional fashion, placed in on their heads. The Black and white picture was so eagerly received that quickly a second print became necessary of eight or ten thousand copies. After that most converted families may have received a copy and this was the beginning of the ‘European art’ in India. But the painters who paint under the law of 1557 followed the painting style of Portuguese. And here we got under the influence of painting under Europeans.

Later on in Mughal eras, greater part of Mughal paintings belongs to the period of Akbar, Jahangir and Shah Jahan which reveals its proximity and contrariety with the Indian, Persian and European art. The Mughal artist’s primary source of art was their interaction with European pictures, engravings, specimens of decorative art, textiles and the like. This was only due to Akbar

openness to other religions, and his own innovative interest in different social and religious communities gave rise to the imagery in Indian art. Akbar and his painters opted for novel forms and techniques under profound impact of the biblical pictures of the Renaissance period. His passion for spirituality held room for different social and religious orders which decidedly steered his quest for truth. Akbar's intellectual curiosity was to explore the different religion systems sincerely. We see several paintings of Hamzanama, Tutinama, and Anwar-i-Suhaili having impact of European art on Mughal Artist's works. In the North there were no large Christian communities so there was no need for big churches. So for propagation of Christian faith Jesuits used paintings and engravings as gifts for the emperor which were most easily accessible and mobile and were appreciated for their creative individuality and for their spiritual contents. For example Jesuits presented a copy of Plantins Polyglot Bible to Akbar which was printed in 1569-72 for Philip II of Spain and was illustrated with the engravings by Flemish artists of the school of Quentin Matsys. Abul Fazl notes the visit of Pietro Tavares to Akbar's court at Fatehpur Sikri in 1578. Badauni also mentions the presence of Portuguese priests at Akbar's court during 1575-76. Father Francis Julian Pereira, invited by Akbar to his court in 1578, was present at Fatehpur Sikri when first Jesuit mission led by Rudolph, Aquava, and Monserrete from Goa arrived in February 1580. In all likelihood Akbar had already acquired some specimens of European art much before 1580. Monserrete notices that the picture of Christ, Mary, Moses and Muhammad were already there in the royal dining hall when this mission arrived. Akbar contact with the Europeans and his interest in Christianity, at least since 1557, should have encouraged European pictures on Biblical subjects. This would explain the influence of European art on early Mughal manuscript paintings. The examples of Christian pictures having the impact of Italian renaissance during Mughal times are "Annunciation and the Fall" (in Maryam Palace at Fatehpur Sikri), portrait of "Savior of the World" and "Virgin Mary" presented by the Fathers during third Jesuit mission. In 1581, during the Kabul expedition, Father Monserrate had an opportunity to show some scatted illustrated books and to explain the pictures, the meaning of the Ark of the Covenant and they discussed Noah's Ark, a type of Savior Christ. Also a large picture of "Holy Virgin" or of "The Nativity" for Akbar and Price Salim, together with some small pictures was ordered for Akbar by Father Jerome Xavier from the General of the society. In 1598, he presented the pictures of Christ and St. Ignatius Loyola to Akbar. And in 1601, Father also presented him a picture of Lady of Loretto executed on gilded metal. Pictures representing secular themes were also presented in which two portraits drawn from life, one of Albuquerque and the other of Viceroy of India, Ayres de Saldagna.

Jahangir too, even while a prince showed considerable interest in Christian paintings and tired to acquire them. He also praised the holy pictures which the fathers gave to him, not as they fondly imagined out of veneration for the subjects represented but because he had fervour for works of art and curios of all kinds, and especially for pictures of which he was not only an enthusiastic collector but also a very competent judge. Also when a Portuguese painter was brought to his court Prince straightway ordered him to make a copy of pictures of our lady which they had brought from Goa and when he went to chapel to see the embossed image of the little infant Jesus and another of a crucifix, he ordered to make the similar ones for himself in ivory by his own craftsmen. In 1608, Father Xavier notices that Jahangir's collection of European prints included the pictures of Sardanopolus, The Circumcision, God the Father, Crucifixion, and David Kneeling before the Nathan. Interest of Jahangir in Christian paintings is evidenced by the fact that we know he had his audience and private assembly halls at Agra decorated with such pictures. His palace in Lahore was decorated and adorned with many paintings which had painted both on the inside and on the outside

of a verandah where he sits before he wishes to appear on the outer verandah he has a large verandah, on the middle of the ceiling of which there is a good picture of Our Saviour in glory surrounded by Angels and on the walls of the hall are some Portuguese figures of large size, beautifully painted with the pictures of saints. The English traveller, William Finch, provides a detailed account of a picture in the fort at Lahore on the walls of the living rooms in which emperor sits. This picture represents Jahangir, his ancestors, princes and nobles, as seen in 1611 on gazing at the pictures of Christ and of the Virgin Mary over the doorway.

Shah Jahan was also interested in European pictures. Surviving pictures of his atelier clearly provides the proof of the continuous adaptation and incorporation of European art. He was interested in the picture of Diana, while he was a prince. However during his reign, copies of European engravings and pictures were not made on the scale witnessed during Jahangir reign. Important to note that while European pictures were being introduced in Mughal India, there were European painters too in Mughal territory. The Persian painter Muhammad Zaman later a Christian convert, named 'Polo Zaman', of the Ispahan school deserves mention as he has been identified with the Muhammad Zaman, a protégé of Shah Jahan who Manucci had met in Delhi. Percy Brown notes his influences on several illustrated margins of Shah Jahan's reign. Also Mughal artists like Keshu Das, best Known for his copies of European work. His picture 'St Matthew and an angle' executed in AD. 1587-88 is the earliest known Mughal work which is almost entirely European in Character. It is based on an engraving by Phillip Galle after Martin Van Heemskrek 'St. Matthew the Evangelist. There are other painters like Miskin, Baswan, and Manohar who also painted European themes during Mughal eras. Further, Aurangzeb forbade art at the court, and showed no interest in paintings, Indian or European. The European techniques and methods greatly influenced Mughal visual perception. One must here realize that the adoption of Renaissance humanism in Mughal art was not the result of an intellectual or scientific movement; and this certainly handicapped it in appreciating the full dimension of Europe's achievement in art. Mughal painters were unable to liberate themselves from the canons of the conventional arts of Persia and India though their conscious effort to switch over to the methods and techniques of Renaissance art showed, as we have seen, both in skill and ingenuity. The modes and trends of European Renaissance art, and their humanistic message, gained popularity at the Mughal School, but subsequently faded away as other modern schools of Indian art were barely affected by them.

It is from the beginning from the end of 15th c and from 16th c onwards, European traders from Portuguese, Germany, France and British competing amongst themselves for establishing authority in India. Portuguese settled themselves in Goa. And Ultimately British East Indian Company was successful in establishing both trade as well as their political sway in India. With the influx of the traders and British army, came to India a number of painters seek their fortunes and brought along with themselves new techniques and styles. They caught the attention of the provincial rulers especially in their treatment of portrait paintings. These provincial rulers and their nobility started commissioning these European painters, thereby making the position of Indian painters more pathetic and they gradually lost their secured patronage. In 18th c., Indian painters virtually transformed to Bazaar painters as they were then in search of some commissions or assignments from the Britishers. This was then in the mid-19th century, the Indian artists started incorporating certain European techniques in their works in order to gain confidence among their possible buyers. Thus, the Company School of art evolved. Also the European influence occurred in the style and techniques of the Indian artist and in their art. But there was no room for creativity and individualism as they were copying their techniques and styles. The Indian artists were in between

their Indigenous and traditional dignity and accepting the new terms and principles of European arts. Raja Ravi Varma's paintings, representative of the western academic manner and imbibing tenets of the Renaissance art of Europe proved to be a strong channel of transference of western realism into Indian art. In response to the emerging nationalism, Ravi Varma turned to themes from Indian mythology and history but always adhering to the western techniques and style of painting. Moreover, during late 19th century, art schools were opened to impart European art techniques to the Indian artisans and students. Also western education helped people to understand the western standards of life and art and aware them about their backwardness. By this time the art produced in India was of two type one is influential and other is traditional folk. No matter the themes in both the types of arts was Christian or Indian. We see biblical symbols and biblical depiction in folk art also and Indian themes in influential European art of which Raja Ravi Varma's works are the best examples. Later on, in the beginning of 20th c. with awakening among the Indian intelligentsia, especially in Bengal, there was a new awakening and transformation in ideas about art and aesthetics and literature also. Indian art witnessed another change at the end of the nineteenth century and with the rise of the new Indian Style, heralded by Abanindranath Tagore and followed by Nandlal Bose, A. R. Chughati and others. Their work developed in to what is known as Bengal school of paintings, also called the Nationalist school which totally discarded Western Academic art and whose principle trust was to glorification of the past. The Revivalists prescribed using the Indian method of the miniature and the fresco. But some of them in Bengal also visualised a new Indian art of the future. The controversy began while posing the question whether it can be done by an insulator outlook or by being open-minded and responsive to the newly emerging European revolutionary movements. For a time the Indianness went in to the background and there was a whole-hearted welcome and adaptation of every new manifestation that the Indians heard from Europe, mostly by artists from the north as well as those based in Bombay during the forties and fifties. This generation of artists styled themselves as Progressive believing in internationalism. They saw to it that the concept of Indianness was downgraded as retrogressive and reactionary and made synonymous with narrow-mindedness. This extreme stand has softened to give rise to the view that although Indianness is really not essential yet if it is desired then it will come automatically, when the artist happens to be sincere and opens up himself to his environment. The depiction of the biblical themes in Modern art of India continued with the changing political and economical environment and also with the individual and original approach of artist expressed in his art.

Abanindranath Tagore also painted few Christian themes especially of Jesus. The Jesus Christ (1924) in water colour is standing European looking resurrected white Christ in white halo and a stick with a dove. In the background the cross is integrated in a halo and some kind of a door. His disciple Nandlal Bose has painted Christ also. All of his paintings of Jesus include the cross. His understanding about the Jesus was influenced by the writings of Rabindra Nath Tagore. A.D. Thomas painted an oriental looking Christ with a halo, beard and crown of thrones draped in a floating white gown. He placed Christ and his followers in Indian settings with Indian symbolism, interpreting them in the light of the Christian faith. He also depicted Archangel Gabriel carries a lotus flower which replaces the lily as the symbol of purity and peace. The Goan artist Angelo da Fonseca represented Mary wearing a Sari, and even standing on a lotus. Jesus was shown as an Indian Sanyasi, or Guru. The famous Indian artist Jamini Roy painted many pictures of Jesus in his own Bengali style- developed with great sophistication on the basis of village folk "Pat" technique. Jamini said Jesus is above and greater than human emotions and that therefore in his paintings, even the crucifixion he shows no sufferings. This is utterly different form the painters who are primarily

concerned with the sufferings of Jesus. Jamini Roy so intensely worked on Christ. K.C.S. Panikkar, with the influence of folk also represented Jesus as belonging to the Indian peasant, or even Dalit communities. Nikhil Biswas once wrote that for him Christ symbolizes the pain and agony of the soul stirring the pangs and helplessness of our age. Solomon Raj depicts Christ as a poor Dalit and migrant who suffers. In Jesus the suffering of anonymous masses is reflected, suffering like hunger, too much heavy work and forced migration. He depicts suffering of the people on the flight in general. He also depicted Jesus as a teacher who sits on lotus and teaches with the gestures of hands. He also used Christian symbols for depicting Christ. Krishna Khanna one of the founder members of the contemporary Indian Artist group said that Jesus stood in between the constricted Jewish religiosity and the colonial interests of the Romans. He was open to all and did not distinct the rich and low, the oppressors and the sufferers. He was ready to go and eat with tax collectors, who were hated because they served for the interests of the colonial powers, and he was happy to go to the home of a Roman official to heal his daughter. But on the other hand he was also anxious about the misery of the Jewish folks. We as Indians are in the same position, Krishna Khanna told that we have also the narrow religiosity of fundamentalist forces on the one hand and we have also the colonial authorities that are dominating over our wealth and economy on the other hand directly or indirectly. Jesus shows us a way of being human, even in this very contradictory situation. When he was asked about his interest in depicting St. Thomas, he told me that he himself is identical with doubting nature of St. Thomas as St. Thomas found it impossible to believe unless he had himself touched the wounds of the Lord. Indian artists have usually represented the suffering of Jesus. This is because in Indian sacred art we do not find an image of a God or Goddess depicted as sufferer. In a way, from the point of view of Indian approach towards religion this is very appalling. In fact it is laid down in the texts such Shilpa Shastras, that artist must never illustrate a divine being deformed or ugly in any ways. But here was a profoundly spiritual and divine figure that was painted or depicted as a sufferer servant. Bireswar Sen depicted Jesus washes the feet of his disciple. In India we have many images of the disciples touching the feet of their gurus and never the other way around. So the quiet interesting to many modern Indian artists was the distinct cultural approach of Jesus. Jesus was often shocked the receptivity of his own Jewish community by allowing his feet to be kissed and swabbed with the hair by Mary Magdalene who was alleged to be a sinning woman. Francis Newton Souza's art is also deeply religious. But his is a religion which is not soar. It rather bends down with earthiness. He cannot be sensual without being conscious of original sin. He cannot delineate lust without its accompaniment of shame. His Christ is a broken down man – not one whose sorrow is his fulfilment. Jyoti Sahi the most important Catholic Christian artist who is called the theologian with the brush, also painted Christ. He was inspired and worked on Hindu symbols and later on the theology of Dalit liberation in which he depicted the Christ images and architectural forms to express the Incarnation of Christ, his presence in our physical world, which we continue to see and touch. And communicate the Faith that we have in Jesus and to all people of good Faith. M. F. Hussain also depicted Christ in an oriental manner sometimes as a poor man sometimes a divine figure. He also fits the social and political environment around Christ or Christ around social and political environment of India. In his works we also see symbolism. He also did a fiber glass mould, 30 feet in diameter in the Catholic Salvacao Church in Dadar, Mumbai. Some of the sculptors and print makers also depict Christ and other biblical themes in their art. Angelo da Fonseca made a stain glass window named Our Lady of Pillar in the Chapel of the Pillar Fathers in Pillar in Goa during 1962. Vinayak Masogi did a woodcut in 1965 named The Child Jesus in the Temple. Sudhir R. Khastgir sculpted the Head of Christ, Satish Gujral sculpted the Resurrection of Lazarus in burnt wood which shows the agony of Christ in Mexico and the suffering of the people

during the partition between India and Pakistan. He presented Jesus as exemplified sufferer. Ramachandran a painter also did an etching namely the Descent from the cross as like his paintings which suggests the sufferings of common people of his dwelling. He took Christ as an inhabitant or amongst one of the people who suffers daily and try to come out from the day to day troubles of their lives. S. Dhanapal in his bronzes depicts Christ in an expressionist way where the suffering of the man becomes incarnate. He also dramatizes the body of Christ by twisting his head. In his sculptures Christ seems so tolerant and compassionate. He exaggerated the expression of pain in his statues. He also depicted Mother and Child, and Mother and Christ. P.V. Jankiram also made bronze sculptures on Christian themes. In his interpretations of the Virgin he permeates the image with a perceptible degree of piety and a sense of the mass of the tragedy that awaits for her child. His Christ is even more expressive of the typical concept of the son of God, an quintessence of suffering and sympathy plagued by malevolence and emaciated but yet of great strength of benevolent. S.P. Jayakar depicts Jesus sitting on the lotus flower in metal sheet which shows his experimentation on the forms of cross and Christ on cross. He invites viewer to meditate on the symbols he used as a source of inspiration for life.

Work on Christian themes is done intensely in each and every style in India. We see the paintings and statues done in the church's walls, altars, ceilings, and the doors. Moreover when we are talking about the individual expressions in art we see works of Indian contemporary artists in different materials and method and techniques of art in India depending upon the changing trends, techniques and the social environment. But one thing is clear that we find two types of paintings in which Christian themes or Gospels were depicted one by the Christian painters and others, the non-Christians. This shows two efforts at considering Christ in relation to the Indian traditions. Non-Christian painters represented their search and thoughts in relation to the person of Christ whereas Christian painters interpreted Christ through the means of Indian traditions.

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