Symbolic Representations

Symbols work as a language for the communication of meaning. According to the definition given in the Encyclopedia Britanica, it is a term given to a visible object representing to the mind the semblance of something which is not shown but realized by association with it\(^1\).

The human mind is functioning symbolically when some components of its experience elicit consciousness, beliefs, emotions and usages, respecting other components of its experience. The former set of components are the 'symbols', and the latter set constitute the 'meaning' of the symbols. The organic functioning whereby there is translation from the symbol to the meaning will be called 'symbolic reference'. This symbolic reference is the active synthetic element contributed by the nature of the percipient.

This derivative symbolism, employed by mankind, is not a general mere indication of meaning, in which every common feature shared by symbol and meaning has been lost. In every effective symbolism there are certain aesthetic features shared in common. The meaning acquires emotion and feeling directly excited by the symbol\(^2\).

Symbols are as old as human thought and civilization. Right from the dawn of civilization, Indian art expresses and exposes deep meaning through

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\(^2\) Whitehead, A.N.; Symbolism, its meaning and effect, p. 9
syhmbols. History of Indian art exposes an important fact that artists have given primary importance to them to convey deep meaning. According to Indian mythology the creation of the first Svara from the mouth of Brahmā was highly symbolic. We know that the words are full of symbols. So far as poetry is concerned, word is considered body and its meaning is considered soul. The great poet laureate of Indian culture, Kalidāsa, has paid the revered homage to both comparing Šabda and Artha with the cosmic creator and the divine mother, the parents of the world, who preside over creation, and also inspire human art, both being inseparable. He says:

\[ \text{Vāgarthārīv Samprktau vāgartha pratipattaye} \]
\[ \text{Jagatah pitarau vande Pārvatiparamesvarau} \]

In Indian music all the Svaras and Rāgās have symbolic meaning. Rāga in Indian music is not merely a melody, but a symbolic creation through the harmony of Svaras, leading towards, eternal beauty and joy. Rāga is called an atmosphere, a musical colouring, which is deeply connected with a mood of feeling, the highest aesthetic experience.

Painting is a lyric of line and colour conveying and exposing deep meanings of human life through symbolic representations. In Indian tradition, music is considered language of the impersonal and hence a symbolic medium. The seven Svaras of Indian music correspond to the voices of birds and animals. The first note of the scale Šadja - Sā corresponds to the call of the peacock; the second note of the scale Rṣaba - Re corresponds to the sound of the Cātaka;

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the third note of the scale Gandhāra - Ga corresponds to the call of the goat; the fourth note of the scale Madhyama - Ma, corresponds to the call of the crane; the fifth note of the scale Pañcama - Pa corresponds to the sound of the Koyal, the Indian woodpecker; the sixth note of the scale Dhaivata - Dha, corresponds to the call of the frog in love; the seventh note of the scale Niṣada - Ni corresponds to the call of elephant when he is beaten on the head by his rider. Thus the seven notes are symbolic representation of the Indian music. Similarly, the origin of the five main Rāgās is symbolically connected with the five faces of Śiva. The names of the five faces of Śiva are: Sadyojāta, Vāmadeva, Aghora, Tatpuruṣa and Īśana. The five main Rāgās have been conceived to correspond to these five faces. These are:

1 Sadyojāta - Śrirāga
2 Vāmadeva - Vasantā
3 Aghora - Bhairava
4 Tatpuruṣa - Pañcama
5 Īśana - Megha

The visioners of Rāgās felt within themselves the necessity of anthropomorphising the material structure of Rāgās and they imagined form of the formless and personified the impersonal. Thus the invisible Rāgās became visible in material forms. The intuitive and visionary poets composed the conceptual forms of Dhyānāmaṇtras of the Rāgās. These Dhyānāmaṇtras describe symbolic representation of the Rāgās, Rāginīs and Rāgaputrās.

In these Rāgamālā miniatures various pictorial elements depicted have a symbolic meaning which is occasionally verbalized in the Dhyānāmaṇtra. They have been divided thus:

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1. Aerial representation: Sūrya and Candra, stars, sky, clouds and lightening.

2. Animic representation: Birds and animals like cuckoo, crow, peacock, cock, white crane, sparrow, dove, deer, duck, horse, elephant, camel, bull, cow, serpent, scorpion, etc.


4. Representation of articles and objects: Pūrṇa kumbha, pair of water pots, Svastika, Cāmar, Śankha, Trīśūla.

1. Aerial Representation

Sūrya and Candra (Sun and Moon):

These are the two great aerial symbols, accepted in all the ancient civilizations of the world. They are highly honoured and worshipped in India from the protohistorical period. The two opposite principles of heat and cold are expressed through them which are the source of happiness. They are deified in Hindu pantheon, as the giver of life not only to human beings but the whole animic world. In a solar orbit, Sūrya is a sovereign in his own right. Devotional hymns were composed during the Vedic period, to praise their grace and glory. The famous Gāyatrī Mantra of Rgveda is addressed to Sūrya. He is also personified in the Rgveda. He comes in the very early morning seated in a chariot driven by seven horses. His charioteer is Uśā, who comes with a message of light and knowledge. The duality of creation is well symbolised by Sūrya and Candra. The first is changeless and eternal and the other waxing
and waning with borrowed light.

Both these symbols are depicted in the Rāgamālā paintings. The names of the Rāgās like Dīpak and Caṇḍrakausa, denote these symbols. They help in representing day or night. They are depicted with facial features in some sets and in some just a luminous ball of light as in the Rāgamālā of Āmer dated 1709 A.D. art collection Kāṅkroli and Mewār Ca. 1675 A.D. collection of Sangram Singh.

Stars are the symbols of dim night. During the night they guide the caravans in desert area. As Rajasthan is a desert area they are very well represented in Rājasthānī paintings. A number of Rāgamālās depict starry night even the Suri Rāgamālā has depicted tiny stars in the dark sky. In certain pictures like the Baṅgāl Rāgīṇī of Sirōhī Ca. 1690 A.D. collection of San gram Singh has a small rectangular patch of sky but is richly filled with stars and a crescent moon. The Sorath Rāgīṇī of Mālwā Ca 1680 A.D. Bharat Kala Bhavan has a wash of blue for the sky but only in the centre is a crescent moon surrounded by a cluster of stars while rest of the sky remains clear.

Clouds:

Monsoon is the season wherein birds, animals and human beings seem to be in their active moods. The atmosphere is surrounded by clouds. These clouds full of water is a symbol of richness specially for Indian farmers. It is a festive occasion for the farmers, they celebrate on the first shower. Indian economy is based on agriculture and is depended on rains. In the Rāgamālā paintings these clouds have been depicted in different ways, earlier are seen the Chinese
cloud patterns and later natural effects have been made efforts at. This season in itself is the name of one of the Rāgas - Megha - Megha Mallar. Similarly it is emotionally connected with the feelings of the Nāyikā too. Monsoon is the time when her beloved has to return from his far gone journey. She is depicted all awaiting desperately while the lightening represents a hope and the peacock express her feeling.

Lightening:

A symbol of hope, as said every cloud has a silver lining. The Nāyikā eagerly waiting for her husband to return finds hope in the lightening. Lightening has been depicted in Rāgamālās. In Madhumādhavī Rāginiī too wherein a woman is depicted feeding peacocks or rushing into the home feared by the thunder or lightening (Vidhūt). It is closely associated with Sahacari - friend or wife. Lightening is depicted in zigzag lines - western stereotype or the snake line or just wavy. Lightening - snake-like e.g. in Madhumādhavi Rāginiī of Mālpura dated 1756 A.D. Klaus Ebling collection.

Rainy season indicates the return of the beloved from other region or country. It is a season of live and togetherness hence depicts the Prasūtabhartīkā Nāyikā awaiting desperately for his arrival.

2. Animic Representation

Sārasa - Cranes:

They are depicted in bright white colour. They are the symbols of fidelity and true love. Male and female crane always live together. They are very well depicted in the pictures of Rāgamālā paintings in the foreground.
Snake - Serpent:

It is a symbol of energy and creation; space and eternity. There are various types of snakes in India. Some of them are fond of sandal flavour and they live on sandalwood trees. In Indian mythology, they are described as Pātālāpati i.e. Lords of Pātāla and they are described as symbols of death, darkness and untruth. They are very well depicted in the pictures of Rāgamālā paintings of Asāvari Rāginī.

Peacock:

It is a beautiful National bird. It is a symbol of dancing and love. His erected neck is a symbol of self-respect. Its sweet tunes (Keka) convey the message of coming of rains. Without knowing the choreography of dance, it dances with perfect steps, which creates a divine atmosphere on the earth. It is beautifully painted in the Rāgamālā paintings of Kakubha Megha Mallār, etc.

Mrīga:

It is the most gentle among animals. It is a symbol of innocence, auspiciousness, holiness and swiftness. It is depicted in Rāginī Toḍī of the Rāgamālā paintings.

Buzzing Beas:

They are depicted hovering over the Āṁ ramaṇjaṁ in a pot in the hand of the dancing Kṛṣṇa in Vasaṅta Rāginī. They are also observed hovering over the lotus flowers offered to the Śivalīṅga in the Bhairavī Rāginī. They
symbolize the passion of the lovers.

Vyāla:

It is a composite figure of man and animal, animal and animal. It is known as leograph. Simhavyāla, a composite figure of elephant’s head and lion’s body is observed in the Rāgamalā paintings of Gujarat.

Kinnara:

This is a semi-divine figure having a horse-mouth and human body. He is a heavenly mythical figure involved in playing music. In a picture of Śrī Rāga of Jaipur School, he is depicted in the company of Nārada, a mythical Puranic sage.

3. Natural Representation:

Padma - Lotus:

It is also known as Puṣkara. It is a symbol of purity and life. It is an important symbol in Rāgamalā paintings. It opens its petals with the rays of rising Sun symbolising the early morning. It is considered as the flower of life blossoming on Earth. It symbolises the principle of growth. It is also a symbol of cosmic mind and of the centre of energy in the individual. This symbol is depicted in the foreground in a lake or water tank in practically all Rāgamalā sets and especially in Bhairavī where the early morning scene is depicted and the Nāyikā is offering her prayers at the Liṅga. Lotuses are depicted on the Liṅga and in the lake too.
Amramanjarī - Sprouts of Mango Tree:

It has close connection with the spring season. It is a symbol of love and passion. In Indian mythology Āmra i.e. mango tree is an abode of Mañmatha i.e. Kāmadeva. Various Sanskrit poets while describing spring season have given a beautiful description of Āmramanjarī. The sweet tunes of Cuckoo and the fragrance of Āmramanjarī represent the coming of the spring season.

Kalpavrksa:

This is a mythical wish-fulfilling tree. When Gods and demons churned the ocean for nectar, this tree came out as a jewel. The word Kalpa signifies thought or idea. It is the symbol of mind, which is a tool for wishing. What one wishes under this tree, obtains it. It is considered to be a tree of heaven, with various Gods seated on its branches and leaves. It is said to possess dense foliage. It is also a symbol of home, where pairs of eternal male and female enjoy Mithuna - sexual joy. It is described in Rāmāyaṇa, Mahābhārata, Purāṇas, Buddhist and Jain literature. It is very well sculptured in detail at the Stūpas of Bharahūt, Bhājā and Sāñcī. In the Rāgamālā paintings it is depicted in the Kalpasūtra Rāgamālā.

4. Representation of Articles and Objects

Padmaśara:

Arrow of Padma (Lotus) weapon of Kāmadeva the God of Love, generally known as Kusumāyudha. Padmaśara is a symbol of passion. As per the Purāṇic legend a demon named Tārakāsura was empowering Gods. Gods approached Brahma on which the solution forwarded was the birth of Kumāra
to Śiva and Pārvatī to destroy Tārakasura. Pārvatī born as a daughter of Himalayss, formerly wife of Śiva regularly visits Śiva to worship him who is in several pence of Sthānuvana. The legend takes a beautiful turn, wherein Indra, the Chief of Gods, instructs Kāmadeva to disturb Śiva in meditation. Kāmadeva with the help of Vāsanta glorifies the environment and when Pārvatī visits Śiva, Kāmadeva shoots his flowery arrow. Śiva badly disturbed sees Kāmadeva on the tree and with his third eye turns him into ashes. Kālidāsa has composed his famous epic Kumārasambhava on this theme. In Rāgamālā paintings this cupid arrow the Padmaśara is observed in Vibhāsa Rāgini where the lovers are depicted on the bed and the Padmaśara is in the Nāyaka’s hand. Here there are varied differences according to various sets like the Vibhāsa Ca. 1610 Provincial Mughal, Dr. W.B. Manley collection depicts lovers on a bed. The Nāyaka touches the Nāyikā who is fast asleep with the Padmaśara. In theJaipur-18th century A.D. Vibhāsa in the National Museum, New Delhi 58.58/83 Kṛṣṇa as Kāmadeva, aims a flower studded arrow at the reclining Nāyikā to induce passion and love. In some Vibhāsa Rāginiś the couple is in embracing posture and the Nāyikā aims an arrow at the crowing rooster to stop disturbance, or the Nāyikā is asleep and the Nāyaka aims the arrow to stop the crowing of the rooster. Here the arrow’s depiction is not of Padmaśara. The Vibhāsa in National Museum 47.110/128 depicts the Nāyaka asleep while the women aims the arrow at the rooster.

Cāmara:

It is a symbol of fire of love. It is also a symbol of royalty and divinity. It is prepared from the yellow-silvery hairs of the tail of a Cāmarih cow, generally
found in the Himalaya regions. It is observed in a number of folios like Bhairava Malakausa, Khaibhāvati Rāgini of Mālwā and Madhumadhavī Rāgini of Jaipur School, etc.

Makarakētana:

Makara is a crocodile and Kētana - a flag. This Dwaj of Makaraketana observed in the Bhairavī (Pl. 3) mid-16th century A.D. V & A Museum suggests the intensity of love and is also observed in the Caurapañcāsikā paintings.

Pūrṇakurūnḥa (Kalaśa):

This is a symbol of happy life, symbol of plenty and creativity. The human body is Pūrna-Kalasā. The water inside is a symbol of life. Water is called Jeevan in Sanskrit. Srifala with foliage is a symbol of wealth and creativity. This is depicted in the Rāgamalā paintings of Kalpasūtra and other Rāginis of Khambavati, Bhairavī etc.

Amṛtakuruñḥa:

Water pots on the steps of the Veraṇdāh in pairs are often observed in Rāgamalā paintings. They are either placed on floor or on a stand, they are at times also covered. They are normally meant to keep water cool and out in the courtyard under the shade in the cool breeze helps water remain cool, though here symbolically they represent the two full breasts of the Nāyikā, they are especially observed in those pictures which have amorous dalliance and the Nāyikā has his hands placed on her breasts.
Svastika:

It is sacred cross of Maṅgala - good omen. This is a symbol of Sun and knowledge. It is a solar symbol typifying the four armed pattern of the cosmos spreading in the four directions. According to Dr. V.S. Agrawal, 'The Svastika is the symbol par excellence of the four-fold divine principle (Chatushpāda Brahma) of which another significant form is four faced Brahmā in art and mythology, the Tetradic Deity of the four basic type manifestation. A chain of four-fold symbols as four Vedas, four Lokas, four Devas, four Quarters, four Varṇas, four Āśramas, four Priests, etc. is linked to this basic pattern of quadruplication'.

This symbol is found on the seals of the Harappan civilization. It is accepted in all the religious sects of Hinduism. It is very well depicted in the pictures of the Rāgamālā paintings like the Kalpasūtra Rāgamālā.

Śaṅkha:

It is a symbol of creation, and the abode of Nāda Brahma, the first manifestation of divine energy in the cosmos. It is blown in all the auspicious ceremonies in all the Hindu temples. It is depicted in the Bhairavī Rāginī of Mālwā and is also depicted in pictures of Megha Mallār.

Swing Hindola:

The music sung with swing (Dol) was called Hindola. An object of leisure and pastime, a symbol of sexual and erotic desire. It is associated with spring.

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Agrawal, V.S.: Indian Art, p. 50
It is often depicted in Rāgamālās especially the name itself Rāga Hindola depicts a Nayaka or Lord seated with Nayikās.

Everything depicted in these miniatures do not represent a thought symbolically, they have been used to enhance the environment and the interest of the artist and patron. Only a few important ones have become the set iconography without which a Rāgamālā would be incomplete. This treatment helps in understanding the subject thoroughly.

In Indian tradition cultivation of art is a spiritual training which uplifts the consciousness of man to the highest aesthetic experience and symbols help in it. With the help of the symbolic representation, the painters of Rāgamālā have achieved this ultimate aim of art.