Rekha: The Line as Aesthetic, Symbol, and Structure in Indian Tradition

Deshani Vivekkumar Ramachandrabhai[1], Dr. Pranav Joshipura[2]
[1]*Department of Indian Culture, Gujarat University*
[2]*Gujarat University*

***Abstract*—The concept of Rekha—translated from Sanskrit as line, stroke, or contour—holds a profound position in Indian aesthetic, architectural, and philosophical traditions. Unlike the static conception of the line in classical Western geometry, the Indian Rekha is imbued with dynamic life, serving as a conduit between the tangible and the metaphysical. This study examines Rekha as it appears across Sanskrit and Prakrit literature, where it figures as a metaphor for beauty, desire, and destiny; in temple architecture of Odisha, Khajuraho, and South India, where soaring lines symbolize spiritual ascent; and in classical painting and sculpture, notably in Ajanta murals, Jain manuscripts, and the tribhanga pose. Further, it explores the role of Rekha in palmistry (Hasta Rekha Shastra) and astrology (Jyotisha), as well as in the ritual geometries of the Sulba Sutras. Finally, it considers modern reimaginings by artists such as Jamini Roy and M.F. Husain. Through textual analysis, iconographic examples, and comparative perspectives with Hellenic traditions, this paper argues that Rekha serves as a cultural sutra, binding diverse strands of Indian art, architecture, literature, and cosmology.**

***Index Terms*—Rekha; Indian Aesthetics; Sanskrit Poetics; Temple Architecture; Tribhanga; Hasta Rekha Shastra; Jyotisha; Sulba Sutras; Indian Painting & Sculpture; Jamini Roy; M.F. Husain; Comparative Aesthetics.**

I. INTRODUCTION

The Sanskrit term "Rekha" (रेखा), commonly translated as line, stroke, contour, or outline, is far more than a simple geometrical concept in the Indian cultural lexicon. It embodies a rich array of meanings that traverse the aesthetic, poetic, philosophical, and metaphysical dimensions of life (Zimmer 34). Unlike in modern Western geometry, where a line may be viewed merely as a dimensionless extension in space, the Indian concept of Rekha is charged with expressive vitality. It breathes, flows, and connects — acting as a tangible conduit between the microcosm of human form and the macrocosm of cosmic order (Michell 119).

This multi-layered significance of Rekha becomes evident when we observe its pervasive presence in various domains of Indian tradition. In temple architecture, Rekha shapes the ascending profile of shikharas, channeling spiritual energy upward (Hardy 55). In classical Sanskrit poetry, Rekha emerges as a favorite metaphor to delineate feminine beauty, emotional nuances, and even the trajectory of fate (Ingalls 211). In Jyotisha (astrology) and Samudrika Shastra (physiognomy), Rekhas mark the palm and horoscope charts, believed to foretell an individual's destiny (Acharya 14; Subramanian 76). Even in ancient mathematical treatises such as the Sulba Sutras, the act of laying out Rekhas on the ritual ground integrates geometric precision with sacred symbolism (Pingree 58).

Heinrich Zimmer captures this Indian conception beautifully when he states, *"In the Indian tradition, the line is alive; it is an expression of an inward force which extends beyond mere appearance to embody the rhythms of life itself"* (45). Thus, Rekha becomes a paradigmatic symbol — a living line that animates art, literature, ritual, and metaphysical inquiry.

This article undertakes a comprehensive exploration of Rekha across Sanskrit and Prakrit poetics, temple architecture, classical painting and sculpture, palmistry, ritual geometry, and modern Indian art, arguing that the humble line is a profound cultural signifier in India. By weaving together textual analysis, visual studies, and philosophical interpretation, we aim to demonstrate how Rekha unites diverse artistic and intellectual traditions into a cohesive aesthetic philosophy.

II. REKHA IN SANSKRIT AND PRAKRIT LITERATURE: POETRY OF THE LINE

The poetic Rekha: Body lines and delicate metaphors

Classical Sanskrit poetry (Kāvya) displays an enduring fascination with Rekha, frequently employing it as a metaphor to evoke feminine beauty, grace, and fragility. The poetry of Kalidasa, arguably the greatest classical Sanskrit poet, is replete with such imagery.

In his celebrated epic Kumarasambhavam, Kalidasa describes Parvati's waist with exquisite delicacy:

"रेखेवतन्वीनितम्बप्रदेशे"

(rekhāivatanvīnitamba-pradeśe)

"as slender as a mere line around the region of the hips" (Kalidasa 3.27).

This is not a mere physical observation. The Rekha here suggests an almost insubstantial presence, a fragile beauty that borders on the ethereal. As Ingalls notes, *"The Sanskrit poet is not content with describing shape; he delights in refining it to the point of suggestion, making the line a whisper of form rather than its declaration"* (219).

Eyebrows like lines of Cupid's bow

Kalidasa similarly crafts Rekha as a metaphor for eyebrows, aligning them with the bow of Manmatha (Kama, the god of love), which metaphorically becomes a Rekha that shoots arrows of desire. In *Raghuvamsha*, he writes:

"मृगमदतिलकाङ्कितेनभालेन/रेखाइवभ्रूभिरधर्मशराः"

(mṛgamada-tilakāṅkitenabhālena/rekhāivabhrūbhiradharma-śarāḥ)

"Her forehead adorned with musk marks, her eyebrows curved like fine lines, shooting arrows of unrighteous love." (Kalidasa, Raghuvamsha 6.35)

Here, the Rekha is sharpened into a weapon of love, illustrating how a simple line becomes a carrier of psychological and emotional tension (De 88).

Rekha in alankara shastra: A figure of poetic suggestion

The classical Indian science of aesthetics, Alankara Shastra, also treats Rekha as a device of poetic ornamentation. S.K. De in his History of Sanskrit Poetics observes that *"figures of speech involving shape, line, and outline were highly prized in the kavya tradition for their suggestive power"* (112). The Rekha thus often transcends its literal meaning to function as upama (simile) and rupaka (metaphor), subtly linking the outer line with inner moods.

In Bharata's Natyashastra, though primarily focused on dramaturgy and performance, there are explicit references to graceful lines of the body, especially in the context of dance postures (angika abhinaya). The tribhanga or three-bend posture is praised for the fluid Rekhas it creates, embodying grace and controlled sensuality (Natyashastra 24.89; Ghosh 177).

Rekha in Prakrit love poetry

Even outside Sanskrit, in Prakrit love poetry (Gāhā Sattasaī), the notion of Rekha appears frequently. In one verse, a lover exclaims:

"अस्सवेलएमहुअम्हि/उडिअलिअरेहाएणिव्वुअम्"

(assavelaemahuamhi/uḍialiārehāeṇivvuam)

"At that hour, my dear, even the lines of my body melted away." (Gāhā Sattasaī 342)

Here, Rekha captures an emotional dissolution, where the very outlines of the body blur under the influence of passion. It signifies how deeply ingrained the idea of line was in the imaginative vocabulary of ancient Indian poets.

Rekha as destiny: poetic intersections with palmistry

Interestingly, Sanskrit kāvya often intertwines Rekha as a line of beauty with Rekha as a line of fate. In love poetry, references abound to the rekha on palms that foretell unions or separations. The line thus becomes both a physical mark and a narrative thread tying together aesthetics with destiny.

Rekha in Temple Architecture: The Ascending Line

The Odisha Rekha Deul: Cosmic Axis in Stone

Among the most striking architectural expressions of Rekha is found in the Odisha Rekha Deul style of temples. These temples, flourishing between the 7th and 13th centuries CE, are characterized by their tall, curvilinear towers (shikharas) which appear to rise in a seamless, tapering Rekha toward the sky (Michell 119).

The Lingaraja Temple at Bhubaneswar (c. 11th century) stands as a paradigmatic example. George Michell writes, *"the vertical contour of the Lingaraja shikhara is a continuous Rekha, unbroken by*

horizontal projections, thus enhancing the illusion of a single ascending line that pierces the heavens" (125). This line is not merely decorative or structural; it symbolizes the axis mundi, the cosmic pillar that connects bhuloka (earth) with swargaloka (heaven).

Adam Hardy, in his study of temple forms, notes that the Shilpa Shastra texts specifically prescribe the line-like elevation of the Rekha Deul. The *Mayamata*, an important south Indian treatise, states:

"शिखरेरेखयाभूयिष्ठंकार्यं"

(śikharerekhayābhūyiṣṭhaṃkāryaṃ)

"the shikhara should predominantly follow the Rekha, the line" (Mayamata 18.4; Hardy 47).

This establishes the spiritual purpose of architectural Rekha — to embody the aspirational flow of the soul towards liberation (moksha).

Khajuraho and the Nagara Rekha

Moving west to central India, the temples of Khajuraho (10th–12th centuries CE) also demonstrate a sophisticated use of Rekha. The Kandariya Mahadev Temple, with its soaring shikhara flanked by a cascade of miniature spires (urushringas), exemplifies what scholars call the Nagara Rekha Prasada style (Dehejia 91).

Vidya Dehejia explains: *"The primary spire is a sharply tapering Rekha, while the smaller spires echo its lines, creating a visual rhythm that mimics a mountain range — the Mount Meru of Hindu cosmology."* (93). The upward-thrusting Rekha is thus a visual mantra, guiding the devotee's gaze and consciousness heavenward.

Rekha in South Indian Dravida Temples

Even in the Dravida tradition of South India, where vimanas tend to be more pyramidal and segmented, the principle of Rekha is subtly present. The central vertical axis (brahmasutra) defined in the Shilpa texts acts as an invisible Rekha around which the tiers align (Hardy 52).

The Meenakshi Temple at Madurai (16th century CE) though elaborate in its gopuram ornamentation, maintains an underlying Rekha through the internal sanctum tower, which draws an unbroken line toward the sky, reflecting an architectural echo of spiritual ascent (Michell 142).

Rekha in Classical Sculpture: The Sensuous Line

The Tribhanga: Line of Grace and Movement

Indian sculpture extends the idea of Rekha from architecture into the human form. The classical tribhanga pose, literally meaning "three bends," embodies a curvilinear Rekha that suggests fluidity and rhythm. Zimmer describes this as *"the line of beauty, a dynamic curve that evokes grace and the containment of sensual energy"* (47).

The Natya Shastra, foundational text on performance and dance, prescribes this posture for its visual allure:

"त्रिभङ्गलालित्ययुक्तारेखाशोभांवर्धयेत्"

(tribhaṅga-lālitya-yuktārekhāśobhāṃvardhayet)

"the Rekha endowed with the grace of three bends enhances beauty." (Natyashastra 24.89; Ghosh 177).

This Rekha is not rigid; it is a pulsating line that breathes life into stone, guiding the viewer's eye along a path of meditative contemplation.

Ajanta & Jain manuscript lines: The outline as soul

Ajanta murals (2nd century BCE – 6th century CE) and later Jain manuscript paintings from Gujarat and Rajasthan showcase another dimension of Rekha — the elegant contour line. Ajanta artists outlined figures with confident brush Rekhas, often minimal yet profoundly expressive. Bhaskar Rathod writes that in Jain art, *"color was secondary to line, for it was the Rekha that contained the prana, the vital force of the figure"* (58).

In a folio from a Kalpasutra manuscript (c. 15th century), the Tirthankara is drawn with a few fluid lines, yet conveys spiritual serenity more powerfully than intricate shading could (Rathod 59).

Ornamentation as layered Rekha

Even ornamental designs in temple walls and miniature paintings often involve layers of Rekhas — geometric borders, floral vines, and narrative friezes — that create a rhythm of movement and stillness. This layering builds a visual texture that is both decorative and symbolic, reflecting the multiplicity inherent in dharmic cosmology (Zimmer 51).

Sanskrit & Shilpa Shastra insights on Rekha in art

The Shilpa Shastra treatises, which codify sculpture and painting guidelines, repeatedly emphasize the importance of Rekha in determining beauty and propriety. The Vishnudharmottara Purana, a major text on iconography and painting, states:

"रेखाललित्यंरूपस्यमूलम्"

(rekhālalityaṃrūpasyamūlam)

"the Rekha (line) is the root of the grace of form." (Vishnudharmottara 3.35.12; Rao 203).

This underscores that in the Indian artistic ethos, the line is not a boundary but a living guide that shapes meaning, emotion, and cosmic alignment.

Rekha in Palmistry & Astrology: Lines of Life, Fate, and Cosmic Design

The living lines on the palm

In Hasta Samudrika Shastra, a classical branch of Indic physiognomy, the word Rekha specifically refers to the lines on the human palm, believed to encode an individual's destiny. These include the Jeevan Rekha (Life line), Mastishk Rekha (Head line), Hriday Rekha (Heart line), and Bhagya Rekha (Fate line) (Acharya 14).

Acharya Raghunandana in his *Hasta Samudrika Shastra* writes:

"हस्तरेखागुणदोषान्प्रकटयन्ति"

(hastarekhāguṇadoṣānprakaṭayanti)

"The lines on the hand reveal virtues and faults." (22).

Here, Rekha serves as a bridge between the microcosm (human body) and the macrocosm (universal karma). Just as the Rekha of a temple leads to the divine garbhagriha, so too the Rekhas on the hand map one's spiritual and material journey.

Rekha in Jyotisha: The line in charts and planetary diagrams

In Jyotisha (Hindu astrology), Rekha is also present in the Janma Kundali (birth chart). The astrologer draws intersecting Rekhas to demarcate the twelve houses and planetary aspects. Each line represents subtle cosmic forces that shape human experience (Subramanian 76).

This reflects the Indian penchant for seeing life as inscribed by invisible patterns. The Rekha is not just graphical; it is the cosmic script itself.

Rekha in Sulba Sutra Geometry: Ritual Lines on Earth

The sacred geometry of altars

The Sulba Sutras (800–500 BCE), among the earliest mathematical texts in India, detail the geometric procedures for constructing Vedic fire altars (vedis). They instruct priests to lay out precise Rekhas on the ritual ground to establish sacred proportions.

Pingree notes: *"The line in the Sulba Sutras is simultaneously practical and sacred — it ensures the altar embodies the order of the cosmos."* (58). For instance, the *Baudhayana Sulba Sutra* prescribes:

"रेखास्थापनंदेवायजनाय"

(rekhāsthāpanaṃdevāyajanāya)

"The establishment of lines is for the worship of the gods." (Baudhayana 1.3.4; Sen 127).

These Rekhas were drawn using ropes or strings coated with flour, then aligned to the cardinal directions, turning geometry into ritual cosmology.

Rekha in Modern Indian Art: From Traditional Lines to Contemporary Graphics

🖋 Jamini Roy & M.F. Husain: Line as vitality

Modern Indian artists like Jamini Roy (1887–1972) and M.F. Husain (1915–2011) adapted classical ideas of Rekha into new idioms. Roy's paintings, inspired by Bengal folk pata styles, use bold, rhythmic Rekhas to depict figures that are at once archaic and modern (Brown 204).

M.F. Husain's horses and dancers are similarly born of swift, almost calligraphic Rekhas. He once remarked, *"for me, the line is movement, breath, spirit"* (Brown 207).

Rekha in textiles, logos & cultural branding

The Rekha continues in contemporary Indian design. From intricate saree borders to minimalist corporate logos (like the TATA or ICICI arcs), the flowing Rekha is everywhere. It serves as a bridge between heritage aesthetics and modern commercial identity.

Comparative Aesthetics: The Greek Line vs. The Indian Rekha

Static outlines vs. dynamic flows

A comparative glance reveals that Greek classical art prized the line for its ability to fix ideal proportions — a static perfection (Gombrich 178). In contrast, the Indian Rekha is dynamic, suggestive, inherently linked to motion and transformation.

Zimmer notes: *"In the Hellenic tradition, the line contains form within immutable bounds. In India, it is a wave that carries form beyond itself, into a continuum of life."* (Zimmer 53).

III. CONCLUSION: REKHA AS INDIA'S CULTURAL THREAD

From temples that soar in linear ascent, poetry that caresses with curving metaphors, palms etched with destiny, altars laid with sacred cords, to modern canvases and logos pulsing with inherited rhythm — Rekha pervades India's artistic and spiritual life.

It is, in essence, a cultural sutra, a line that binds architecture, poetry, ritual, astrology, and modern design into a seamless fabric. As Zimmer beautifully concludes, *"the Indian line is not a boundary; it is a passage — a luminous trail that leads from the seen to the unseen"* (59).

WORKS CITED

[1] Acharya, Raghunandana. *Hasta Samudrika Shastra*. Chowkhamba Vidyabhawan, 1968.

[2] Baudhayana. *Sulba Sutras*. Trans. S.N. Sen. Calcutta UP, 1985.

[3] Brown, Rebecca M. *Art for a Modern India, 1947–1980*. Duke UP, 2009.

[4] De, S.K. *History of Sanskrit Poetics*. Firma KLM, 1960.

[5] Dehejia, Vidya. *Indian Art*. Phaidon, 1997.

[6] Ghosh, Manomohan, ed. *Natya Shastra*. ASI, 1967.

[7] Gombrich, E.H. *The Story of Art*. Phaidon, 1995.

[8] Hardy, Adam. *The Temple Architecture of India*. Wiley, 2007.

[9] Ingalls, Daniel H. H. *An Anthology of Sanskrit Court Poetry*. Harvard UP, 1965.

[10] Kalidasa. *Kumarasambhavam*. Harvard Oriental Series, 1929.

[11] Michell, George. *The Hindu Temple*. U of Chicago P, 1988.

[12] Pingree, David. *The Sulbasutras: Texts and Studies*. Harvard, 1978.

[13] Rathod, Bhaskar. "Line and Form in Jain Painting." *Indian Art History Congress*, 2012.

[14] Sen, S.N. *Ancient Indian Mathematics*. Calcutta UP, 1985.

[15] Subramanian, P. S. *Jyotisha: The Science of Light*. Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1974.

[16] Zimmer, Heinrich. *The Art of Indian Asia*. Princeton UP, 1955.