The term ‘symbol’ comes from the Greek word symbolon, which means contract, token, insignia and means of identification.  

Symbolization is a universal human process. It is the most important human trait that man can create and use symbol. This trait differentiates humans from all other living species and plays a crucial role in the intellectual history of mankind. Human beings with their ability to fabricate symbols from their experience and to communicate these through the medium of symbols are classified as homo-symbolicus, by anthropologists referring to them as a species that creates and communicates explicitly through symbolic encoding.

Symbols are cultural assets of a society. It is known that culture itself is a symbol. In effect, the entire edifice of civilizations is built upon these complex symbolic structures; man has been developing from the beginning of time and history. Sound, gesture and visual imagery are the basic modules by which man facilitates the creation and communication of his symbols. A language thus is a system of symbols where man uses sounds, i.e. the spoken word as well as codes of the written words as his means of communication.

Through symbols ideas and meanings are represented. In a symbol there is both concealment and revelation. Symbols facilitate communication by giving a common reference point for a variety of original disparate ideas.

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296 Encyclopaedia of Britanica, 1997, ed. (CD Version) see under “Nature of Religious symbols and symbolization”. 
Symbols are universal, in the sense they transcend history. Most writers agree in tracing the beginning of symbolist thought to prehistoric times- to the latter part of the Paleolithic Age.\(^{297}\)

Ananda Coomarswamy says that ‘Symbolism is the art of thinking in images’. Diel considers the symbols to be ‘a precise and crystallized means of expression’.\(^{298}\)

Marc Saunier points to an important characteristic of symbols when he states that they are ‘the synthesizing expression of a marvelous science, now forgotten by men’ but that ‘they show us all that has been and will be in one immutable form’.\(^{299}\)

*Rangoli* is a store house of symbols. Beginning with the auspicious bindu (dot), the symbols of *rangoli* go on expanding to form a line and the basic geometrical shapes like the circle, triangle, square, spiral and so on, each having its own significance.

The geometrical figures as the point, straight line, circle, triangle and square, have a symbolic value in representing the basic energies of the universe. They can be combined in increasing complex figures to represent particular forces or qualities embodied in some aspect of creation, evolution, dissolution.

Considering the qualitative change that has occurred in the character and perception of life in today’s times, an attempt is made to study, understand and present, with the aid of *rangoli* symbols, ‘the perceptions of life in the distant past’ where the cosmic forces at work were looked at with awe and reverence, fear and hope.


\(^{298}\) *Ibid*., p.xxix.

\(^{299}\) *Ibid*., p.xxx.
The various symbols, apart from being a part of an unconscious inheritance, grow efficacious through the process of association, observation and experience. Experience changes with environment. New images, more immediate and representative of the new environment, dilute the original association and significance of the symbol. Nevertheless, the consistent pre-occupation with fertility, birth, death and rebirth lie at base of most of the prominent symbols.

It is observed that almost all the motifs employed in *rangoli* are symbols of fertility and procreation or the cosmic life force and regeneration and all of them are in one way or the other, ‘symbols of life’ and therefore highly auspicious. This life-affirming trait of *rangoli* also finds its expression in the choice of purely decorative forms which when combined with symbol motifs; result in infinite variety of new designs.

**Floor art motifs and their symbolism:**

**Dot:** The dot or the ‘*bindu*’ is the highest form of abstraction because it is the point where form touches formlessness – the very genesis of being. The most comprehensive and minimal symbolic expression, it is the point of origin and end, all beginnings and all dissolutions. It denotes seed or *beej* which has the power of recreation. The central point representing zero dimensions is the fundamental point of repose from which emerges transformation and evolution. It signifies the starting point in the unfolding of inner space, as well as the furthest point of ultimate integration. It is the point-limit from which inner and outer space take their origin, and in which they become one again.

*Bindu* is considered to be a *yantra* which represents the centre of the universe and is believed to be visible form of *shunya* or zero.\(^{300}\)

\(^{300}\) Liebert Gosta, *IDIR*, Sri Satguru Publications, Delhi, 1st ed. 1976, 2nd ed. 1986, p.44.
It is a potent symbol to ward off the evil spirit. A black dot is commonly applied on a child’s forehead or cheek to neutralize ‘drishti’. The red dot, by its obvious association with the Mother Goddess, not only implies sanctification and protection but is also believed to impart the vital life-force. When applied on the woman’s forehead it is considered as a sanction to procreate. In certain communities of South India, women are denied the right to apply the red bindu during their menstrual periods. In North India, the use of sindoor is restricted to married women.

*Bindu* forms the base of *rangoli* designs, especially in Maharashtra and South India. A grid made of calculated dots serve as the guideline for the design. Just as the tree, flowers and fruits proliferate from the seed and sprout, the *rangoli* begins with a dot.

Each movement of the *bindu* takes on a new graphic significance, forming line, spiral, triangle, square and so on, unfolding new vistas for visual vibration and evolution.

**Line:** The *bindu* moving with length without breadth forms a straight line. The straight line signifies development and growth. Linear patterns suggest sound vibrations or dimensions of space. In *rangoli* the dots are joined together forming lines so as to create beautiful patterns. Sometimes the line form loops around the dots as in case of *kolams*. Straight or curvy, the lines are symbolic of movement and progression.

Horizontal lines run parallel such as ===

Vertical lines run up and down such as |||||

Diagonal lines are slanting lines such as \\|

Angled lines are a combination of diagonal lines such as /\|\|\| ><<>

Wavy or serpentine lines express movement such as ~~~~~~~~~
Intersecting lines lie at the base of some important auspicious symbols like the Swastika, six-pointed star or the hexagon and eight-pointed star or the octagon.

Circle: Circle known as ‘vrita’ in Sanskrit, is one of the most widespread of all symbols and is rich in meaning. It symbolizes the wholeness or totality or eternity which has neither the beginning nor the end. The circle occurs very frequently in mandalas and is devised for the motion of the revolution of the planets. It symbolizes the finite and the infinite. It is the boundless and the bounded and its symbolism overflowing in many directions. Rayed, it is an emblem of the sun, spoked, it represents the wheel. Divided by an S-shaped diameter it is the well-known Yang-Yin symbol of Chinese mysticism. The circle pattern is found in the ground plans of great architectural creations ancient and modern. In the representation of the Panchamahabhutas, or the five elements, the circle symbolizes the water.
Several puranas mention that the sun was worshipped in a circle in early days. As mentioned in Chap.3, women in Rajasthan to this day draw circular designs when they worship the Sun for the first time after child-birth, the design being known as ‘Suraj-ko-chowk’.

It was enjoined to draw magical circles while practising Jaduidya.\textsuperscript{301}

The rituals for defeat or destruction of the enemy and also for conjuring were performed in the circular kunda.\textsuperscript{302}

In the Brahmanda P. among magical devices the drawing of a circle (chakra) with the mantra called ‘Shodashakshara’ (sixteen-lettered) before the goddess Sridevi is prescribed. It is to be drawn secretly with a yellow pigment and to be protected from other’s eyes. It is said that this method is effective in assemblies and checks the speech of the rival.\textsuperscript{303}

The circle serves as a mysterious magical figure used to enclose some supernatural powers and hence drawn by the tribal people like the Warlis on important rituals like birth, marriage and death rites (as discussed in Chap.1). The world view of the Warlis is best represented by the circle which to them is an expanding, encapsulating view of reality, akin to the womb which is capable of endless births. The circle denotes the very core of their existence.

Symbols formed from the basic circle:

\textit{Chakra} (wheel) – A common symbol in rangoli, its worship was common among the primitive civilizations and is still prevalent among the Hindus in the form of Vishnu’s


*chakra* and *Sudarshan chakra* of Krishna used to destroy the evil, among the Buddhist as the wheel of Law and among the Jains as *Siddha Chakra*.

It is a symbol of power, absolute completeness and emblem of protection. It symbolizes the creator’s mind or the first thought of the Supreme Being when the desire of creation moved him to manifest himself. It is a mystical diagram connected with the *shakta* worship and used as a term equivalent to *yantra*.

The significance of this symbol is wide and varied.

The Hindus worship the potter’s wheel (*Chakra-puja*) or (*Chaka-puja*) at the time of marriage which was perhaps the first wheel invented by man.

In the *Rigveda* the word *Chakra* is mentioned in the sense of the wheel of the Sun’s chariot denoting time. It consisted of a rim (*pavi*), a felly (*pradhi*), spokes (*ara*) and a nave (*nabhi*). In the post-vedic literature one of the weapons of Vishnu is the wheel which is round like the sun. Sun was symbolized as the many spoked wheel used as a discus or cart-wheel.

In the *Dharmashastras*, it is said that the Sun should be worshipped as a form of Vishnu and that the Sun is the right eye of Vishnu and should be worshipped (*Bhaskar puja*) in a *mandala* resembling a chariot wheel.

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Time is sacred and is in constant movement like the wheel of the chariot (Kala Chakra). It is cyclic, repetitive, without beginning or end.\(^\text{309}\)

Similarly the cycles of life like Dinachakra, Masachakra, Rituchakra are represented by a chakra. In Indian astrology, plans like Graha chakra or Rashi chakra are seen. In astrology, tables like Nakshatra chakra and Hoda chakra occur. In tantra, it denotes a mystical formation (chakra bandha).\(^\text{310}\)

Shat-chakras are the energy-centres of the human body. They represent the ascending stages of consciousness, from Muladhara to Sahashrara, the seat of realization.

Chakra is a symbol of great antiquity, as its representations are found on the Indus Valley art- amulets, seals, pottery etc. later on, on the punch-marked coins.\(^\text{311}\)

Chakravyuha- The symbol of Chakravyuha or the labyrinth is drawn in the rangoli of Maharashtra and Tamilnadu. One of the formations of the army is described in the Mahabharata as Chakravyuha. Abhimanyu’s Chakra was also called Manas Chakra. It symbolized the eight activities of the mind to attain Moksha before it was used as a military formation in Mahabharata.\(^\text{312}\)


Sometimes the mandala is regarded as a map of hidden dimensions, and is then drawn in the form of a maze. Or it may serve as a means of activating a mental reflex and reproducing in the conscious mind the symbolism of our hidden selves.\(^\text{313}\)

R.E. Enthoven in his ‘The Folklore of Bombay’ writes that in difficult labour cases, Chakrava water is sometimes given to women. The Chakrava figure is a figure of seven cross-lines drawn on a bell-metal dish, over which the finest white dust has been spread. This figure is shown to the woman in labour: water is then poured into the dish and offered her to drink.\(^\text{314}\)

The above practice can be linked to a story in Mahabharata, in which Subhadra, the sister of the god Krishna and the wife of Arjuna, conceived a demon, an enemy of Krishna. The demon would not leave the womb of Subhadra even twelve months after the date of her conception, and began to harass the mother. Krishna, the incarnation of God, knowing of the demon’s presence and the cause of his delay, took pity on the afflicted condition of his sister and read Chakrava (Chakravyuha), a book consisting of seven chapters and explaining the method of conquering a labyrinthine fort with seven cross-lines. Krishna completed six chapters, and promised to teach the demon the seventh, provided he came out. The demon ceased troubling Subhadra and emerged from the womb. He was called Abhimanyu. Krishna never read the seventh chapter, for then Abhimanyu would have been invincible and able to take his life. This ignorance of the seventh chapter cost Abhimanyu his life on the field of Kurrukshetra in conquering the seven cross-lined labyrinthine formations. As the art of conquering a labyrinthine fort when taught to the demon in the womb facilitated the delivery of Subhadra, a belief spread that drinking in the figure of the seven cross-lined labyrinthine fort would facilitate the delivery of all women who had difficulties in child-birth.

Madhu Khanna in his study on yantra says that, the figure of Chakravyuha is a linear womb-shaped yantra used in childbirth to ensure an easy delivery. At the appropriate hour the yantra is propitiated by the occult priest, who urges the woman to enter the opening of the yantra mentally, and follow its zig-zag course in deep concentration, completing each of its circuits and then reversing the course to return


to the entry gate. The mental ‘walk’ through the yantra makes the subject circumambulate her own womb and helps her to use her mental powers to assist the birth.\footnote{Madhu Khanna, \textit{Yantra: The Tantric Symbol of Cosmic Unity}, Thames & Hudson, London, 1981, reprint 2003, p.157.}

It appears that the symbol originally held some magico-religious significance that was understood in widely separated parts of the world. Ground-plans, sketches and emblems of mazes appear fairly frequently over a very wide area, but principally in Asia and Europe. Some are believed to have been conceived with the purpose of luring devils into them so that they might never escape.\footnote{Cirlot, \textit{op.cit.}, p.165.}

\textit{Chakravyuha} motif is tattooed for protection in South India.

Prof. John Layard in his work on labyrinth ritual\footnote{John Layard,“Labyrinth Ritual in South India: Threshold and Tattoo Designs” \textit{Folklore}, Vol. 48, No. 2, June 1937, pp. 115-182.} claims that the practice of \textit{kolam} originated in the ritual of the labyrinth. He bases the ritual on an early conception of the labyrinth as an important accessory to the attainment of future life and consequently, of success in this world. He narrates C.N. Deedes\footnote{C. N. Deedes, \textit{The Labyrinth}, edited by S. H. Hooke, London, 1935.} introduction to the labyrinths connected with the royal tombs of Egypt, where the object of the labyrinth was: 1. to exclude the uninitiated from participating in the life after death and 2. to prevent inauspicious and unlucky influences from entering. He further elaborates on the labyrinth ritual dance, involving the drawing of labyrinths in the sand, practiced in the Melanesian island of Malekula. Here it is a part of a mortuary rite involving the concept of life after death.

Subsequently, he concludes that similar designs are now made by native Indians as games of skill. (In a book on \textit{rangoli} by Panditin Godavaribai, published in 1867 in Mumbai, the drawing of \textit{Chakravyuha} motif in \textit{rangoli} and using it as game for pastime is mentioned)\footnote{Godavaribai Panditin, \textit{Rangavallika, Part-1}, Trimbak Janardan Gurjar, Mumbai, 1st ed. 1867.}. 

\textsuperscript{316} Cirlot, \textit{op.cit.}, p.165.
Probably the spiral uninterrupted line of the *Chakravyuha* besides representing life, fertility and the womb, also represents immortality, the consciousness of the continuity of a "life-death-life" circle.

Labyrinth motif is seen in the later phases of Indian rock art. Maze games are found in the remains of the IVC. This pattern is seen in the carvings of Halebid temple in Mysore, illustrating the *Chakravyuha* episode from the Mahabharata war.

**Spiral pattern or Kendravardhini** – The spiral is a basic symbol with the meaning turn or revolve, in the physical as well as philosophical sense that life is eternal, turning, coiling, changing like clouds and smoke. It forms an important component of the *rangoli* design. There are two ways of executing a spiral movement. The course traced as outward illustrates the movement as enlarging where as the inward movement signifies a penetration inward and within. It is the most ubiquitous patterns found in the nature. For instance, creepers growing on the walls or on the trees, horns of ram, tentacles of octopus, conch-shells, wind and wave patterns, whirlpool and serpentine coils etc. illustrate this. Mackenzie argues that when primitive man drew the spiral motif, he was just not creating ‘fanciful aesthetic forms’ but he was ‘imitating’ patterns from nature. The spiral also symbolizes ascending growth. He further observes that the prevalence of the circular motif in ancient art is rooted in the belief-system of a magico-mythical reality. These motifs function as a ‘luck motif’ rather than an ‘art motif’. It is also believed that the child at the time of its birth makes a spiral movement before coming out of the womb. In order to assist


an easy delivery many spiral artifacts such as amulets, ear-rings, anklets and bangles were drawn or kept by the side of the delivering mother.

Sun and Moon

It is believed that the sun is the only God that reveals himself, there is not a day when he does not arise. In India, the sun-face or surya-mukh is one of the chief guardians against evil. It is carved on temples or carried in procession, worked on banners. Like the sun, the moon too receives divine honour. Moon-worship secures wealth, augments progeny, cures diseases, and betters the condition of the milch cattle. In many stone inscriptions, the stones depicting some rituals or the Hero stones and Sati stones found all over India, the sun and the moon are carved at the top left and right respectively. Here they are carved to indicate that the glory or success achieved from some specific ritual or feat may last till the sun and the moon exists, which is “Yavat Chandra Divakaran” in Sanskrit. Sun and moon being the two eyes of the supreme deity also act as witnesses to the event inscribed. These are recurring motifs on door-steps, threshing grounds and granaries. In the Chaitrangana and rangoli of Deepavali in Maharashtra, the sun and the moon are placed in the same way to the left and right on the top of the rectangular rangoli. By doing so, the lady probably prays for God’s blessings towards her household which should last till the sun and the moon exist.

The crescent moon is the embodiment of the female principle. The moon regulates the woman’s periodic functions. It is the guardian of the embryo and the placenta. All through the year, corresponding with the moon cycle, various vratas and pujas are performed by the women for fertility, material prosperity and for the longevity of their husbands. The moon mark tattooed on the face prevents the bearer from turning into an evil spirit after death.

The Vokkaligas in north Kanara district after the harvest perform a ritual of marriage of the sun and moon in a bid to revive the fertility of the earth by propitiating the dual aspects of nature recognized as essential for the cyclic regeneration of plants. Similarly in the Beladingala puja performed by women and children of the Vokkaliga community, to evoke the moonlight, songs are sung and the moon is evoked and invited to be seated in the pandal. A motif called “Beladingalappa Hane’ meaning the drawing of the father of moonlight, is drawn with *ragi* powder, red soil, rice, *haldi*, *kumkum* and flowers. The sun is drawn in the east with red soil along with a parrot and a deer with grains. The song which accompanies the act visualizes the moon as the bride of the sun.

The North American tribe of Navajo Indians believes that drawing a ritualistic image of the sun in sand can cure all kinds of maladies.

**Planets or Graha** – Planets are believed to have influence on the life of a person, according to the position in which they are at his birth. Each planet has its period of influence. *Rangolis* play an important role in the worship of the *navagrahas*. The *navagrahas*—the Sun, Moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, Saturn, *Rahu* and *Ketu* are drawn and propitiated before important rites of sacrament like the threading ceremony or wedding. These planets have special colours, metals and other materials like grains associated with them. The Garuda P. indicates the reason why the various colours and metals are used for the planets. It says that due to proper metals and colours, the evil eye of the planets gets pacified. The *navagrahas* are sometimes worshipped in an eight-petalled lotus with prescribed position and colour representing each planet. Thus the sun (*Ravi*) is drawn with the red colour powder in the centre, the yellow petal in the north stands for Jupiter (*Brihaspati*); on the north-east is the deep yellow petal for Mercury (*Budha*) and on the east in white is Venus (*Shukra*). In the south-east is the moon (*Soma*), also in white. The petal in the

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*Navagraha mandala, Courtesy: Dr. Varsha Shirgaonkar*
south is the Mars (Mangal), indicated in red. In the south-west is Rahu, depicted in black, in the west stands Saturn (Shani), also in black and in the north-west is Ketu, depicted in brown. The grahas indicated in black and brown colours are believed to cast bad effects on human destiny; those in red are supposed to be strong in their action. The yellow and white ones are considered to produce good effects. The navagrahas are propitiated with a view to please them so that they may act favourably on the worshipper. There are twelve rashis or constellations within which all these grahas move with mathematical precision. The destiny of mankind is determined according to the position of a particular graha in relation to a particular rashi in which it stands or which it influences. The symbols used to represent these grahas are as follows: a circle for the sun, a square for the moon, a triangle for Mars, an arrow for Mercury, a rectangle for Jupiter, a five-pointed star for Venus, a bow for Saturn, wicker vessel for Rahu and a flag for Ketu.

A navagraha shilpa is present at Gangaikonda-cholapuram in Tamilnadu.

**Triangle:** The triangle is the basic linear figure of enclosure. It represents the three worlds- the positive, the negative and the balanced apex: Rajas, Tamas and Sattva. The upward pointing triangle represents the Purusha, the ‘karta’. The downward pointing triangle represents the yoni, the female sexual organ the primal receptacle of creation and therefore the Prakriti. When two triangles interlock each other in the form of a hexagon it represents the kinetic, revolving tendency of ‘Rajas’ from the point of view of genesis-union of Shiva and Shakti- Purusha and Prakriti.325

Speaking of the union of the male and female aspect, Dr. Devangana Desai states that ‘this unity is used for fertility purposes and also its wider connotations, viz. the aversion of evil, death, misfortune and promotion of life, happiness, prosperity, well-being, abundance and auspiciousness. The magical power of sex is manifest both in actual practices and symbolic representation in religious rituals.326 The six-

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pointed star as a symbol of the goddess, usually Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and happiness, is expressed in *rangoli* throughout India.

These geometrical diagrams have been used not only in India, but almost all over the world for acquiring occult powers. The basic unit of the hexagram or the six-pointed star and also the motif for *grahas* which is drawn in everyday *rangoli* of Maharashtra and India, consists of three lines intersecting each other. This arrangement of three intersecting lines is also known as *hagal*-rune, a Germanic letter, symbolizing protection and procreation.\(^{327}\)

In Israel, the six-pointed star is the symbol on the Shield of David, the father of the great King Solomon, who ruled there in c. 930 B.C. Today it is their national symbol. Similarly, a five-pointed star which is significant of the five *tattvas* (elements) in *Tantra* had been used for black magic by the ancient Hellenistic wise men. It is considered to be a charm against evil spirit in *rangoli*.

A more detailed and intricate expression is the *Shri-yantra*; a complex of interpenetrating triangles, symbolizing the interaction of male and female principles, held within the circle. At the Parvati temple complex at Pune, in the temple of Vishnu, the Madhava form of Vishnu is standing on the *Laxmi yantra*.

The symbol of goddess of learning, *Saraswati* is drawn or established on a slate (*Sarasvatisthapana*) and worshipped on *Dashehra* day. Special *Sarasvatipooja* is done by bringing together books, pens, tools, instruments used by elders and youngsters in the house. Among craftsmen and manual labourers, *ayudhapuja*, i.e. worship of the tools of their trade is

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done. In earlier days, children begin to learn the alphabet on this day. They were ceremoniously
initiated by drawing a symbol of goddess Saraswati on a slate. The triangular figure drawn as a
symbol of Saraswati on Dassehra, is a yantra having upward and inverted triangles. It is similar
to the Jana yantra used in Tantric practices.\textsuperscript{328}

Triangle is also believed to be a tantric symbol of Kamakala. It is formed by \textit{naad, bindu and beej}. This
triangular letter is indestructible.\textsuperscript{329} Quoting from \textit{Shilpa Prakasa}, Dr. Devangana Desai says that “The
Kamakala yantra, on which erotic figures are portrayed, is to be offered \textit{puja} for \textit{siddhi} (success) in
\textit{Shaktisadhana}. All obstacles and fears are believed to be destroyed through this portrayal.”Ghosts
(\textit{bhutas}), departed spirits (\textit{pretas}), goblins (\textit{pishachas}), demons (\textit{kaunapas}) and other hideous creatures
will flee far away at mere sight of the \textit{yantra}. This \textit{yantra} is giver of power and bestower of all
\textit{siddhis}”.\textsuperscript{330}

In the representation of the \textit{Panchamahabhutas}, or the five elements, the triangle symbolizes the fire.

The \textit{Chendu-phali} motif drawn in Maharashtra represents Krishna’s ball, relating to the famous Kaliya
legend. However, the motif actually is a \textit{yantra} described in \textit{Saundaryalahari}. The drawing of this \textit{yantra}
is believed to help one gain the capacity to enter into another body (\textit{parakaaya-pravesah}).\textsuperscript{331} The
presence of the interlocked triangles in the centre forming a six-pointed star is significant here.

\textsuperscript{328} As seen in Ajit Mookerjee and Madhu Khanna, \textit{The Tantric Way}, Thames & Hudson, London, 1977, reprint
2003.


\textsuperscript{330} Desai, \textit{op.cit.}, p.98.

\textsuperscript{331} A.R. Parthasarathy (trans.) and Dr. P. Ramachandresekhar (ed.), \textit{Sri Saundarya Lahari}, Giri Trading Agency,
Square - A geometrical figure having each side equidistant from its centre is the stable linear form representing the Earth. The surface of the earth, in traditional Indian cosmology, is regarded as demarcated by sunrise and sunset, by the points where the sun apparently emerges above and sinks below the horizon, by the East and West and also by the North and South points. It is therefore represented by the ideogram or mandala of a square. The square altar represents the earth in Egyptian hieroglyphics.

During the Garbhadana ceremony or the inception ceremony of a Hindu temple, on an auspicious night, the Garbha vessel, in the form of a casket, is placed on the foundation on which the serpent Ananta is drawn. On the lid of the casket, on a square surface, the mandala of the earth is drawn with its seven continents, seas and mountains. The casket here represents goddess Earth and she is invoked on the mandala by ritual incantations.

Spiritually, the four equal sides of the square mandala represent the gates to the four quarters of the fourfold mind, leading from the Earth to the worlds beyond.

The Rigvedabrahmakarmasamuchaya a text about the rites and worship, mentions several mandalas, plain or drawn in various colours, such as Sarvatobhadra mandala, Chaturlingatobhadra, Prasadavastumandala, Grahavastumandala and so on. These mandalas and the various yantras used for religious and magical rituals have square as the basic shape.

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Sarvatobhadra meaning ‘auspicious on all sides’, is the name of a mantra which is said to be the instrument of the fulfillment of all wishes, in the present and the future, in the visible and the invisible world. It consists in its written form 64 squares – like chess-board\textsuperscript{337}

Chatuskona- yantra is a yantra with two squares (one inscribed in the other) symbolizing heaven and earth.\textsuperscript{338} Similarly when two squares interlock each other, the ashtakona, or octagon is formed, which is the symbol of protection assigned to Lord Vishnu. This is a common symbol drawn in rangoli.

Even the human life in India was planned according to the design of the four lines of a square, we have the four varnas and the four ashramas and the four purusharthas also.

The most striking feature of the Warli wedding painting is the chowk, a square consisting of other geometric figures. The importance of the chowk is indicated by the fact that the entire painting is named after it. The square here, concretize the ancient belief of the four quarters of the earth being presided over by the guardian deities. It not only encloses a sacred space but is a powerful barrier against evil spirits. The Warlis feel extreme paranoia about the evil spirits, which reaches a pitch of intensity on the auspicious occasions; the square is a powerful symbol of protection.\textsuperscript{339}

Similarly in other tribal communities of India too the ritual drawing a chowk is followed (as discussed in Chp.1). In Uttar

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{seal_with_square_motif.png}
\caption{Seal with square motif on the left, Source: E.J.H. Mackay, \textit{Further Excavations at Mohenjo-daro}, Manager, Delhi, Vol.II, Pl.XC-23a}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{337} Gosta, \textit{op.cit.}, p.263.

\textsuperscript{338} Ibid., p.59.

\textsuperscript{339} Yashodhara Dalmia, \textit{The Painted World of Warlis}, Lalit Kala Academy, New Delhi, 1988, p.198.
Pradesh the name *chowk-purana* for *rangoli* itself suggests the significance of the square shape in this ritual. A motif very similar to a *chowk* or a square *mandala* is found in the IVC remains.

**Cross or the Chaturbhuja**

The cross is a common motif in *rangoli*. The regular cross motif and its variation is drawn in the *rangolis* called *Pokhran* or *Pushkarni* in Maharashra. Here the cross symbolizes a tank or a well. These motifs are actually architectural plans of step-wells found in different parts of the region.

Another motif derived from the cross is the ‘*Dyutapat*’ or ‘*Choupat*’ meaning a dice game. *Dyuta* was played and *jagarana* (keeping awake through night) was practised on the *Kaumudimahotsava* and *Yaksharatri*. Playing *dyuta* is not only auspicious but also a means of securing one’s luck for the coming year. Even today ritual gambling with friends and family is a common feature of *Diwali* festival. It is believed that Goddess Parvati played a game of dice with her husband, Lord Shiva on the day of *Diwali*. This scene is superbly sculpted at Kailash temple- Ellora and Elephanta caves near

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340 P.V. Kane, *op.cit.*, p.290.

Mumbai. The Pathare Prabhus of Maharashtra have the tradition of drawing a rangoli of ‘Pat’ or dice game on the day of Diwali. Chowpad is also a common motif in the Rajasthani mandana.

An equal armed cross appears in several of the paintings on the walls of the rock-shelters of India. Though of an unidentifiable period, its presence here indicates the belief in its potency among the primitive people of India, which must have been handed down from the Paleolithic age. This motif is also found on the seals and buttons of IVC.

The cross represents the cross-roads of the Carrefour. Buddha had enjoined on his disciples to place the remains of his body at the meeting of roads and erect a stupa on them. Such road-crossings are still used for making offerings to the bhutas in the Indian villages. Among the Indian villagers, it is a common practice to perform charms at cross-roads and also light bon-fire during the Holi festival where the roads meet. In the orthodox Brahmanical death rites, lamps are placed at cross-roads. Among the Celts for summoning chance spirits and seeing visions a circle was made at the cross-road and the operator went round it.

For the primitive the vertical line if prolonged was a sure means of reaching heaven and the horizontal of getting to the ends of the earth. In Mexico, Peru and Central America, the cross was designed in allusion to the four quarters, from which rains came and was thus a symbol of the god who dispensed with celestial waters.\(^{342}\)

In this symbol is thus hidden the belief of the primitive peoples who thought that the appropriate place to make offerings to their dead ancestors was the crossing, where with the winds of the four corners

\(^{342}\) Rai Govind Chandra, op.cit., p.88.
they came and assembled. To wear an amulet, bearing the symbol of the crossing would have, according to them, assured the protection of the dead ancestor.\textsuperscript{343}

\textbf{Swastika}: The term ‘Swastika’ is believed to be a fusion of the two Sanskrit words ‘Su’ (good) and ‘Asati’ (to exist), which when combined means ‘May Good Prevail’. Thus the symbol implies auspiciousness and good fortune.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{swastika.png}
\caption{Swastika}
\end{figure}

The Hindus, along with Jains, Parsis and Buddhists regard it as an auspicious symbol or \textit{mangala chinha}. It is one of the 108 \textit{mangalas} enumerated in the \textit{Harivamsha}.\textsuperscript{344} The Jains consider it as one of the auspicious symbols and place it on \textit{balipattas} or trays of copper on which offerings are made to \textit{Tirthankaras}. It is especially connected with Suparshvanatha. Similarly the Parsis too revere it as the holy symbol of the Sun. Buddhists regards it as an auspicious symbol. It finds mention among the \textit{mangalas} witnessed by Sujata when she was preparing the rice and milk pudding (\textit{khira}) for Buddha and among the sacred hair decorations of Buddha.\textsuperscript{345} It also occurs among the auspicious symbols seen on the palm of Buddha after his birth.

A red \textit{swastika} is often marked at the beginning and end of manuscripts and books of accounts by the Hindus and Jains. There is a sitting position in yoga known as “\textit{Swastikasana}” or the auspicious posture, in which the legs are crossed and the feet rest on opposite thighs. Also there is a \textit{Hastasvastika} or ‘hand-cross’ \textit{mudra} suggesting devotion.\textsuperscript{346}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{343} Ibid., p.89.
\item \textsuperscript{344} Rai Govind Chandra, \textit{op.cit.}, p.25.
\item \textsuperscript{345} Ibid., loc.cit.
\item \textsuperscript{346} Gosta, \textit{op.cit.}, p.103.
\end{itemize}
Its four sides are believed to represent *Dharma, Artha, Kama* and *Moksha*.

The auspicious symbol of the Swastika is very commonly used in Hindu art, architecture and decoration. The shape of Swastika considered to have protective power was in ancient times employed as the ground plan to build forts. A bandage and a surgical instrument of the shape of a cross were respectively referred to as ‘*Swastikabandha*’ and ‘*Swastikayantra*’.347

In the Bharata’s *Natyashastra* there is a dancing pose which is named as *Swastika*, the representation of which can be seen at the temple of Chidambaram in Tamilnadu. In the *Ramayana* we come across boats moving in the formation of the *Swastika*.348

According to *Manasara*, a *Swastika* shaped city should be built for kings.349 In the Vishnupurana, it appears as ornamentation on the hood of *Sheshanaga*, the thousand-headed serpent who holds this world on one of its heads.350

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350 Rai Govind Chandra, *op.cit.*, p.35.
It is connected with ‘spectacle marks’ on cobra’s hood. In certain parts of Bengal a design of intertwined serpents looking in form almost like the Swastika, is still drawn on the ground and worshipped on auspicious occasions.

The antiquity of this symbol cannot be doubted as we get its representation on the various seals, amulets and pottery of the Harrapa and Mohenjo-daro.

On a seal at Mohenjodaro we find an elephant making obeisance before a Swastika symbol. This representation leads us to believe that the symbol had acquired in those early years a sort of mystical power. The belief in its potentiality must have led to its wide distribution. It is also present on the earliest punch-marked coins known as bent bar coins found by Marshall.

A silk waist-cloth (antarpaat) marked in the centre with a red Swastika is stretched in front of the couple to be married. The couple is supposed to look at the Swastika till the auspicious moment for marriage arrives. At the time of the Punya-vachan, a ceremony which precedes a Hindu wedding, the figure is drawn in rice and is worshipped.

In Konkan, women who observe a Swastika vrata in the four monsoon months, paint the auspicious symbol either on their threshold or at their doors every morning and worship it. It is painted on the doorjambs and on the Purnakumbha by the womenfolk under the belief that it would bring good luck.

\[351\] Gosta, op.cit., p.290.\]
The *Swastika* was used in calculating the number of days taken in pilgrimage by one’s relations, one figure being painted on the wall each day from the date of separation. Here the *Swastika* is a representation of *Jogmaya*, a nature power, bringing about the union of two separate beings.\(^{352}\)

It is one of the most common and popular symbol used for *rangoli*. Right-hand *Swastika* is considered to be auspicious. It is believed that the *Swastika* is much in favour with the gods as a seat or couch, and as soon as it is drawn it is immediately occupied by some deity.\(^{353}\) It is therefore customary to draw the *Swastika* on most auspicious and festive occasions such as marriage and thread ceremonies, *Diwali* festival and fulfillment of vows. *Swastika* is considered to be an emblem of peace and prosperity in general and for this reason women draw a figure of the *Swastika* in front of their houses.

**Foot-prints:**

The feet motif has a specific symbolic connotation in mythical and ritual contexts. Its symbolic significance has evolved from the pre-historic magico-religious belief. It was believed that the feet of a benevolent person, animal or divinity can usher in propitious events. This belief is prominently found among most of the ancient cultures and has given rise to various art motifs.

With respect to the art of *rangoli*, the foot-print motif drawn all over can be safely assigned mainly to be those of goddess *Lakshmi*, the Goddess of abundance, prosperity and happiness, whose pleasure may turn a pauper into a millionaire. It is seen that women are allured to adore the foot-prints of *Lakshmi*, inviting the goddess of wealth to come and reside in their homes believing that she would bestow upon them riches and happiness. Often the footsteps of Goddess *Lakshmi* entering into the home are designed at the main entrance of the home or near the place of worship, which indicates the entrance of prosperity in the home.


In another custom followed in south India at the time of *Janamashtami* - the birth-day of lord *Krishna*, small foot-prints are drawn with rice flour, from the altar of the house to the kitchen suggesting that baby *Krishna* after taking birth has entered their kitchen to steal butter. Similarly Goddess *Gauri*’s foot-prints are marked from the entrance of the home to the place of installation of the idol at the time of *Gauri-Ganapati* festival in Maharashtra.

The feet of deities, such as *Gauri, Lakshmi, Krishna* are considered auspicious and indicative of their presence. They are always drawn pointing towards the house. These symbolic representations translate the beliefs related to the foot-prints into tangible forms and help to maintain those beliefs by giving them currency.

Secondly, the foot-prints commonly seen in the *rangolis* are those of the Holy cow, worshipped and revered all over India. These foot-prints motifs as *Gau-ka-khur* in Rajasthan and *Gopadma* in Maharashtra are invariably marked in the *rangolis* entrance and in front of the Gods. These are made by the women as an acknowledgement of the unconditional services provided by the cow and also as a request for the continuation of those services for the well-being of their family.

In olden days, the ornament- *Gokshura*, which is in the shape of cow’s hoof was made as it symbolized the sacred qualities of the cow.\(^\text{354}\)

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The performance of *Gopadmavrata* by young married women is mentioned in the *Dharmashastra*. The *vrata* involves drawing figure of cow’s feet in the house or cow- pen or in temple of Vishnu or Shiva or near *Tulsi* plant; 33 figures are to be drawn every day for five years.\(^{355}\)

This *vrata* is also observed by the women during the *Vasu-baras* before *Diwali*. A special *Rangoli* is drawn for this *vrata* (illustrated in Chp.3).

Some foot-prints like those of a tiger are drawn out of fear and reverence. These are believed to be especially powerful in scaring away the evil spirits and are found in the *rangoli*, tattoo as well as embroidery designs in the South.

**Knot or loop motif:**

A knot is a complex symbol embracing several important meanings mainly related to the idea of tightly closed link. It expresses the idea of binding, of creating an enclosure and of protection.

In the broadest sense, loops and knots represent the idea of binding. Mircea Eliade has made a special study of the symbols of knots and notes that in magic cults there are two types of knots and bonds. (a) those which are beneficent and a protection against wild animals, illness and sorcery and against demons and death and (b) those employed as a form of ‘attack’ against human enemies.\(^{356}\) The first type applies to the knots drawn in *rangoli*, especially in the *kolam* of Tamilnadu.

The eternal, endless, or mystic knot is common to many ancient traditions, and became particularly innovative in Islamic and Celtic designs. *Granthi* or the endless knot is one of the *ashtamangal* symbols

\(^{355}\) P.V. Kane (ed.), *op.cit.*, p.294.

\(^{356}\) Cirlot, *op.cit.*, p.182.
of Buddhism. It is a yantra representing ‘the endless cycle of rebirths’. In Chinese Buddhism, it is one of the eight emblems of good luck and is a symbol of longevity.

The knot used in kolam designs is believed to be a universal symbol of protection which originated thousands of years ago. As seen in Chp.1, it is found on the IVC remains. A rangoli like loop arrangement with a left-handed Swastika to its left is also seen in one of the seals.

The Celtic people, considered to be ancient people of Europe used this symbol on their shields. It was used to ward off evil spirits. Similar patterns are common in Egypt and in the Sumerian civilization where they are known to have had a talismanic significance.

Single continuous lines intricately woven are believed to be efficacious charms for warding off evil. These patterns are frequently found in temples of South India like Shri Cheluva Narayanaswamy temple at Melkote, carvings on pillars from Basrur in Karnataka, the gopura walls of Acharapakkam village about 100 kms south of Madras.

Beej Akshara or Mantra

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357 Gosta, op.cit., p.97.

358 Cirlot, op.cit., p.165.
The Sanskrit word ‘mantra’ is a form of word or sound which is believed to have a magical effect when uttered with intent. Essentially, the mantra is a sound – a vibration. The most potent mantras are those embodied in a ‘seed’ or in monosyllabic (beej-akshara) form and such seed mantras are held to be the quintessence of complex teachings. Basically the seed mantra must be one that can be prolonged indefinitely when voiced, and because of this requirement such mantras are generally built around the vowel sounds or the humming sounds, such as ‘m’ or ‘n’, all of which can be sustained when uttered. The beej mantras like Hrim, Klim or Hrun are meant to give added strength to the principle mantra like Aum and are to be understood only as variations of this principle mantra.\(^{359}\)

In Maharashtra, there is a tradition of beginning the rangoli by drawing an Omkar or Shreekar syllable, generally at the top centre. Also in Maharashtra as in South India women follow the tradition of drawing the rangolis representing the particular day of the week in front of the Gods. These rangolis have the ‘beej-aksharas’ or ‘beej-mantras’ meant for that particular day of the week written in a corresponding symbolic figure. The beej-mantras- Hrim, Klim, Shrim, Ain, Stram and so on are associated with every day of the week and drawn in rangoli (illustrated in Chp.3). These are considered to be magical syllables used to bring some circumstances under control. The Saundaryalahari mentions such tantric designs with the associated beej-aksharas. It is believed that if one draws the seminal letters with the appropriate designs, repeating the relevant mantra or shloka and wears the talisman with the same designs inscribed, one is rewarded with wealth and success in any task undertaken.

These mantras or spells and the associated beej-akshara are believed to have their origins in the Atharva Veda. Various Puranas also enjoin the use of magical syllables for various purposes. The sound Hrim if uttered in the morning on the fore-head of a woman, she is brought under control.\(^{360}\) The beej-aksharas like Hrim and Krom are present in the Jain yantras too.


\(^{360}\) Ibid., p.874.
Beej-akshara awakens the respective deity; a mantra without beej-akshar is weak and fruitless. For e.g.

Aim: beej-mantra representing Sarasvati, purpose acquiring knowledge and wisdom, mastery over words and power of speech.361

The sound –‘im’ in beej-mantra ‘klim’ symbolizes Kamakala-union of kama & kala, i.e. Shiva and Lalita.362

The beej-akshara ‘Shrim’ is also known as Lakshmi beej as it represents Goddess Lakshmi.363

Letters, in all cultures, have a symbolic significance, sometimes in a two-fold sense corresponding to both their shape and their sound. Letter symbolism probably derives from primitive pictograms and ideographs.364

The beej-mantra Aum also named Brahmbeej or Brahmavidyamantra is the most celebrated of all beejs. It is believed to be the visual depiction of the root mantra Aum, from which all matter and space originates. It is most pronounced sacred sound-symbol or nada-brahman. All the Vedic mantras are the product of this monosyllable which, it is believed, existed before the world was created. It is referred to as supreme mantra of Hindu scriptures. It is placed at the beginning of most Hindu texts as a sacred exclamation to be uttered at the beginning and end of a reading of the Vedas or previously to any prayer or mantra. The syllable is mentioned in all the Upanishads, specially elaborated upon in the Taittiriya, Chandogya and Mandukya Upanishad.

361 Gosta, op.cit., p.7.
362 Ibid., p.121.
363 Ibid., p.149.
The word *Aum* consists of three alphabets of which *A-kara* means form or shape like earth, trees, or any other object, *U-kara* means formless or shapeless like water, air or fire and *Ma-kara* means neither shape nor shapeless (but still exists) like the dark matter in the Universe.

From this sound-symbol, as the centre, the universe of words and things emanates as a spiral text. The concept of the sound *Aum* is a combination of what are called the three *matras*, A, U and M. The letters correspond to the geometrical figures semi-circle, straight line and point. The A, semi-circular, represents the revolving tendency (*rajas*) red in colour, the condensing form of the universe. The U, straight line, represents the tendency toward concentration (*sattva*) white in colour, the cosmic intellect. The M, a point, represents the tendency toward disintegration (*tamas*) black in colour, the casual substratum. This one syllable is formed of eight subtle sound elements: A is the first, U is the second, M the third. The nasalization (*bindu*) is the fourth, its sound (*nada*) is the fifth, its duration (*kala*) is the sixth, its vibration in time (*kalatita*) is the seventh. In addition to these, its timeless resonance is the eighth.³⁶⁵

A-represents *Brahma*, therefore creation, U- *Vishnu*- maintenance, M-*Shiva*- destruction, together symbolizing *Trimurti*. It leads to realization, liberation from bondage to the attainment of supreme reality.³⁶⁶

The *beej-askshara* ‘*shree*’ denotes goddess *Lakshmi*.

*Kalash* (pot) - The *Purna kumbha* or the *Purna kalasha* is the commonest of all auspicious symbols used in Indian art throughout history. It is a symbol of abundance, fertility and is one of the *ashtamangalas*.³⁶⁷ It is supposed to be the


harbinger of good fortune and success in life and is thus frequently drawn in rangoli.

The earliest reference to Purna Kumbha is in the Rigveda where the pot is full of water and appears to be connected with Indra, the god of rain, who brought in agricultural prosperity. The worship of the Kalasha is indicated in a hymn- ‘Etani bhadra kalasha Kryama, Kuru shravana dadato maghani’. References to Purna Kumbha as one of the auspicious (mangala) symbols are found in the Hindu, Buddhist and Jain canons.

The Katha-sarit-sagara equates the kumbha or ghata to the womb. According to D.D. Kosambi, this linkage explains why a fertility pot (ghata-sthapan) is established during Navaratra festival. Seed-grain is planted in the pot as a symbol of fertility.

The kalasha or the purna-ghata present in all Brahmanical or non-Brahmanical ceremonies represents the womb and the fertilizing waters of life. A sculpture from Nagarjunakonda depicts the lower portion of a female form in a sitting posture with legs doubled up and wide apart and feet pointing outwards. The bifurcated lower portion of the vulva is very prominent, while the area between the broad belt below the navel and the upper portion of the vulva is used to make a purna-ghata vessel, highly decorated with an ornamental belt around it. In other words it depicts the lower portion of a nude pregnant woman and the elevation of the womb is represented by the ghata or jar.

The seeds planted and sprouted in the kalasha enact a fertility rite which is imparted through magic or contagion. These bundles often represent Mother Goddesses and ensure fertility, progeny and material

367 Gosta, op.cit., p.229.
368 Rai Govind Chandra, op.cit., p.4.
370 Ibid., loc.cit.
prosperity. The *kumbha* as representation of mother goddess still survives in many south Indian festivals.

References of people placing *Purna Kumbha* at the doors of their houses are found in the various *Puranas* and also in the *Gatha-Saptashati* of Hala.

As per the prevalent practices, the *Purna Kumbha* is decorated with the auspicious signs like *Swastika* and filled with water. The leaves of five trees, the *Ashvattha*, the *vata*, the *Amra*, the *Panasa* and the *Bakula* are placed in its mouth on which a bowl of rice with a coconut on top is placed. It is a prayer for immortality as well as for an enriched, fulfilled life. The *Siddhchakra yantra* of the Jains is in the shape of eight-petal lotus, enclosed in a *kumbha* form which is attributed in anthropomorphic analogy with a pair of eyes.

The motif of the *Purna Kumbha* is seen in the carvings of the Ellora and Ajanta caves and also at Sanchi and Bharhut stupas.

Among the Warlis, the goddess *Palaghata* (*pal*-plants, *ghata*-pot) is synonymous with the symbol of the pot overflowing with plants. The auspicious circles drawn by the Warlis at the time of child-birth and wedding are always accompanied by pots made of mud which are placed alongside these circles as an intensification of auspiciousness.\(^{371}\)

**Lamp** - The lamp symbolizes the dispelling of ignorance. Philosophically, the upward movement of the flame denotes the path to wisdom and the path to divinity.

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Dhvaja (flag, banner) - Dhvaja is the orange or red banner flown above temples, at festivals and in processions. It is a symbol of victory and self-assertion. Its color betokens the sun's life-giving glow. It has a specific importance in the social and religious life of the ancients. The custom goes back to the Rigveda, wherein dhvaja was used in wars to ward off evil and hurdles and to invoke divine blessings. There is an indication that Indra was depicted in a symbolic form on the banner.

Agni Purana says that by the installation of a dhvaja, evil powers like ghosts etc. vanish and the installer stays in the world of Lord Vishnu for countless years. It also says that the flag of the banner is Prakriti and the staff Purusha. It was necessary to hoist a banner with figures of weapons on royal buildings. Similarly Sun, Moon and Garuda should be shown on the flag.

Weapons and attributes of Gods

Trishula (trident) – An attribute of Shiva, this symbol is the royal scepter of the Shaiva religion and believed to be a symbol of Shiva’s rule on heaven, earth and nether land.

Its triple prongs betoken desire, action and wisdom. It represents the three energy channels (nadis) of the Kundalini Shakti - ida, pingala and sushumna; gunas- sattva, rajas and tamas; and also believed to be the destroyer of the tri-dosh (vata, pitta, kaph) from the body. It symbolizes the three divine functions of creation, preservation and destruction.

It is a weapon against evil, symbol of magical nature which probably originated in the Indus Valley Civilization. In tantrism, it is an exorcising instrument, a magical wand to conjure power

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372 Dange, Ashvatthachi Pane, op.cit., p.161.
374 Ibid., p.74.
over demons.\textsuperscript{375} In order to ward off evil powers, a \textit{trishul} using mixture of \textit{rangoli} powder and ashes is drawn in front of the deity.

\textit{Gada} (mace) – An attribute of Vishnu, it is a Vaishnava symbol denoting bravery and intelligence. It is considered to be a symbol of strength, destroyer of evil powers and protector of good.\textsuperscript{376}

\textit{Dhanushya – baan} (bow and arrow) - The bow and arrow constitute the classical Indian weapon of warfare, from the \textbf{Vedic period}. One of the attributes of Rama, it stands for authority, power and also concentration.

\textit{Damru} - The two triangles of the \textit{damru} symbolizes the past, present and future.\textsuperscript{377} It is a symbol of music. It is the place of origin of knowledge and speech. It is believed that Shankar passed on the \textit{beej-mantra} of grammar to Panini through the \textit{damru}.

\textsuperscript{375} Gosta, \textit{op.cit.}, p.305.

\textsuperscript{376} \textit{Ibid.}, p.86.

\textsuperscript{377} Vatsyayan, \textit{op.cit.}, p.19.
Shankha (conch) – An attribute of Vishnu, it means ‘naad’. It is said to be the brother of Lakshmi as both of them emerged from the churning of the ocean. The power of the Shankha is to bestow opulence and to grant wishes. We find it for instance as an attribute of the god Kubera, giver of riches and grantor of wishes.378

Vishnu has a conch called Panchajanya and Arjuna has one called Devadatta.379

In the centre of the Shankha resides moon, Varuna in the womb, Prajapati at the backside and Saraswati in the front.

According to Mackanzie, the conch-shell is considered to be an auspicious object due to its spiral shape and used as a charm in various Hindu rites, especially to produce a sound by blowing through it.

In tantric rituals the shankha is worshipped and held in high esteem. It is generally believed that the conch shell keeps away evil spirits and saves mankind from calamities.

In the classical dance forms of Bharatnatyam, Kathak, Odissi etc., the shankha is a common mudra created by joining both the hands to create the impression of a shell.

378 Bosch, op.cit., p.116.
379 B.A. Gupte, op.cit., p. xx.
Ancient epics, tantric texts, sacred and secular literature like Kautilya’s *Arthashastra*, all eulogise the *shankha*.

The prevalence of the *Shankha* motif in the *rangoli* is indicative of the magical beliefs associated with the form or shape of the object, i.e. winding motion brings forth creation. Its association with Vishnu gives it a religious connotation. It is a popular motif in Bengal and Orissa. In ancient times, the beginning of a sailor’s journey was marked by a ceremony wherein the women bid farewell to their seafaring kinsmen with an *aarti* and blowing of conch shells. In Bengal, it is still common to see young girls waving conches at the onset of *Bangobda*, the Bengali New Year. Puri in Orissa is also called the *samkha kshetra* as its geographical alignment resembles a conch shell. The raised platform on which the deities, Jagannath, Baladeva and Subhadra are seated is called the *samkhanavi mandal*. *Shankha* is an important motif in the traditional textiles of Orissa and the Kantha embroidery of Bengal.

The medicinal value of *shankha* is great and it is known as *uparasa* in Ayurveda or the Vaidya *shastras*.

The *shankha* is a recurring motif in sculpture. In Bharhut, Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda, panels depicting *shankha* are found. In the Ajanta paintings, figures holding or blowing the *shankha* are seen.

Shell script or *shankha-lipi*, a cursive script the characters of which bear apparent similarity to the shape of a *shankha* is found on some inscriptions. Hence the name was coined by James Princep who discovered it. Inscriptions written in the so-called ‘shell characters’ are found in different parts of India,
including Ajanta caves and also Indonesia. Some scholars believe that there must have been an impact of *tantrik* or folk beliefs on the shell script inscriptions.\(^{380}\)

**Vegetative and animal motifs:**

Besides the above mentioned symbols, the plant and animal motifs play an important role in this art. These motifs depicted naturally or symbolically represent particular forces or qualities embodied in some aspect of creation, evolution, dissolution. These are symbols of fertility and procreation or the cosmic life force and regeneration and all of them are in one way or the other, ‘symbols of life’ and therefore highly auspicious.

**Animal motifs**

*Naga (cobra)* —Naga is worshipped as a deity as early as in IVC and since then in all Indian religions. It is believed that the cult of *naga* has aboriginal tribal connections. In Hinduism, *naga* are said to be descendants of *Kashyapa* and *Kadru* and regarded as chief enemies of *Garuda*. *Naga* is also associated with Vishnu and his incarnations and also Shiva and Ganapati and is therefore an auspicious symbol. In Jainism it is associated with Jina Parshvanath, who has a serpent hood.

Since the ancient past *naga* represented the cult of serpent worshippers, the ruler of underworld or *Patal*. In this cult, *naga* (the masculine) and *nagin* (the feminine) are worshipped widely.

The *nagas*, having access to the underworld mystical source of life and guarding the unlimited treasures there, are considered threshold deities. Describing the *Garbhodana* ceremony or the inception

ceremony of a Hindu temple, Stella Kramrisch says that—“on an auspicious night, the Garbha vessel, in the form of a casket, is lowered to the prescribed level of the foundation. On its floor the Serpent Ananta, the Endless is drawn. On the hood of Ananta the Garbha-casket has its place. Here the casket represents the earth.”\(^{381}\) She also relates the origin of the word Nagara to ‘naga’ as “the meaning of Nagara is Universe (Visva). The temple, the Universe in a likeness, is Nagara for it rests on the naga, who supports the Universe and is Shesha, the Remainder.”\(^{382}\) According to a Rigveda hymn, the earth is addressed as sarpa-rajni, i.e. the queen of serpents.\(^{383}\)

The snake rites are performed predominantly in the rainy season (Shravana onwards) when driven from their habitat they dwell amongst men. The association of snake with rains lies in the belief that it is the harbinger of water. The sensuous, winding wave-like movement of the snake must have further found visual correspondence and identification. Thus, it is not surprising to find snakes shrines and votive slabs worshipped near rivers, ponds and lakes. They, as controller of water, are both water-confining and water-bestowing.

As impregnating the Mother Earth, they are popularly associated with Mother Goddesses and considered to be bestowers of fertility and progeny and dispeller of sterility. The snake, the pot and dots combined are a popular representation of the Mother Goddess in Andhra.

Stones dedicated to snakes (naga-kalas) are frequently seen under sacred trees such as the peepal, the banyan or the neem tree and in the vicinity of temple tanks and in sacred groves, mainly in South India. Such stones are usually offered by women who desire

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\(^{381}\) Kramrisch, op.cit., p.128.

\(^{382}\) Ibid., p.288.

\(^{383}\) Vishvanath Narayan Mandlik “Serpent worship in Western India. The Naga-panchami Holiday as it is now observed; Serpent Worship, the Nagas and Sarpas”, *Journal of the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol.IX, No.XXVI., 1867-70, p.188.
children. On these stones are representations of snake couple, entwined in the act of copulation and many times enclosing a small figure, mainly of Krishna, which is an allusion to the child desired. The efficacy of naga-kalas is enhanced if placed under tree-couples (peepal and neem or mango and neem) ensuring increased fertility. The mystery of having no children is referred to as ‘sarpa-dosham’.  

*Narayana-Nagabali or the sacrifice to the Narayana-naga* is performed in order to secure progeny.

The fertility and procreation contingents of the serpent divinity's function, also gives prominence to the erotic dimension of this very function, so evident in the entwined serpent pair motif in sculptural images and *rangoli* patterns.

Iconographical evidence testifies to numerous female snake divinities and serpentine figures, not only in well-known temples but also in forgotten village shrines, as in Buddhist and Jaina art and in Mohenjo-Daro seals. In one of the seals a deity is seen in yogic posture, flanked by adoring worshippers and the towering shapes of upward-coiling snakes.

The cult of *Manasa*, the goddess of snakes, probably originated in Bengal and is widely respected even today. *Manasa* is a Goddess of fertility, and may be prevailed upon to cure snake-bites. The rituals related to the goddess enjoin drawing of the *nagamandalas* in coloured powders. Similar ritual as discussed in earlier chapters, are performed in South Karnataka and Kerala.

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385 Mandlik, *op.cit., loc.cit.*

Nagas are also endowed with the healing touch, the belief rooted in the medical properties ascribed to its skin. They also operate as donors of prosperity and opulence, grantors of wishes, owners and guardians of valuable treasures.\textsuperscript{387} The spectacle marks on the cobra’s head are supposed to be a half Swastika.

The polyvalent characteristics of the snake have not only led to its association with cure, life, rebirth and immortality but also with disease, death and destruction. Due to its casting of its skin it symbolizes rejuvenation and as such it is worshipped as a tutelary deity.\textsuperscript{388}

It is also a symbol of kundalini power, the cosmic energy coiled and slumbering within man.

The snake is widely tattooed on the body, a practice which traces its origin in sympathetic magic, which is supposed to protect people so marked.\textsuperscript{389} This practice continues in rural India even today.

Nagamudra, resembling hood of snake is a hasta-mudra in Indian classical dances. There is also a yogic posture named Sarpasana.\textsuperscript{390}

Apart from the benevolent attributes, the most malevolent aspect of the snake is its association with death – the bite that causes instantaneous death. Their wrath is identified with the wrath of the ancestors.

The worship of nagas is mentioned in the Bhavishya P. where the nagas are enjoined to be drawn on a wall or a plate, the word used is alikhyā.\textsuperscript{391}

\textsuperscript{387} Bosch, op.cit., p.136.

\textsuperscript{388} J. Ph. Vogel, Indian Serpent-Lore or The Nagas in Hindu Legend and Art, Varanasi, 1972, p.277.


\textsuperscript{390} Gosta, op.cit., p.187.

On *Nagapanchami*, many Hindus, all over India, compose picture of seven cobras along with other auspicious symbols in front of the houses and on the walls and worship it. The diverse folklore that supports the celebration of *Nagapanchami* narrates the revival of brothers who die of snake bite, on appeasement and propitiation by their respective sisters who, among other things, offer milk to the snake. The *Bhavishya P.* assures safety and ‘*abhayadan*’ (protection) with the observance of *Nagapanchami*. The *Grihyasutras* prescribe *Sarpabali* to be performed on the full moon day of *Shravana*. The annual rite is performed for two specific reasons, namely, honouring of snakes and warding off any evil from them. On *Alekhyasarpapanchami* or *Bhadrapada panchami* colourful *nagas* are drawn and worshipped.\(^{392}\)

*Nagabandha* or *nagamandala*, i.e. frieze of *nagas* on a temple are commonly found in temples of Maharashtra and Southern India. It is seen on the pillar of *Vithoba* temple at Pandharpur and also on the temple doorways of *Shri Dnyaneshwar* temple at Alandi. It is also seen in the sculptures at Elephanta, Ellora, and Kanheri caves. The temples in Tamilnadu like the *Nataraja* temple at Chidambaram, *Meenakshi* temple at Madurai, *Kamakshi Amman* temple at Kancheepuram and many others too have *nagamandalas* carved on the pillars. *Nagamandala* with Sanskrit *varnamala* written on it carved on a pillar at Bhoj-shala in Dhar, M.P.

\(^{392}\) *BSK, op.cit.*, 1962, Vol.1, p.495.
Fish - The use of fish motif for rangoli is common all over India. It is one of the naturalistic positive symbols of fertility, (the fish is believed to be a symbol of yoni probably due to its shape) abundance, conjugal happiness, providence and a charm against the evil eye. The silver fish ornament put by the ladies on the toes is a symbol of fertility.393

Fish are the easily gained food of all nations. As creatures of boundless liberty, not threatened by the flood, they appear as saviours in Indian myth, avatars of Vishnu and Varuna. In China, they are emblems of plenty & good luck.

Fish alpana, Bengal
The fish is considered as a symbol of good fortune among the Hindus and finds mention in the description of 108 auspicious signs in the Harivamsa. The Matsya-yugma is regarded as one of the ashtamangala chinha or eight auspicious signs by the Shvetambara Jains. It is the symbol of cupid’s banners who comes to worship the Jina after the defeat of the god of Love. The fish is also one of the auspicious symbols on the palm of Buddha in the Lalitavistara. The antiquity of this symbol cannot be doubted as we get representation of a fish in faience at Harappa and in ivory at Mohenjo-daro besides their representation on pottery and the seals. Similarly among the undeciphered semi-pictographic letters or words of the Indus valley we come across a sign which is almost in the form of a fish. Later we find it on the early punch-marked coins. According to Coomarswamy, this symbol was invested with amuletic value in the course of time and began to be used in various contexts.394

The fish motif finds a place of prominence in the Bengali alpanas and the Parsi chalk. Matsya padma, a pattern depicting a lotus surrounded by matsya-yugma is drawn at the time of wedding in Orissa.

393 Dange, Ashvathachi Pane, op.cit., p.237.
394 Rai Govind Chandra, op.cit., p.76.
Garuda (eagle) – It is a solar symbol. The mount (vahana) of Vishnu, it is said to be massive, large enough to block out the sun. Sworn enemy of the Garuda is invoked as a symbol of impetuous violent force, of speed, and of martial prowess. The altar for the Asvamedha sacrifice was made of the shape of Garuda.\textsuperscript{395} According to Vedic tradition, it is also important as a messenger, being the bearer of the soma from Indra.\textsuperscript{396}

Kasav or Kurma (tortoise / turtle) In rangoli the tortoise is commonly depicted in a hexagonal shape. In Indian mythology, it is one of the avatars of Vishnu, a mount of river goddess Yamuna and also a lanchana (cognizance) of certain Jain Yakshas and Tirthankaras. The tortoise symbolizes the Sun, the waters and is the Lord of creation in Vedic mythology. Because of its shape, the tortoise is regarded as a symbol of the three worlds; its lower shell is this terrestrial world, upper shell the sky and in between is the atmosphere. This concept is also seen in Chinese cosmology.\textsuperscript{397}

The tortoise is believed to carry the world on its back and its long life no doubt account for its appeal as longevity symbol. Kurma is able to withdraw its limbs within its shell. This imagery gives rise to the concept of tortoise as a model of self-restrained man, who has command over his indriyas (senses) and withdraws from sense objects.\textsuperscript{398}

\textsuperscript{395} P.V.Kane, \textit{op.cit.}, Vol.II, part II, 1941, p.1238.

\textsuperscript{396} Cirlot, \textit{op.cit.}, p.87.


\textsuperscript{398} \textit{Ibid.}, p.41.
Kurma being an emblem of stability is placed in the form of Kurma-shila in the foundation of buildings at the time of Vastu puja or worship of the deity of the site. Due to its support the building remains firm. The Shatpatha Brahmana mentions the practice of burying a tortoise in the lowest level at the piling of the altar.

It is a familiar sight to see a tortoise at the central place in a Hindu temple, either at the entrance, or in the centre of the main hall. The symbol traveled far and wide, and the Balanese Hindu temples, called Meru, show a large tortoise at the basement, with his feet, mouth and tail protruding out. The hexagon is a further symbol. Kashyapa or kurma is also a type of hasta-mudra.

Peacock – A beautiful bird who can eat snakes and therefore associated with power. It finds mention in Rigveda and Atharva veda with reference to its efficacy against poison, having to do with its function as a snake-killer. It is also closely associated with the approach of the monsoon. On account of its plumage, is believed to protect a person from the evil eye. It is also later regarded as bird of immortality and as a variety of the sun-bird.

In Hindu mythology, the patterns on its wings, resembling innumerable eyes, are taken to represent the starry firmament. It signifies love and beauty and is a vehicle of goddess Saraswati. In South India, peacock is known as Mayil and Kartikeya is always represented as mounted on it. Mayuramudra is a type of hastamudra.

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399 Ibid.

400 S.A. Dange, Cultural Sources from the Veda, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1977, p.84.

401 Cirlot, op.cit., p.239.
**Gandabherunda** – An imaginary bird represented by two birds having conjoint bodies. It is believed to be very strong and powerful of all the birds. In sculptural representation it is depicted holding an elephant in each of its beaks and paws. The *Padma P.* mentions the birds called *bharunda*, that are said to throw the dead in a crevice or a valley in the Uttarakaru country.\(^{402}\) A temple of *Gandabherunda* belonging to 2\(^{nd}\) century B.C. has been excavated at Takshila.\(^{403}\)

It is a royal symbol of the King of Mysore and also found on the coins of Vijayanagar Empire. Carved image of this bird is found in some caves of Karnataka and forts like Shiveneri and Raigad in Maharashtra. It is also seen on the Vidhansaudha of Bangalore. It is present on vehicles used in processions of images in south India.\(^{404}\) This motif is commonly depicted in the *rangoli* of Karnataka.

![Horse](image)

**Horse** – A symbol of power, energy, wealth and abundance. It also represents speed, movement, desire and passion. It is a vehicle of Sun, Moon, Venus and Jupiter and is also a symbol of royalty. In Hindu mythology it is one of the 14 jewels created by the churning of the ocean. In horse sacrifice, the horse was considered as the symbol of the sun.\(^{405}\)

**Owl** – From Vedic period owl or *uluka* is looked at as harbinger of ill-fortune.\(^{406}\) It is a bird of ill omen does not seem to be associated

\(^{402}\) Dange, *op.cit.*, Vol.1, p.127.


\(^{404}\) Gosta, *op.cit.*, p.89.

\(^{405}\) Dange, *Cultural Sources from the Veda, op.cit.*, p.83.

auspiciousness except in Bengal where it is depicted as Goddess Lakshmi’s vehicle. The owl associated with Lakshmi is also known as Pechaka and is worshipped in Bengal during Lakshmi Puja. Owl is a nocturnal bird and eats rodents in the field. Thus it protects the crops and therefore must have gained importance and acquired the status of being Lakshmi’s vehicle. It also symbolizes wisdom and intelligence because of its ability to foretell events. It is believed that the wealth provided by Lakshmi blinds the person and he takes to dishonesty and avarice. A wise person on seeing an owl with Goddess Lakshmi realizes the trap of wealth and its splendor. For such a person, the owl is the symbol of wisdom as the person uses the wealth for positive purposes. An owl is an indispensable part of the Lakshmi Poojan Alpana of Bengal. Interestingly, the owl is also sacred to the Greek goddess of learning, Athena and is even depicted on some Greco-Roman currency as a symbol of status, intelligence and wealth. An image of owl is carved in cave no.24 of Pandava leni near Nasik. It is seen as a Greek influence on Indian art.

**Butterfly** – Butterfly is a symbol of fertility. The fact that the butterfly lays large number of eggs and also the belief that the butterfly brings children supports its symbolism. In Bengal and Assam, the butterfly is called as Prajapati. In Indian mythology Brahma is also called as Prajapati. Probably because of this association, the butterfly is also believed to be the creator of the universe. It is considered to be a good omen for marriage in Bengal. In the invitation letters for marriages the picture of a butterfly is usually printed at the top. It is considered a good fortune if a butterfly enters the room of a bridegroom or the bride before their marriage. Prajapati Padma alpana is executed on the floor on the day of finalization of a proposal of marriage.

**Bulls** – Muscular and aggressive, the bull has long been an important symbol in many cultures. The importance of the bull is reflected in its appearance in the zodiac as Taurus, and its numerous appearances in mythology, where it is often associated with fertility. They appear in the cave paintings around the world and also on the seals of the IVC. In Hinduism a bull named Nandi, usually depicted as
seated, is worshipped as the vehicle of the god Shiva. Saint Basava (Kannada word for ‘Vrishabha’) of Karnataka is believed to be an incarnation of Nandi. On the new moon day of the month of Jyeshtha, celebrated as the festival of Basava in Karnataka, rangolis of twin Basavas or holy bulls are drawn and worshipped. This worship is the forerunner of a series of festivals of the year and the bulls usher in the ploughing season.

**Elephant** - Elephant is a symbol of strength, virility, wisdom, fertility, prosperity and royalty. It is one of the Hindu mangalas and is associated with Indra, the Vedic deity. It is seen on the seals of IVC. The elephant, mountains, clouds and the cobras were all believed to belong to one family and were thought to be born from water. It is believed that the *dig-gaja* or the elephants of the four quarters support the caryatids of the Universe, who support the dome-shaped shell of the firmament on their backs. This belief supports the depiction of elephants supporting the lintels of the Sanchi *toranas* and supporting the celestial world in the rock-cut temple of Kailashnath at Ellora and many South Indian temples.

The rangoli of elephant is drawn by young girls in Maharashtra, in the period when the Sun moves to the thirteenth constellation of the zodiac called *Hasta*, which means Elephant. The rainfall in this period is considered very beneficial for the rabbi crops and the farmers in Maharashtra look forward to these rains.

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Cow - The sanctity of the cow is perhaps the foremost sentiment of Hindus. It is natural that in a predominantly agricultural and pastoral country like India, cows were and to some extent still are, considered to be the real wealth of the people. In the Hindu world view, an offering of a cow or gau daan is considered the highest act of piety.

No havan or fire ritual is complete without the presence of panchgavya or the five gifts of the cow, namely milk, curds, ghee, gobar, and gau mutra.

In Maharashtra, on the day of Vasu-baras, a typical rangoli with a cow and its calf with the many auspicious symbols is drawn traditionally. Similarly, in Andhra Pradesh and Tamilnadu cow is drawn in the rangoli and worshipped on Sankranti festival corresponding to Pongal.

Swan (Hamsa) – Breath goes out with the sound Ha and enters again with the sound Sa. The living being is indeed always repeating the mantra Ham-Sa. Breathing is the rhythmic formula which is constantly said of itself. The Ham-Sa mantra is the “seed of the Universe”, the breath of life (prana-bija). Its visual symbol is the Hamsa, the royal mallard, celestial swan, who is the vahana of Brahman, the creator.410

Parrot: Vehicle of Kamadeva, deity of love and sex, the parrot symbolizes sensual desires and forms an important part of marriage decorations. The parrot is a love bird, and has special value as a charm in tattoos.411 It is one of the attributes of Goddess Meenakshi of Madurai in Tamilnadu.


Vegetative motifs:

*Kamal* (Lotus) - The Lotus is considered to be the most sacred flower and has great religious significance and many symbolic meanings. The faculty of bestowing life, fertility and wealth is attributed to the lotus-plant and its vital points.  

Rooted in the dark mud, the lotus plant grows up through the murky water to leaf and flower in the air and light, this growth represents the journey of the soul from the mud of materialism, through the waters of experience, to the arrival at enlightenment.

In Hindu mythology the lotus represents the female life principle, and is the symbol of the *yoni* or female generative organs. When the lingam or sacred phallus is depicted, it is often shown resting on or surrounded by lotus petals. Such a fertility goddess appears later as *Lakshmi*, the consort of Vishnu, who emerged out of a lotus which sprang from his forehead; she is also known as *Padma*. In the form of Kali, she holds the lotus symbol of regeneration in one hand.

As per *Skanda P.*, the lotus named *Shatapatrika* or of hundred petals is said to have emerged when Brahma created the various types of flowers.

According to Stella Kramrisch, the *yantric* character of the lotus pedestal is pronounced by the *Vishnudharmottara*, which states “that god only and no other should be worshipped on lotus by contemplating whom in mind it was set up.”

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412 Bosch, *op.cit.*, p.49.

The lotus has been a symbol of the womb. In the ritual of fire-kindling, the clod on which fire is to be placed is to be placed on a lotus-leaf. There is also a myth about the association of the fire and the lotus. It is said that the first fire was kindled by atharvan on the lotus-leaf. In the context of the Agnicayana rite, the clod of clay is placed on the lotus-leaf that is placed at the base of the first layer in the altar. Thus, the lotus stands at the base of the whole cosmos, of which the Agnicayana is the imitation. In later symbolism, the lotus stands at the base of Gods, indicating the belief that it was at the very base of the cosmos. The lotus-fire symbolism works up further, and in the puranic records we have a regular altar in the shape of the lotus.415

The thought that all the creation takes place from a universal womb which is in the shape of a lotus is also reflected in Indian architecture. Here the lotus flower-plan is utilized for the foundation or the basement of the building construction.416 Lotus-shape village is mentioned in the Manasara.417 Padma is also a significant yantra or mandala in the Tantric doctrine, on which all the magical creations are built upon.418

The later part of the creation myth from the Bhagavata P. states that from Vishnu, the Padma-nabha or ‘lotus-navelled’, issued a lotus on which sat Brahma, the ‘lotus-born’ Creator. The visual imagery depicting the birth of the universe reflects the biological process of embryonic maturation and birthing, where the lotus stalk represents the umbilical cord and the flower, the womb from which the universe is generated by Brahma. Thus the lotus symbolizes self-creation.

414 Stella Kramrisch, “Introduction to Vishnudharmottara”, in Barbara Miller Stone (ed.) Exploring India’s Sacred Art: Selected Writings of Stella Kramrisch, Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, New Delhi, 1994, p.272.


418 Ibid., p.203.
The lotus has much importance in Hindu, Buddhist and Jaina pantheons.

In 8-petalled lotus with red or white colour, Shiva is said to be invoked. Offering such lotuses or keeping them would mean gaining all knowledge and mastery over Shaktis. The Puranas further mention drawing of such a lotus at the time of the victory-bath for a king or Jayabhishekha. Brahmanda P. also states that various Shaktis reside in a 16-petalled lotus.\(^{419}\)

Lotus is the common motif in the rangoli all over India. It signifies the universal life-force and the opening of the consciousness of the divine. The Hriday Kamala, the centralized lotus motif or the sahasradala padma, the thousand petalled lotus is commonly depicted in aripan of Mithila.

In the richly significant gestures of the Hindu dance, the lotus is a recurring symbol, and in yoga the chakras or centres of super-physical energy are known as the six lotuses, the seventh or supreme chakra, the sahasrara, being the thousand-petalled lotus.

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\(^{419}\) Dange, op.cit., Vol. III, p.969.
Lotus is mentioned in the *Rigveda* and gets its mention with increasing frequency in later *Samhitas*. In *Atharvaveda* the human heart is compared to the lotus and the *Pancavimsa Brahmana* speaks of lotus flower as ‘born of the light constellations’.\(^{420}\)

The earliest representation of lotus in art is found among the flowers adorning the head of a statue of an earth mother figure (c 3000 BC) discovered at Mohenjo-Daro in the Indus valley.\(^{421}\)

Instances of the lotus motif appear in Buddhist art from 200 B.C. onwards, mainly seen as ornamental patterns on the gateways of Sanchi, Bharhut Amravati and Gaya. According to the Lalitavistara, 'the spirit of the best of men is spotless, like the new lotus in the (muddy) water which does not adhere to it', and, according to esoteric Buddhism, the heart of the beings is like an unopened lotus: when the virtues of the Buddha develop therein the lotus blossoms. Depicting the image of a divinity either standing or in a seated posture in a lotus flower is considered sacred in Indian iconography. This practice is also seen in Buddhist iconography and Buddha as *Avlokiteshvara* is depicted seated on lotus flower or shown with a lotus flower in his hand (*Padmapani*). According to the iconographic representations, showing a lotus flower in the hand of deities became an essential feature denoting the procreative power of the gods.\(^{422}\)

The 8-petalled lotus depicted on the Yadava coins seemed to be a well-known symbol during that period. In the field of numismatics the gold coins of Yadava are known as *Padmatankas*, owing to the lotus symbol on them. These coins also have conch and *Shri* on them.\(^{423}\) On the coins of Guptas, *Lakshmi* is depicted as seated on a lotus and holding a lotus in her hand.\(^{424}\)

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There are references in the *abhanga* of Sant Namadeva about the 8-petalled lotus in connection with the *rangoli* drawn of Ashtadala Kamal.\(^{425}\) Krishna is described to have an *Ashtadala Kamal* on his feet.\(^{426}\)

The shape of the lotus flower too is significant, as it has a multi-layered petal structure with one layer opening into the other, something which ‘resembles’ the Sun who emanates brilliant rays from its central core. Here the resemblance or correspondence to the form or shape makes the lotus flower a potent symbol capable of representing certain aspects of the Sun, which in this case is its radiating nature.

The *Surya* appears as an object of worship on the early tribal coins of India. The symbolic representation of the sun is either in the form of lotus or wheel and its numerous variants. Wheel is designated by scholars as solar symbol.

*Divakarvrata* is performed by drawing twelve-petalled lotus with the names of sun written on each petal. This lotus is worshipped with *Vedic mantras* for gaining knowledge and prosperity.\(^{427}\)

A lotus representing the sun in the centre surrounded by zodiac signs is seen in a *Shaura-pith* from A.P.

At Gangaikondacholapuram in the Trichinopoly district of Tamilnadu, the planets are represented in a monolithic car having their top a lotus representing the sun.

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Shri-fal (Coconut) – Shri-fal or the fruit of God, is one of the main offerings on any occasion. No gift is believed to be complete unless accompanied by a coconut. In absence of idols, it represents the gods, therefore immersed in the sea or in flowing water. Breaking a coconut before a shrine is the ego's shattering to reveal the unseen grace in our lives. It is a sign of plenty coming from the tree known as 'Kalpavruksh' in Sanskrit. None of its parts goes waste. A person is reminded to be resourceful and useful in all walks of life. Coconut is supposed to be unseen, untouched and hence is associated with purity. It is also believed that coconut offering replaced blood sacrifices which were common in ancient times.\textsuperscript{428}

Bilva or Bel or the Aegle marmelos – It is the embodiment of Lord Shiva and is one of the sacred tree symbols of Hinduism. Its fruit, flowers and leaves are all sacred to Shiva. Planting this tree around home or temple is sanctifying, as is worshipping a Linga with bilva leaves and water. Its trifoliate symbolizes the three functions- creation, preservation and destruction of Lord Shiva as well as his three eyes. The five portions of the tree, the root, bark, leaf, flowers and fruit, all have great medicinal value and are used to cure snakebites. As per an ancient belief, those who wear an amulet of Bilva, their offspring is not harmed at the time of birth and misfortune never invades their house. Lingayats plant a bel tree on their graves.

Tulsi Vrindavan or Ocimum basilicum or Ocimum sanctum - One of the holiest and most useful plants, tulsi since time immemorial has remained an integral part of Hindu way of life. It is planted on a little mound of sand or on a square pillar of about four feet

\textsuperscript{428} D.D. Kosambi, \textit{op.cit.}, p.74, ft.nt.
in height, hollow at the top with its four sides facing the four points of the compass. This structure is called the Tulsi Vrindavan. Hindus, especially Vaishnavaites consider it a peculiarly meritorious act to carefully watch and cultivate the plant. It is praised as destroying all the evils and it is considered sinful to break its branches. It is believed that in the roots of tulsi are contained all places of pilgrimages; its centre contains all the deities and its upper branches all the Vedas. Hindu women worship tulsi every morning and evening and draw rangoli around it.

The Prasad of Lord Krishna is a leaf of tulsi. Tulsi Mahimamritya records that if a dying person gets tulsi water he goes to Vishnu Loka. It is popularly believed that tulsi even wards off the messengers of Yama, the ruler of the dead, who would not enter a house containing a sprig of tulsi.

The Puranas enjoin that one dying in a garden of tulsi or with tulsi leaf placed in his mouth at the time of death attains moksha even if guilty of crores of sins. The tulsi is grown on the graves of members of certain communities.

However, tulsi worship is not limited to man’s theosophical aspirations alone as tulsi’s curative effect has been widely acknowledged by the Ayurvedic system of medicine, based on the Atharvaveda. Tulsi leaves are considered as a potential preventive medicine. It has a sweet aromatic scent and act as a cough elixir. One or two leaves swallowed after meals helps digestion. Since long there is a practice among Hindus to put leaves in cooked food to prevent germination and in stored water to prevent bacteria formation during solar or lunar eclipse. The tulsi plant possesses many curative properties and is an antidote to snake-venom. It is acknowledged as a great destroyer of mosquitoes and other pests.

On the day of Tulasi-vivaha, an image of Hari and Tulsi and worshipped and then married. A rangoli of Tulsi Vrindavan is drawn. Many such Rangolis show the plan or top view of the structure of the Tulsi Vrindavan.

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Tree motifs: In India, tree worship belongs to the hoary past. It dates back to pre-Aryan times. Seals from the Indus valley have identifiable images of trees.

**Kalpavriksha or Kalpataru**

The *Kalpavriksha* also called the ‘tree of life’ is the wish fulfilling tree, the tree of plenty, in Indian mythology. The reference to this tree is found in the earliest Vedic literature. The adoration of this sacred plant is deeply rooted in all the religions of the world, and it is found associated with almost every ancient sanctuary as visible manifestations of the Divine Spirit. The belief that god resides in this sacred Tree is widely spread among the primitive people and has been passed on to the most sophisticated religions in one form or the other. It is attested by the reliefs on the seals of Mohenjo-daro, Harappa and Chanhu-daro. For the unreasoning mind; it is the symbol of life, fortune and of knowledge.\(^4\)\(^{30}\) *Kalpavriksha* motif is found in carvings at Bharhut and Sanchi.

**Banyan tree:** A *mandana* drawn on the occasion of *Bar Poojani Amavasya* in Rajasthan depicts *Bar* or Banyan tree in its realistic form showing plinth, roots, trunk, branches, fruits, birds, a monkey and a human figure at its base. The *peepul*, banyan and other kinds of fig trees are considered haunted by the spirit of a Brahmin who died without imparting his knowledge to another.\(^4\)\(^{31}\) Probably the human figure stands for the spirit of the Brahmin.

Women in Maharashtra worship the banyan tree on the *vata-pournima* day, the full-moon day in the month of *Jyeshtha*. This practice is associated with the *Puranic* story of Savitri who, with her strong determination rescues her husband from the clutches

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\(^4\)\(^{30}\) Rai Govind Chandra, *op.cit.*, p.103.

\(^4\)\(^{31}\) Archana Sastri and Gita Narayanan (ed.), *op.cit.*, p.60.
of death. It is believed that worshipping the banyan tree on this day averts widowhood.

**Creeper pattern and other vegetative motifs:**

The creeper patterns in *rangoli* signify fertility, growth and progress. In *alpanas*, *shankha-lata* or the conch-shell pattern and *champa-lata* are drawn. Creepers of man-made objects are also drawn such as shovel or *khunti-lata*, bangles or *banti-lata*, pearls or *mukta-lata* and many other objects are shown growing on the creeper. Sometimes the creeper patterns are referred to as *vansha-vel* which itself explains its significance.

*Karle* (bitter gourd) – A vegetable having medicinal value, it also symbolizes growth and fertility.

Repetitive chain patterns similar to the creeper patterns are also drawn in *rangoli*. These patterns signify continuity, creating a pleasing aesthetic effect. In function they are a decorative art motif.
Bharadi (ear of corn) is drawn around the main motif during Diwali. It is an emblem of fertility and an attribute of the sun.\textsuperscript{432} It symbolizes the idea of germination and growth and of the development of any feasible potentiality.

Sometimes seasonal fruits and vegetables are also drawn in the rangoli like the kairi (raw mango) drawn in the mandana at the time of Holi and Gangaur, signifying the mango season.

Prickly or thorny fruits and vegetables drawn in rangoli deserve a special mention. Prickly plants are useful guardians against evil in many lands, for eg. the thistle is a native protector of Scotland. Similarly, the pineapple finds a special place in the kolam drawn during Pongal festival.\textsuperscript{433} Also, in the mandanas of Rajasthan, motifs like Baingan ka binta (stem of brinjal) and Singhada ka chowk (chest-nuts) are drawn. Similarly Nimbu ki dali (stem of lemon plant) aipan is made in the Kumaon region. These vegetative forms are thorny by nature and thus serve the purpose of warding off evil. Rangoli using thorny motifs are generally made on the occasions of marriage and welcoming the bride. These are not drawn in a natural realistic manner. Rather they are drawn in such abstract and symbolic form that it is possible to identify these motifs only through minute and repeated observations. Many times it is the name of the design which gives clue about its form.

**Miscellaneous motifs:**

\textsuperscript{432} Cirlot, op.cit., p.89.

\textsuperscript{433} Pineapple is not indigenous to India, but it is a prickly plant and, as such, would serve to ward off evil influences.
Sometimes the motifs in the rangoli indicate the local customs pertaining to a particular festival, like in the mandanas for Diwali, Hira, eatables like papari, khur (hoofs of cattle), divata (lamp-stand), kalamdan (pen and ink-stand), hatri, baat (weights), tarazu (pair of scales), covering the trade paraphernalia and associated with Lakshmi-puja are drawn.

Likewise, in some alpanas of Bengal and rangoli of Maharashtra, women draw ornaments, vermillion container, comb, sarees, mirror, house etc. which they desire to possess.

These motifs are either drawn individually or are additions to the main symbols assigned to the festival which undoubtedly, remain unaltered.

**Significance of the motifs used in the Parsi chalk:**

**Fish**

It is a symbol of plenty and forms an important part of the diet. Among the Parsis, cooked fish, motifs of fish, replicas of fish, sweet meats made in the shape of fish are widely used for several auspicious occasions. The use of fish motif for Rangoli is common over India, particularly in Bengal and Bihar. However, the use of fish as a motif among the Parsis can be traced back to more than 2,500 years in ancient Iran. In a bas relief of Cyrus the Great at Pasargadae, not only his crown is adorned with fish, but there is also a relief depicting the lower half of a torso of a person, whose one leg is fish and another of a goat. Fish is buoyant, so it is the symbol of buoyancy and sprightliness.\(^{434}\)

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In earlier days, at the time of marriage procession, a fisherwoman was supposed to hold a fish near the bridegroom for good luck and get paid for her services.\footnote{436}{Jivanji Jamshedji Modi, \textit{Symbolism in the marriage ceremonies of different nations}, pub. not known, Printed at the Caxton Printing Works, Bombay, 1909, p.7.}

\textit{Ses} –

It is a wonderful collection of auspicious symbols kept in a tray. (like an \textit{aarti thali} of the Hindus). It is an indispensable part of any auspicious occasion. It contains the following main items:-

\textit{Paro:} It is a conical metallic container (generally silver) representing the mountain of sweetness. It represents the allegorical Mount Hara from which good spirits are believed to descend.\footnote{437}{Firoze M. Kotwal & Khojeste P. Mistree, “Protecting the Physical World” in Pheroza J.Godrej & Firoza Punthakey Mistree (ed.), \textit{A Zoroastrian Tapestry: Art, Religion and Culture}, Mapin Publishing Pvt. Ltd., Ahmedabad, 2002, p.341.} The present day metallic \textit{Paro} is a remembrance of the sweet (\textit{khadi sakar}) in the shape of \textit{Paro}, wrapped in green papers and used on auspicious occasion in Iran even today. \textit{Khadi sakar} and \textit{kharak} (dried date) is placed inside it. The ‘\textit{Agharni no larvo}’ prepared at the seventh or ninth month of pregnancy, is also a cone-shaped sweet-meat with sheets of beaten silver on it. In a way it is 'welcoming' the new child into the world with a \textit{Paro} of sweets.

\textit{Pigani:} It contains \textit{Kumkum} (Vermilion) for the \textit{tili} (red mark/tika) to be put on the forehead. The Parsis generally put a vertical mark on the forehead of the man and a round one on the forehead of the woman. The former signifies rays of the sun and hence energy, the later signifies the moon and hence beauty. It also signifies the gravitational force (friendship) between the sun and the moon, an important requirement for keeping life active, alive and in order. Also the sun

is seen as a fructifying agent, giving life, whereas the moon is seen as a conceiving agent receiving the rays of the sun. Rice is placed on to the *tili* as a sign of prosperity.

**Gulabaz**: Rose water is kept in it. It symbolizes the spread of fragrance and happiness. In Iran it was sprinkled on guests while welcoming them and chanting the words ‘*khush amadid*’. Even the shape of the *Gulabaz* is typically Persian and similar shaped containers are found in Arab countries even today.

Fish: Usually a replica in metal or *mova nee macchi* or a sweet set in fish moulds is used in the *Ses*.

**Divo**: If it is not possible to have a fire 24 hours of the day, Parsis adopt a substitute custom of having a *divo* (oil lamp) burning for 24 hours. A *divo* is generally referred to as a *dikro* or a son. As the son looks after the safety and security of the house and also brings in good things, so also an oil lamp (as a substitute of fire) prevents any evil from entering the house and attracts goodness and bounties to the house.

Coconut: It is a sign of plenty coming from the tree known as 'Kalpavruksh' in Sanskrit. None of its parts goes waste. A person is reminded to be resourceful and useful in all walks of life. Coconut is supposed to be unseen, untouched and hence is associated with purity.

Pomegranate: Use of pomegranate on auspicious occasions is a remnant of the Iranian influence on the Parsi ceremonies and eating habits. In fact the fruit has traveled to India from Iran.\(^{438}\)

The fruit stands for fertility as it is likened to the womb of nature with its hundreds of seeds. Its ruby colour is considered auspicious. The pomegranate being an evergreen plant is considered to be an emblem of immortality of the soul. It is also held as the symbol of prosperity, from the fact

that it contains number of grains within itself. On the initiation ceremony of Navroze, a pomegranate leaf is chewed and spat out as a part of ritual.\textsuperscript{439}

The fruit being a symbol for wisdom, pomegranate leaf is supposed to imbibe wisdom. When benedictions are recited upon a child during its investiture with the sacred shirt and thread, grains of pomegranate mixed with grains of rice and cocoa-kernels are sprinkled over it. It represents the vegetable creation and especially the fruit-growing trees. On auspicious occasions, Betel leaves (\textit{paan}), betel nut (\textit{sopari}), rice, dates and other dry fruits, turmeric sticks, a small container of curd, garland of flowers are some symbols of prosperity and fertility which are also kept in the \textit{Ses}. Sometimes a small container of salt is included.

\textbf{Fire altar with tongs and ladle –}

Zoroastrians worship all the natural elements but the most important is fire. Fire as a symbolic representation of all pervasive energy is a symbol of Ahura Mazda. It is a natural object, to remind the Parsis of Him. Thus it is understandable that it plays a very important role in the religious lives of Zoroastrians. It symbolizes Self-sacrifice, immortality of the soul - by its flaming shooting upwards, opposing darkness of all kinds. The respect and reverence given to fire often referred to as son of Ahura Mazda is evident in many Gujarati songs and Monajats composed in honour of fire. In the pattern depicting the holy fire or the altar with fire, the ritual ladle and tongs are invariably present at the sides. These are used by the priests who attend the holy fire.

\textit{Swastika-}

\textsuperscript{\footnotesize K.N. Seervai and B.B. Patel (ed.), \textit{op.cit}, p.50.}
Like the Hindus, the Parsis also use the *Swastika* pattern in their *chalks*. The *Swastika* is an ancient Aryan symbol of the sun, and Zoroastrians revere the sun as a form of fire energy.

**Horse-shoe —**

One of the motifs commonly used in the Parsi *Chalk* is the Horseshoe. Horseshoes are considered a **good luck charm** in many cultures. The shape, fabrication, placement, and manner of sourcing are all important. A common tradition is to hang or nail a horseshoe on a door at the entrance of the house with the two ends pointing up or down. Traditions do differ as to the direction of the horseshoe. In some cultures, the horseshoe is hung points down (so the luck pours onto you); in others, it is hung points up (so the luck doesn't fall out); still in others it doesn't matter so long as the horseshoe has been used (not new), was found (not purchased), and can be touched. But it is commonly believed in all the traditions round the world that luck is contained in the horseshoe and can pour out through the ends.

**Rooster —**

A white rooster in a *chalk* is the protective bird associated with the *Yazata Srosh*. The crowning of the rooster is said to frighten away the Evil spirit. The cock is held sacred to *Yazata Srosh* and is never killed or eaten after it has begun to crow. The widespread belief is that the crow of the cock scares evil spirits.  

Orthodox Zoroastrian would never kill a cock of any colour since he is the bird of *Srosh*, who crows to put an end to demon-haunted night and to bring in God’s new day; and white being the Zoroastrian colour, a white cock is especially holy.  

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Parsi children were made to wear *jhablas* with rooster motifs embroidered on it to ward off evil. Even today, some Parsi ladies put a *chalk* of white cock on the day holy to the *Yazata Srosh*. 