In the study of art, symbols and the contexts in which they are used have great significance. Symbols are meant to convey the sense which is not expressed through words. They are usually found on sculptures, terracotta figurines, coins, epigraphs seals and sealings.

In architecture different types of buildings, such as Padma, Svastika, Sarvatobhadra, mentioned in literature, have their distinct suggestive value.

The well known Hathigumpha inscription of Kharavala at Udaigiri starts after the description of the Svastika and Indradhvaja symbols.

The symbolic way of expressing a statement or an auspicious saying is peculiarly charming. It is only in the context and the background of knowledge of symbology that we can understand the true significance of a particular symbol.

The auspicious symbols, as part and parcel of religious thoughts and ritualistic signs, penetrated the Indian socio-religious structure from very early times. They took such deep roots as to have survived through the ages till now. They
were accepted by the Vedic-Purānic pantheons, Jainism and Buddhism. Indian art almost from the earliest times had a strong religious basis.

According to Dr. V.S. Agrawala, the most typical auspicious symbol evolved in the early Vedic Period was the Pūrṇa-Kaḷaśa.¹ In the Atharva-Veda it is stated that in each home the artistic form of a woman bearing the full vase (Pūrṇa-kumbhanārī) was installed.² In the very first hymn of the Rigveda the truth of Agni's nature is stated to confer auspiciousness upon one who invokes him. Of all the auspicious signs which became universal symbol, the most popular was Svastika, which was regarded as a solar symbol. In the subuh all the good things of life were believed to exist.

Gradually the number of auspicious forms, both concrete and abstract was much expanded. In due course of time a collective offering was made to them.³ An important contribution of the Vedic religion to Indian art is the large number of symbols. These may be grouped under the following categories:⁴

1. **Divinities:**

Śrīlakṣāmī, Nāga, Yaksha, Mātrikā (Mother), Saptamātarākṣa (Seven Mothers), Sūrya, Chandra, Agni (Fire), Rudra-Mahādeva, Visnu, etc.

2. **Ideas and Concepts:**

Swastika, Jyotir linga (Pillar of Light), Sapta-Padi (Seven Steps), etc.
3. **Animals and Birds:**

   Nandi, Ananta (Cosmic Serpent), Varāha (Boar), Prithivi-Varāha (Boar Lifting the Earth), Mahiśā (Buffalo-demon), Swan, etc.

4. **Articles and Objects:**

   Pūrna-Kumbha, Chakra, Stambha, Vedika, Triśūla (Trident), Vajra (Thunder-bolt), Nidhi (Wealth Jar), Kumbhi (Vase), etc.

5. **Trees and Flowers:**

   Padmā (Lotus), Kalpa-Vriksha (Wishfulfilling tree), etc.

   This clearly indicates that a variegated wealth of Vedic symbols was inherited in Indian art, literature and mythology.

   On the punch-marked coins over 600 symbols have been noticed. The tradition was further developed on the tribal and local coins from c.200 B.C. to 350 A.D. A large number of seals and sealings also show various symbols.

   Indian iconography owes a good deal to the Vedic symbolism, which gradually assumed larger dimensions. The original concepts of the Vedic symbols by and large remained intact although in some cases new were evolved.

   Dr. Agrawala has very aptly discussed the nature and forms of various symbols which enriched Indian iconography. He has made several categories of the same, which can be summarised as follows:
I. **Animals**:

Matsya (fish), Kūrma (tortoise), Varāha (boar), Makara (crocodile), Mriga (deer), Simha (lion), Asva (horse), Hastin (elephant), Nāga (serpent).

II. **Birds**:

Garuda, Hamsa, Peacock, etc.

III. **Human Figures**:

Muni, Seven Mothers, Yaksha, Vidyādhara, Gandharva, Kinnara, Lokapāla gods, Apsarās, etc.

IV. **Floral Symbols**:

Tree, Kalpavṛkṣa, Kalpalatā, Padmā (lotus), Pālm and many other floral designs and patterns.

V. **Inanimate Objects**:

Pātra (bowl), Mani, Sankha (Conch-shell), Mukta, Chhatra (umbrella), Purse, Ratha (chariot), Mountain, River, Coin, Chāmara (flywhisk), Stūpa, Viṇā (flute), Dhvaja, etc.

VI. **Weapons**:

Triśūla, Sūla, (spear), Chakra, Šanuṣha and Bana (bow and arrow), Musala, Gada (mace), Khadga (sword)

Several early symbols came to be associated with different deities. For example, Suparna (Garuda) became the vehicle (vahana) of Viṣṇu, Chakra was adopted as the vehicle of Dharmā. It was associated with the Jaina Tīrthankaras also.
It became Sudarsana Chakra of Visnu and Dharma Chakra of Buddha. The serpent is connected with the life stories of the Buddha, Mahāvira, Siva and Visnu.

The Purānic Bhakti movement drew a good deal of inspiration from Symbology. Buddhism and Jainism also did not lag behind in this respect. In the course of time the marks on the Silpa Sastras began to include sections on symbology. The details of the icons were full of various symbols associated with Vedic-Purānic, Buddhist and Jaina deities.

When we concentrate on colour symbolism, we find that each colour began to represent a distinct meaning. For example, that white represented the Svātva, yellow the Rajas and blue or black the Īmag Guna.

The physical postures of divinities were symbolised in Indian art. The movement of the lower-limbs i.e., āsanas and the gestures of the hands and eyes, i.e. the mudrās are very suggestive. There are different names for different āsanas and mudrās.

The commonly occurring symbols on ancient coins of Vidisha are Chandra-meru (moon on the hill), Vajra, Indradhvaia, Vedika-Vriksha, Swastika, elephant, horse and river with fish and tortoise, etc. Among the recent numismatic discoveries from Vidisha and the region around, mention may be made of the copper coins of Rāmagupta. They have been discovered from surface as well as from stratification. The coins of
this ruler, previously found, bear the figure of a lion and
the name of the ruler. In the new variety, besides the name
of the ruler the symbols occurring on them are garuda, garuda-
dhvaja, sun, moon and stars. On a recent coin from Vidisha
published by Professor Bajpai, there is the symbol of sun on
the obverse and the taurine symbol on the reverse.

Another copper coin from Vidisha bears the name of a
local King Śivagupta. The coin has the symbol of Chakra and
wavy lines. Prominent Ujjain symbol with double circles, and
a taurine symbol looking like human figure, between two balls
is seen on the obverse. \(^8\)

About the animal motif, Macdonell in his "Vedic Mythology"
states "Animals enter to a considerable extent into the mythology
creations of the Veda. There are still numerous traces surviving
from a more primitive age, when the line dividing men from
animals was not definitely drawn and gods might be conceived
as having animal forms also". \(^9\)

The Elephant and Horse occur on the tribal coins of
Vidisha. These two animals are also found on the art relics
of the Sanchi-Vidisha region (The symbol of elephant is asso-
ciated with the Buddhist art also. The elephant symbolising
the conception of the Buddha is met within the art of Bharhut,
Besnagar etc.). Elephant symbolizes the life-giving force of
nature and is associated with the mother-goddess. It is
naturally conceived of as the prime source of life. On the
coping stones of Bharhut, lotus stalks are found issuing out
of the mouths of sitting elephants. Slightly varied representations of the same motif can be seen in the Sanchi monuments. The same motif is seen on the coping stone of Besnagar now in Gwalior Museum.

**Horse:**

Besides the Tribal Coins from Vidisha, horse occurs on the sculptural and architectural remains from Vidisha and Sanchi.

**Makara:**

Makara occurs in art as a hybrid representation of the crocodile, elephant, fish and others.¹⁰

**Nāga:**

In the art of Vidisha, Nāgas and Nāgis are found both in the serpent and human forms. In the legend of Muchilinda, the nāgarūja sheltered Buddha for seven days against rains and winds by spreading his snake-hood like a canopy over the Master’s head.¹¹

The fabrication of such stories is to establish the superiority of Buddhism over the Nāga cult.

In the case of Saivism, the conception between Śiva and the snake existed from the protohistoric days. Śiva - Rudra was associated with Nāga. Vaishnavism is also closely connected with Nāgas.
Sun and Svastika and Moon:

Surya and Chandra are the two symbols honoured since the early Vedic Period. They are the two opposite principles of heat and cold. The pair of Surya and Chandra is depicted on the Gupta copper and silver coins from Vidisha and other places. They are found on several architectural pieces and sculptures.

Svastika:

It is primarily the solar symbol representing the four-armed pattern of the cosmos spreading in the four directions. About Svastika, Dr. Agrawala writes, "From this was developed the cult of four Regions. Each wheel or Chakra carries within its womb or centre a Svastika formed by combining four right angles of 90° each. The Svastika is the symbol of the four fold divine principle (Chatush-pad Brahma), of which another significant form is four faced Brahma in art and mythology. The chain of four fold symbols as four Vedas, four Lokas, four Devas, four Quarters, four Varnas, four Aṣoras, etc. is linked to this basic pattern of quadruplication." 13

Saptā-Ratna:

It is mentioned in the Rigveda as the gift of Agni in each home, was later transferred in the Buddhist and Purānic literature to a Chakravati King. These include a Chakra-Ratna (Wheel of Law), Vastī-Ratna, Aśva-Ratna, Māna-Ratna, etc.
Bhadramani was one of the seven treasures of a Chakravati king originally deposited in the centre of his palace and thus associated with all Chakravati rulers. This jewel was one of the highlights churned from the ocean and taken by Nārāyana Viṣṇu to be worn by him as Kañsthubha Mani on chest. According to V. S. Agrawala the Nāga Kings were regarded as custodians of jewels and treasures. The mani also became a symbol of immortality and of unfailing prosperity.

Pādмā:

Pādмā (lotus) is by far the most important decorative motif and a symbol of purity and beauty.

V. S. Agrawala, compares lotus with the life floating on the surface of creative waters. He says, "It is the flower opening its petals to the rising sun. Sūrya is the symbol of Brahmā, the supernal Sun in heaven, and the Lotus is the flower of life blossoming on earth; it is the visible sign of consciousness (Prāna) in matter (Bhūta)". The symbol is frequently used in the art relics from Vīdisha.

Pūrṇa-Kumbha:

Pūrṇa-Kumbha or (full vase) was the symbol of plenty and creativity. In art the motif is seen at Vīdisha, Sanchi, Bharhut, Amaravati, Mathura, and several other sites. It also occurs in the figures of Gaja-Lakṣmi.
Mūru Or Sūrēru:

This symbol is ordinarily found on the coins from Vidisha. It is carved as a decorative motif on several sculptures in Vidisha.

The Mudrās:

The most common hand inflections in Indian images are four: I. (ānjañī mudrā) devotion, II. (jñāna mudrā) illumination, III. (abhaya mudrā) reassurance, IV. (varada mudrā) supreme grace.

Significance of major postures of Āsanas as art forms

1. Paddāsana, Dhyānāsana or Vajraparyanika (cross legged seated posture).

2. Lāttāsana and Bhadrāsana (seated posture one or both legs pendant).

3. Tāndava, Nrtyāsana (dance posture).

4. Utmālingana

Transcendental state of experience revealed.

Yoga Samādhi

Relaxation of Samādhi and compassion.

Destruction of the mind stuff and the world process.

Cessation of duality experience of void.
Significance of Major-hand Inflections or Mudrās as Art Forms:

1. Dhyāna or Samadhi (one open palm placed on the other; such as that of Śiva and the Buddha).
2. Abhaya (elevated hand with palm facing outward).
3. Varada (right-hand lowered with the fingers turned downward).
4. Bhumisparśa (right hand lowered with fingers touching the earth).
5. Tarjani (with the tarjani finger pointed upward).

Transcendental State of Experience Revealed:

Serenity of meditation.
Reassurance.
Action of grace or gift.
Enlightment of which the earth is the witness.
Threat of punishment.

Significance of Major Weapons As Art Forms:

1. Sword (Khadga)
2. Noose (Pāsa)
3. Goad (ankusa)
4. Bow and arrow
5. Book (Pustaka)
6. Bowl (Pātre)
7. Skull-cup filled with human blood (Kapāla).
8. Drum (Damaru)

Transcendental State of Experience Revealed:

Dispelling of ignorance or desire.
Bending or restraint of desire.
Uprooting of desire.
Aiming at the target of desire from afar.
Transcendental knowledge.
Asceticism.
Depletion of the world process or mind stuff.
Pulsation of the rhythm of cosmic dissolution.
Significance of Major-hand Inflections or Mudrās as Art Forms:

9. Mace (danda) : Subjugation of evil yogic power.
11. Bell (ghanṭā) : Destruction of ignorance and appetite.
12. Knife (Kartri) : Realization of void.
13. Thunderbolt (Vajra) : Conquest of the three worlds or the three states of consciousness.
14. Trident (trīśūla) : Renunciation.
15. String of beads (aksamāla) : Wisdom.

The Vishnudharmottara gives the following metaphysical interpretation of the various symbols:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attributes</th>
<th>Symbolism</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Visnu Or Supreme Being</td>
<td></td>
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2. Ornaments : Substenance of worldly life.
4. Garland : Binding together the whole Universe; real and phenomenal.
5. Four hands : Four directions.
Mace : Mace the subjugation of all creatures.

7. Garuda vahana : All pervasive mind.

SIVA

1. Five faces : Five metaphysical categories.
2. Three eyes : Sun, Moon and Fire.
5. Fatted lock : Brahma.

It can be seen that with the help of symbols and mudras different forms of gestures and movements of limbs, beauties of the body have been tastefully delineated in sculptures. The various types of hair dressing, style of garments, fitness of form and colour are artistically depicted in the sculptures at Vidisha. The significance of symbology is elegantly highlighted by Dr. Agrawala in the following words: "Symbols have built an elegant language of form and meaning (Sabda and Artha). Just as literature reflects the mind of India so does its art as a mirror of her soul. An analysis of the dispersal and assimilation of these ancient symbols hold the key to understanding of Indian art forms as they had been handed down from the past and absorbed in the art and architecture of the future. The
handling of symbols from these two points of view was a very subtle and universal movement which was quietly perfected in accord and harmony".16
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