Chapter I

DEFINITION OF SYMBOL
"The world 'symbol' is derived from Greek 'symbolan' means a sign. The original source of symbols in the west is supposed to be the Egyptian pictography, but Indian symbols are more archaic in nature than those familiar to the west" (Pandey).

To know Indian symbology it is essential to have proper knowledge of Indian philosophy and traditions. Symbolism is a form of expression, used by man for his ideas and concepts where language is a lengthy process of expression symbolism is an indirect and brief method of expression. Symbolic usage is getting popular day by day in different fields of knowledge, including science. The computer, the latest scientific device, is fed with the language of symbols and replies to our queries in symbolic language. Thus whether past or present, the use of symbols is inevitable in every field.

Like language, symbols are also used by man for communicating his ideas but symbolism is an indirect,
and brief method of expression. Symbols are used by man in his every day life and history reveals their use in the past.

'Symbol' is defined as something that stand for, represents or denotes something else whereas symbolism is defined as the practice of representing things by symbol, or giving a symbolic character to object or acts.

Symbols are a special kind of sign, and they are distinguished from other signs by the fact that they are part of the thing they signify. Symbols frequently have been used in different art media. They occupy significant position almost in every kind of artistic expression. The symbols have served the purpose of decoration and space filling. The abstract ideas were also expressed through symbolic language in Indian art. The language through which art came in a form was of symbols.

"The symbols or sign depicting the divine and semi-divine the unexpressed concepts represent aspect
of paramount truth as seen by men through the ages" (Savita).

Man as a self-conscious individual and as distinct from the rest of creations, always created a language of symbols to express his identity. In pursuance of this inner need he had to invent not only conceptual symbols like 'God' but a fantastic range of other plastic symbols archetypal, temporary and even personal.

Symbols represent the earliest record of man's urge for self expression. In Indian art, we find a large number of symbols occupying pre eminent position right from the time of Harappan culture. The symbols on coins, seals and sculpture have their artistic value. At the same time they have some religious or philosophical connotation also.

"Symbols are used by human beings, not merely to communicate ideas, but also for lyrical expression and for the clarification of one's own ideas and feelings to others" (Savita).
A firm conviction is that man can not live without symbols. He creates symbols, he responds to symbols, and he communicates through symbols. What is true to his general cultural life is certainly true to his religious life wherever religion flourishes, symbols-verbal, visual, or dramatic are in constant use.

Some people misunderstand the difference between sign and symbol. They considered both sign and symbol as one. But there is a categorical difference between sign and symbol.

Sign, is a conventional abbreviation for a commonly accepted indication of something known. Sign always has a fixed meaning and sign is related to sensation or perception. While symbols are related to concepts, sign indicates, while symbol denotes. The difference of sign and symbol is noticed from the fact that symbol retains its importance while sign after giving expression to meaning loses its importance. The different area where these symbols are used or known after the name of the area e.g. painting, sculpture,
religious, philosophical, logical, mathematical, Tantric
mythical and poetical.

Symbols are further classified as simple or complex the symbol which represent a single concept is a simple symbol like the idol. The complex symbol is the picture of five faced Hanumana.

Nature throughout the Indian art is taken as divine. Everything which surrounded the ancient Indian people and which was impressive by its sublimity, became a direct object of adoration, like mountains, rivers, springs, plants, animals and birds.

Religion also communicate itself by powerful symbols. Christianity is represented to the consciousness of millions of people by the sign of the cross.

In Laleh Bakhtiar's view "Symbols are reality contained with in the nature of things. The entire journey in God is a journey in symbols, in which one is constantly aware of the highest reality with in things. Symbols reflect both Divine transcendence and Divine
immanence, they refer to both the universal aspect of creation and the particular aspect of tradition".

The inner or the spiritual aspect of religion had stronger impact on Indian art than on the western art. It is worth noticing that the artists depicting the deities Buddha, Mahavira had never seen them. Hence, these depictions are the symbolic representations of the divine.

God was conceived as formless, as an immanent principle, as pure intelligence, also as possessing forms innumerable, sometimes having many head and many arms. These multiple heads and arms were but a symbolic device to suggest his varied and superhuman qualities. Understood in this way there is nothing disturbing in Indian icons or sculptures with several arms and heads. According to the Hindu view, the whole universe is his forms and countless are his attributes.

Now take the example of Buddha. In the scenes from the life of Buddha incarnation, Nativity and
Enlightenment, the master is never represented in human forms, but only by symbols, of which the caitya tree (Bodhi druma, asvatha, pippala, Ficus, religiosa), umbrella (chatta) and feet (paduka) Rama Sandals, by which he is represented as ruler at Ayodhya during the period of exile and wheel (Dharma Chakra) are the most usuals. Beneath the Bodhi tree is an altar or throne (Bodh-manda-vajrasana). The inscriptions make it certain that these symbols represent the actual presence of Buddha. In later art the empty throne will be occupied by a visible image.

The three pointed triratna symbol represents the "Three jewels", the Buddha, the law and the order.

The impact of Buddhism on Indian art is tremendous. A great many monuments arose in different parts of India such as at Bharhut, Sanchi, Mathura Bodh Gaya, Sarnath, Karla, Amaravati, Jagayyapeta, Nagarjunimkonda and Ajanta.

India is the land of diverse religion and for the understanding of Indian art it is necessary to acquaint
oneself with the background which made its distinctive evolution possible. In past many tribes and races such as Aryans, Parethians, Greeks, Sakas, Kushana, Huns, Turk and Mongole came to this land and made this land their home. They brought with them their indigenous cultures and mixed it with the races already present here. This mingling of races and cultures into mainstream of Indian civilization is proved to be a significant historical process. By mingling there emerged a great spiritual movement like Brahminism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism and various systems of philosophy. This has affected the life and work of the people giving them an ethical basis.

According to the B.C. Bhattacharya "Symbolism was no doubt in practice in other ancient countries of the world but certainly not to the extent and perfection as was reached by India in her iconic sculpture. That is why the art of India is known as the symbolic art by some of the western thinkers."

The symbol of fish, the peacock, the serpent, the bull were used in different countries to express certain
spiritual meanings. Perhaps no where as in India symbolism was developed and worked with such wonderful definitness in both art and religion. The Sala gram and chakra and the Siva lingain are the examples of pure symbolism.

The general characteristics of the symbol according to Paul are asd follows.

(1) The first and basic characteristic of the symbol is its figurative quality. This implies that the inner attitude which is originated to the symbol does not have the symbol itself in view but rather that which is symbolised in it.

(2) The second characteristic of the symbol is its perceptibility. This implies that something which is intrinsically invisible ideal, or transcedent is made perceptible in the symbol and is in this way given objectivity.

(3) The characteristics of the symbol is its innate power. This implies that the symbol has a power inherent within it that distinguishes it from the mere
sign, which is impotent in itself. This characteristic is the most important as it gives the symbol the reality which it has almost lost in ordinary usage.

Words and signs originally had a symbolic character. They convey the meaning which they express. In course of evolution and as a result of the transition from the mystical to the technical view of the world, they have lost their symbolic character, though not completely through the use of their innate power they became signs. Once they lost their innate power they became a conventional sign and lost their genuine symbolic character.

(4) The fourth characteristic of the symbol is its acceptability as such. This implies that the symbol is rooted in and supported by the society. Hence, it is not correct to say that a thing is first a symbol and then gain acceptance, the process of becoming a symbol and the acceptance of it as a symbol belong together.
So far as Indian plastic art is concerned, the representation of symbols is noticed on the Indus valley seals. These seals bear on them several religious signs, human and animal figures and pictographic script. Unfortunately the Indus valley script is still undeciphered. On the early indigenous coinage, an extensive use of symbols are found.

**Different Theories and views on Symbols:**

Symbols are languages much easier to learn and understand in order to express the spiritual reality through them. Some aspects of the divine can be clearly defined in India such symbols (Mangalik) are to be found in abundance. Sankha (conch) and Chakra (wheel) and Padma (Lotus) are constantly employed in both art and religion" (Asit Kumar Haldar).

"Rituals symbols and gestures are means by which man enter into communicaiton with the higher states of being, whether totem, ancestral spirit, mana or deity" (Rene Guen).
Boas considered that among primitive people "the aesthetic motive is combined with the symbolic, while in modern life the aesthetic motive is either quite independent or associated with utilitarian ideas."

"The tradition of symbolic usage is found prevalent in the time of Brahmana literature too, but it is only in sacrificial and ritualistic field. Each and every item of the sacrifice is symbolic of some divine force" (Usha Grover).

"Symbols are vehicles of transmission of Divine realities, which transform us by carrying us to the higher states of being from which they originate" (Laleh Bakhtiar).

"The language through which art came in a form was of symbols. The symbols or signs depicting the divine and semi divine, the unexpressed concepts represent aspect of paramount truth as seen by man through the ages" (Savita Sharma).
'Mankind, it seem, has to find a symbol in order to express himself. Indeed 'expression is symbolism" (White head).

The symbol expresses the goal which directs the course of action, but the goal is not separate from the steps by which it is reached symbols are used as vehicles on one moves about in the world. It is the dimension of reality for which the symbols are vehicles, not vehicles for man but vehicles for reality itself, as reality manifest itself in the lives of men" (Ira Progoff).

Symbol is always a presentation of the concept, through indirect. It is precisely the nature of a symbol that it takes the primary and natural meaning of both objects and words and modifies them in certain ways so that they acquire a meaning relation of a different kind. The object is chosen to represent the concept on account of some sort of its likeness with what it is made to represent. The likeness however, is not pictorial. "A symbol is not necessarily a picture. It is a metaphorical or analogical" (Urban).
Cassirer regarded "symbol as a manifestation of the unity of consciousness which is nothing but the spirit itself. The spirit is an integrated form of the symbolic manifestation. The whole world along with all objects is thus the unity of consciousness in symbolised form."

"Symbolism is one of the two ways in which the human mind functions, the other being the direct experience of the visible world" (Paritosh Sen).

"It is not a sign which stands instead of something else. Any one symbol is not a symbol of any one thing in particular but holds rather a number of suggestions" (Von Ogden Vogt).

"Without symbolism the life of man would be like that of the prisoners in the cave" (Cassier).
LIST OF QUOTES


Early Indian Symbols Savita Sharma, p. 4.

Ibid.

Myth and Symbol Paul Tillich, p. 15-16.