



Self-reflecting & Reflecting the Self in the Other: Mirrors in Hindu Iconography and Ritual

Naman P. Ahuja

Professor of Indian Art History, School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal
Nehru University

What does a sacred image do? It can be magical, of course, but it can also be read as a metaphor, a tool for introspection. This latter intention is beautifully understood through the iconography of the mirror (*darpaṇa*) in Indian art and the rituals associated with it. Both the concept of reflection and the attribute of the mirror have been extensively dealt with in Sanskrit literature, shaping the theoretical basis for art history. The notions of *chhaya*, *bimba*, and *pratibimba*, which explain art as reflection, are found in a variety of philosophical texts, and form foundational aesthetic concepts in India. In painting, the mirror enables alternative visions of reality: Rādhā is shown holding a mirror in which she captures an image of herself with absent Kṛṣṇa—thus creating, in the reflection, a condition she aspires to. Moreover, the mirror is an attribute of many deities, e.g. Pārvatī represented as Prakṛti in the act of reflecting Puruṣa (especially in images dating from the 8th to the 11th century). The mirror is also a widely used metaphor for the Sāṅkhya philosophy of dualism and the nature of cognition. A few centuries later, it was picked up in Nathdwara under the influence of Advaita thought as a symbol of the non-separation between the self and the reflected. Interestingly, in the sacrum of some Bhagavati temples in northern Kerala, in place of the customary icon of the deity we find a sculpted mirror. The mirror enshrined in the *garbha grha* allows the devotee to get a *darśan* (“vision”) of himself or herself—a device that encourages interiorization as a means to seek the divine. The carved mirror is functional to conveying the abstract idea of the agency of the deity without resorting to its figural representation. Yet, the image of the self is recognized in Indian philosophy as only *māyā*, the time-bound mortal and illusory self; for this very reason, such a reflected visage represents the greatest alienation of the true self. The paper concludes with a reflection on how aestheticians came up with an extraordinary abstracted sculptural form to resolve this dilemma.