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## Locating the significance of religious symbols in Indian religions

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### Abstract

The religious symbol integrates the general characteristics of the symbol with the unique characteristics, it possesses as a religious symbol. The religious symbols are having figurative quality, perceptibility, innate power and acceptability. All the Indian religions, irrespective of how ancient or modern they are, use symbols to help create a resonant ethos, which in turn, reflects the moral values, teachings and culture of Indian society. The religious symbols of Indian religion are socially rooted and socially supported to bring togetherness and we feeling. The present world, which is going more powerful day by day through mechanical and scientific innovations, should stop for a while to ponder over and understand the central oneness of the religious symbols where all essence of growth lies. To understand the human mind as a whole one should try to realize the lost significance of art and religion in proper light. One can see oneness in all beings, in religious symbols and man, and recreate this world as a harmonious one.

So far as research method is concerned the paper relies on qualitative research method and applies content analysis of primary and secondary sources to draw conclusion.

It is in this context that the proposed paper attempts to analyse that the significance of religious symbols in the Indian religion which not only describes its culture and events but also helps to foster solidarity among the followers and simultaneously uniting them with humanity.

**Keywords:** Signs, symbols, religious symbols, Indic religions, Abrahamic religions, adherents, oneness, harmony

### 1. Introduction

The research paper can be broadly classified into five sections. In the first section attempt is made to define symbols and religious symbols. It further highlights the four important features viz. figurative, perceptibility, innate power and acceptability of religious symbols. The subsequent section deals with the theories of religious symbols. The section focuses on psychological and sociological theories and both the theories are interpreted on the basis of Freudian and cultural-morphological analysis. The next section focuses on types of religious symbols and analyses the objective religious symbols and self transcending religious symbols. The last section attempts to locate the significance of religious symbols in Indian religions and traces those religious symbols which lead to peaceful coexistence in the Indian society and around the world.

### 2. Literature Review, Objective and Research Method

1. Over the years considerable amount of literature have come up that either deal with religious symbols or religions of India. The available literature on religious symbols focuses on characteristics of symbol, theories of religious symbol and types of religious symbol. In the same way literature on religions of India deal with Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism and Jainism. Attempt is made to compare and contrast concepts of religious symbols and Indian religions and their linkage in the context of significance of Indian religious symbols.

The literature on religious symbols mainly focuses on religious symbols of Abrahamic religion in general and Christianity in particular (eg. Edward J. Machle 1953; Paul Tillich 1958; Peter Slater 1968; Thomas N. Lay 1980). Literature on religions of India provides survey of Indian religions in historical context (eg. R. C. Adhikary 1926; Asit K. Halder 1950; Andrew J. Nicholson 2014).

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Though substantive literature have come up during last few decades, the nuances of treating the issues of religious symbols and Indian religious in the context of their significance of Indian religious symbols have not been properly addressed.

## 2. Objective

India is a secular and plural country. The people of India are mainly adherents of Indic religions and Abrahamic faith. The religious symbols promote solidarity among adherents and unite them with humanity. The paper attempts to examine concepts of religious symbol and Indian religions and their linkage in the context of significance of Indian religious symbols.

## 3. Research Method

The subject matter of research is Indian subcontinent in general and India in particular. The universe of research is wide and involves large amount of data. Therefore, the research relies on qualitative research method and applies content analysis of primary and secondary sources to reach a conclusion.

## 3. Religious Symbols and its Features

Symbols support to bring a resonant mythos denoting the moral values of the community or the teaching of the religion. They help one to find out new facts and change one's orientation and self awareness<sup>[1]</sup>. They are indeed symbols of transformation.

The religious symbols deal with the study of liturgics concerned with allegories, analogies or metaphors whose authority resides almost completely in their intellectual coverage and their aesthetic form<sup>[2]</sup>. The religious symbols have four important features viz. figurative, perceptibility, innate power and acceptability.

Figurative quality is the first feature of symbol. It describes the inner attitude. Thus, the written character can be called a symbol for the word and the word a symbol for its meaning<sup>[3]</sup>.

Perceptibility is the second feature of symbol. It describes that something which is intrinsically invisible, ideal or transcendent is formed perceptible in the symbol and is in this manner given objectivity. Even the abstract concepts can become symbols if their application involves a perceptible element. For example, the concept of "surplus value" as a symbol of economic exploitation in the consciousness of the proletariat or the idea of the "Supreme Being" as a symbol of the ultimate concern in the consciousness of the religious community<sup>[4]</sup>.

Innate power is the third characteristics of symbol. It describes that the symbol has a power constitutive within it that differentiates it from the mere sign which is impotent in itself. The sign is interchangeable at will, does not arise from necessity and has no inner power. Symbol has necessary character and cannot be exchanged. It can only vanish, through dissolution; it loses its inner power. Symbols become signs if they lose their innate power<sup>[5]</sup>.

Acceptability is the fourth feature of symbol. It indicates that symbols are socially rooted and socially supported. The process of becoming a symbol and the social acceptance of it as a symbol belong together. For example symbolic is the science of the distinctive marks of the different churches, that is the science of creedal distinctions. Thus universal

"symbolic" is conceivable as a common science of the self expressions of all groups, tendencies, and communities<sup>[6]</sup>.

## 4. Theories of Religious Symbol

The theories of the symbol can be classified into negative and positive theories. The negative theories explain the symbol as mirroring facet of actuality that is not consciously intentional in the symbol. They refute that the symbols has an objective reference and accredited to it purely a reference subjective character. They have exhibited that the psychological and social position is conclusive for the choice of symbols in all spheres<sup>[7]</sup>. The Freudian examination of the unconscious explains cultural and religious symbols as originating out of unconscious processes.

Psychological and social impulses guide the selection; but they can themselves be considered as symbols for definite metaphysical structure of reality<sup>[8]</sup>. The choice of symbols contingent on a subjective factor. Using this notion of style all aspects or arrangements of cultural life becomes symbols. The sphere of religion so far as it is revealed in symbols accepts the entire autonomous culture<sup>[9]</sup>. A symbolic reality is accredited to the laws in accordance with to which myths are constructed<sup>[10]</sup>. The myth is grouped including the other cultural sphere that are also displayed in symbols like language, philosophy, art etc. It has a symbolic constituent familiar with all cultural formation; for a cultural life survives only in symbols. Considering it has a symbolic character, it acquires a mythical character also.

## 5. Types of Religious Symbols

The divine being, the Supreme Being and almighty are depictions of that which is eventually referred to in the sacred act. They are depictions, for the unconditional transcendent outreaches every attainable conception of a being, containing even the conception of almighty<sup>[11]</sup>.

The second group of objective religious symbols has to do with depiction of nature and actions of Almighty. Here God is presupposed as an object. Religiously and theologically, this fact is that all understanding of Almighty has a figurative character. The third groups of objective symbols are the natural and factual objects that are represented as pious objects into the area of religious objects and consequently become sacred symbols. It involves the level of symbols that we have characterized as "pointing" symbols. It is the immensely large class of signs and actions of a special significance that contain a reference to religious objects of the first level. This whole class of symbols can be divided into actions on the one hand and objects on the other that symbolizes the religious attitude. So long as symbols are imbued with sacral power the religious act is oriented towards them. When the religious act is no longer oriented towards them, that is, when they lose their sacral power, they degenerate into mere signs. This transition, however, involves so large an area of the religious life that one is justified in assigning to it a special place. At all events, this one conclusion is evident, that the authentic sacred symbol is the objective symbol, which in its three categories depicts the unconditional transcendent<sup>[12]</sup>.

## 6. Significance of Religious Symbols in Indian Religions

Religious symbolism indicates the application of distinctive symbols that describe its culture, psyche, events and the art that emerged in that land over a long span of time. It

promotes oneness among adherents, keeps them secure as a single entity and keeps them to focus on worship.

### 6.1 Hinduism

The oldest of all the great religions nevertheless renounced in the globe today is Hinduism, a polytheist religion the central faith of which originated some 6000 years ago. It is so internally diverse that it is considered as a bunch of connected religions instead of single religious orientations; several local cults and religious practices are connected by a few commonly held beliefs<sup>[13]</sup>. The compose of Vedic hymns could understand that truth is one though wise men call it by various names<sup>[14]</sup>. The religion mainly uses Om, Yantra and Trishula. The symbol comprises of three syllables and portrays three aspects of religion. It represents three worlds namely earth, space and heaven. It represents the holy trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. It also highlights the three significant Vedic Scripture namely Rig, Yajur, and Sama. The Yantra means instruments or machine in Sanskrit. It is applied as a symbol to balance the mind and help it center totally on spirituality. The Trishula or Trident symbol signifies the three characteristics of creation, preservation and destruction. It also represents the past, present and the future the three worlds and also three gunas<sup>[15]</sup>.

### 6.2 Islam

Islam means submission to Allah. Its beliefs and doctrine focus on the Quran, which is verbatim of Allah. It is based on the teachings of the seventh century Prophet named Muhammad. The five pillars of Islam refer to necessary obligations of Muslims. The first is recitation of Shahada. The second is five prayers each day. The third is giving of alms. The fourth is fasting in the month of Ramadan during which no food or drink is taken between sunrise and sunset<sup>[16]</sup>. The fifth is that every Muslim will try at least once to go Mecca for pilgrimage<sup>[17]</sup>. The religion uses symbol to convey their ideals and philosophies. The star and crescent, colours and Shahada are the popular symbols of Islam. It uses star and crescent as most important symbol and it features on the flags of several Islamic states. The Islamic dynasties adopted flags of different colours. The Ummayyads employed white banners, the Abbasids used black flags and the Fatimids selected green. The colour green is the stable symbol of Islam for ages. One can see green colour in mosques and on the flag of Saudi Arabia.<sup>18</sup>

### 6.3 Sikhism

Sikhism was established in the 15<sup>th</sup> century and rest on the teachings of Guru Nanak Dev and the ten successive Sikh Gurus. Guru Granth Sahib is the last Sikh guru and also regarded as Waheguru, the almighty God. It uses three important symbols namely Ek-Onkar, Khanda and Nishan Sahib. Ek-Onkar means "there is one God". They consistently recite the chant of Ek-Onkar in order to keep reminding themselves of the existence of one common Almighty. The Khanda means the creative force of the Supreme godhead. The Nishan Sahib denotes the presence of a Gurdwara nearby<sup>[19]</sup>.

### 6.4 Christianity

Many Judaic beliefs were taken over and amalgamated as segment of Christianity. Jesus was an orthodox Jew and Christianity started as a sect of Judaism, though it is not

apparent that Jesus wanted to establish a different religion. There are many divisions in terms of theology and church organization. Roman Catholicism, Protestantism and Eastern Orthodoxy are the dominant offshoot of Christianity<sup>[20]</sup>. Christ precisely means the "anointed one". Christian considers Jesus as the Messiah, the son of God, emerging as the savior of human kind. It uses water, peacock and the cross as the important symbols. Water has cleansing and sanctifying attributes, thus used in baptism. According to early Christianity the peacock did not decompose after and thus it became a hallmark of immortality. The Holy Cross is the most widely acknowledged symbol of Christianity<sup>[21]</sup>.

### 6.5 Buddhism

Buddhism has no God. Rather it emphasize on ethical ideals that relate believers to the natural unity and harmony of the world. It deduces from the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha "enlightened one" in the sixth century. The overall aim of Buddhism is to achieve "Nirvana" or complete devotional fulfilment. Like Hinduism, Buddhism permits numerous regional variations, embracing beliefs in local deities, and does not insist on a single viewpoint.<sup>22</sup>It uses wheel and Swastika as important symbols. In the early Indian art when making pictures of Buddha was prohibited, the wheel happened to symbolize his dynamic teaching. The Swastika describes the infusion of energy and matter in two opposite curvatures out of which all creation was possible<sup>[23]</sup>.

### 6.6 Jainism

Jainism uses wheel, Swastika and Om as important religious symbols. These symbols carry the same meaning for the Hindus, Buddhists and Janis. They use Om in prayer, meditation and Yoga<sup>[24]</sup>.

## 7. Conclusion

The religious symbol has general characteristics of symbol and unique characteristics of religious symbol. Figurative quality, perceptibility, innate power and acceptability are their features. All Indian religions, regardless of how old or modern they are, apply symbols to help create a resounding principle, which in turn, reflects ethical, teachings and culture of Indian society. The religious symbols of Indian religion are socially rooted and socially supported to bring togetherness and we feeling. The present world, which is going more powerful day by day through mechanical and scientific innovations, should stop for a while to ponder over and understand the central oneness of the religious symbols where all essence of growth lies.

Symbols are not invented for magical rituals, but in order to find out the utmost reality of human life. One should attempt to discover the lost significance of art and religion in appropriate light to judge human mind as a whole. One can see affinity in all souls, in religious symbols and human and rejuvenate this world as a peaceful one. The religious symbols used in Indian religions not only describe its culture and events but also help to promote oneness among adherents and simultaneously uniting them with humanity.

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