



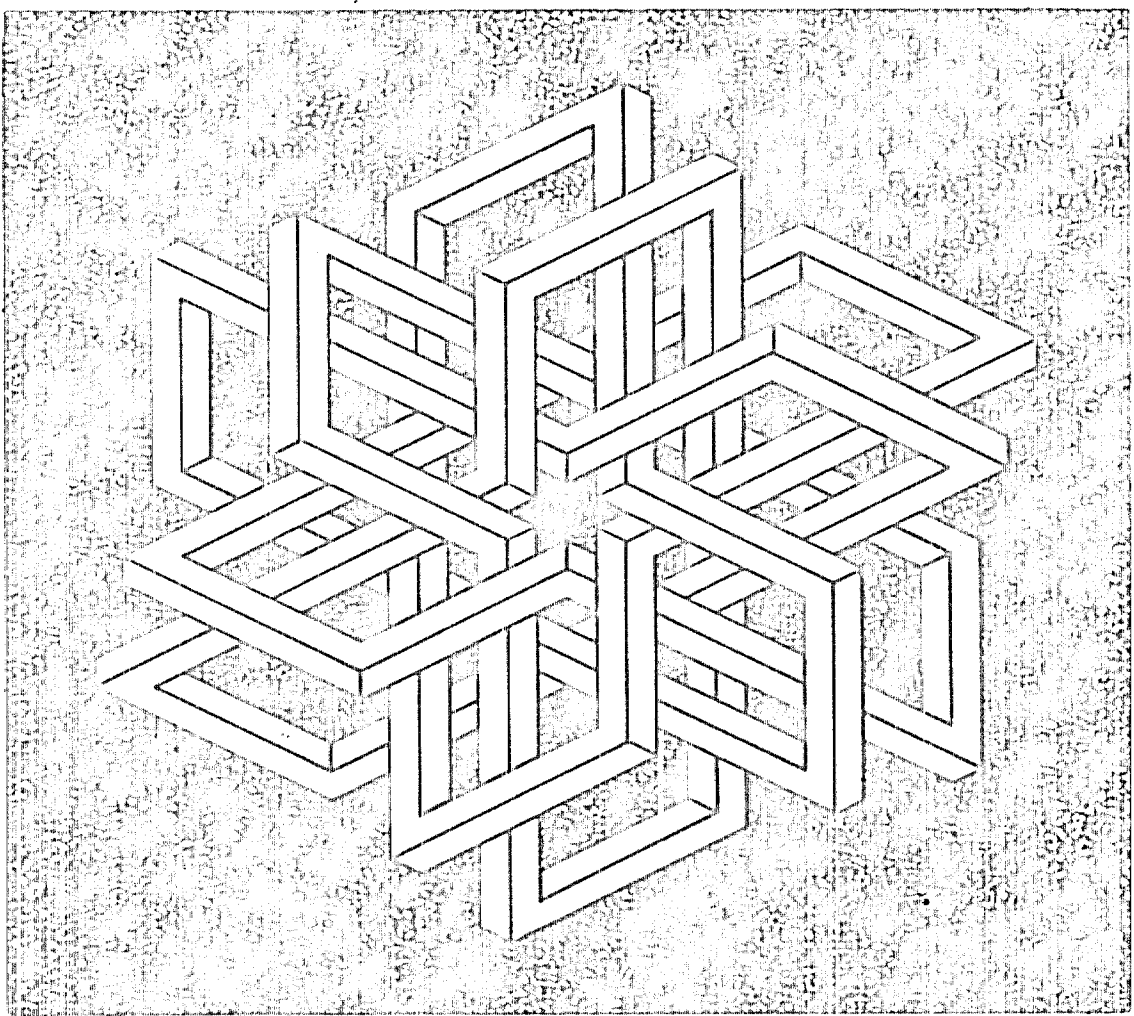
# Symmetry: Culture and Science

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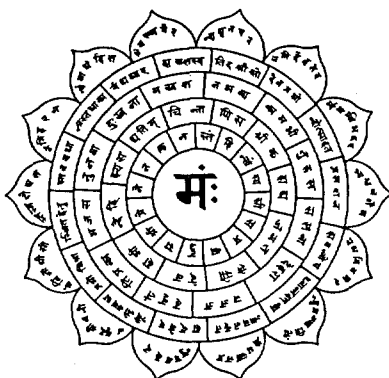
## SYMMETRY IN PATTERNED POETRY - THE CHITRA-KAVYA TRADITION OF INDIA

Kirti Trivedi  
Industrial Design Centre,  
Indian Institute of Technology, Powai,  
Bombay 400 076, India

*Chitra-kavya* (picture-poetry) is an ancient Indian tradition of writing poetry in visual patterns. According to *Alankara Shastra* tradition of Indian classical poetics, charm can be imparted to poetry either by play of words (*Shabdalkara*) or by play of meaning (*Arthalankara*). *Chitra-kavya* is classified as a *shabdalkara*, where the physical arrangement of words in a visual pattern is used to create interest.

References to *Chitra-kavya* are found in the earliest works on Indian poetics dating from 6th Century A.D. Though considered a minor form of poetry, the tradition has survived, and practitioners of '*Chitra-kavya*' are still found in India.

A *Chitra-Kavya* is created by composing a piece of verse specially designed to be fitted in a visual pattern. The reading of the verse is governed by the nature of the pattern used. The verse may also be read in many different ways: from inside to outside, from outside to inside, in clockwise or anticlockwise direction, radially from one centre in many directions, linearly by skipping alternate or given number of letters, and many other arrangements depending on the nature of the pattern. The skill of the poet consisted in creating a pattern which would make best use of the various kinds of symmetry creation possibilities generated by merging the symmetries of the verse (metre, rhyme etc.) to the symmetries of the visual pattern and geometric arrangements.



The *Chitra-kavya* tradition is particularly suited to the Sanskrit language in which because the meaning is syntax-independent, various kinds of visual arrangements of words are possible without loss or distortion of meaning.

For example, in '*Kankana-bandha*', the letters are arranged in circular form as in a bangle, and the verse can be read from any point on the circle - each beginning creates a new verse. The challenge lies in combining geometric symmetry with phonetic symmetry and semantic symmetry to create pattern poems, which have to be unravelled like a riddle to fully appreciate their structure.

Besides giving the basic background and history of the '*Chitra-kavya*' tradition in India from 6th C. A.D. to the present, the paper will present selected examples of some outstanding pattern-poems from ancient illustrated manuscripts, along with an analysis of the symmetries programmed in them.

*Reference:*

Tripathi, Dr. Rudradeva, (1972), *Sanskrit-Sahitya mein Shabdalkara (Hindi)*, New Delhi, Shri Lalbahadur Shastri Kendriya Sanskrit Vidyapeeth, 554 pp.