

Special Project on



Symbolism in Popular, Hindu Religious Imagery

Special Project on
Symbolism in Popular Hindu Religious Imagery

By: Rina Parakh, a student in the postgraduate course
of the Department of Sanskrit
master of the Department of Sanskrit

Guide:

Internal Examiner:

Internal Examiner:

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Approval Sheet

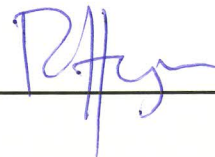
Special Project
Symbolism in Popular Hindu Religious Imagery

By: Rina Parakh, is approved in the partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the
masters Degree in Visual Communication.

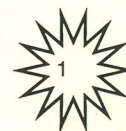
Guide



Internal Examiner 1.



Internal Examiner 2.



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Introduction

India has housed a widespread variety of religious systems wherein thrive a number of casts, either interconnected or independent of each others existence. Hindu is a term which was coined not for a religion but the people dwelling beyond river Sindhu by the Afghans, the Persians, etc. later with the influences of foreign tribes *Hindu became a term describing a religion so as to differentiate them from the Muslims, the British, and other foreigners.*

In every religion, the *roots of worship spring in the very cradle stage of a civilization.* At this stage the people start worshipping what they fear- mainly elements of nature or what is awe inspiring, or what they would consider as a helping element for e.g. rain for the crop. In every civilization - be it the Indus Valley or the Greek, the Mycenaean, Egyptian, or any other the cause of worship of God remained the same. Initially these forces were worshipped as they were i.e. in their original form, but with a feeling of the existence of a supreme being, being present in them. With the passage of time *it was this being in them that became pre dominant and the prime element of worship, which later gained an anthropomorphic form with various attributes concurred upon them, to the extent that now a days the Gods (beings that were worshiped) have become so popular that the element from which they emerged have almost long been forgotten.* e.g. Siva is meant to denote Time and Fertility, but rarely does any layman know about the associations of the various elements surrounding the deity.

This small research is therefore being done in order to bring alive the symbolism that lay hidden behind the human forms of the divinities.



The icons that represent the deities were made with such uncontemplatable derivations that unless one really goes on a hunting expedition for their meaning the image appears to be just a piece of arbid imagination. Every object portrayed with the deity has a strong connotation to its presence. Nothing is JUST there. Even the texture of the hair, the hairstyle, shape of limbs, have a reason, this verily stands to affirm the fact that nothing in this universe is without cause or reason be in within or beyond human understanding.

*It is this limited capacity of human mind to comprehend
that gives rise to symbolic representations of the abstract
since the abstractness on conception by different minds
extends to uncontrolled infinity with no return... as it is
difficult to overwrite or unthink a thought, however unreal!*

So, taking this far fetched theory into consideration I deduced that 'such that people might not violate the credits bestowed to the divine images or do not over smear them with virtues a certain symbolic representation was demanded to be stated 'as even you or I, for that matter, would not like our ideas to be violated by somebody else's imagination.

May be it is the same apprehension that led to the concretization of these thoughts of deities and supreme natural beings.



When one looks at a painting, however intelligent or intuitive one maybe, it is rare that one can get to the core of the gut of the artist which made him paint. But once the artist has put in a sentence of what made or inspired him to make a particular painting, the onlooker is not just pacified but his imagination as I would put it is sent on the track which began in the artist's heart, so - simply looking at the images of deities only gives a picturesque view of imagined heaven or celestial combats might look like - but the essence to the image is still unraveled. This is what I set to find out.

The symbolism that led to the derivation of a certain form - means be logistic, mathematical, a metamorphosis forming a trajectory from the initial idea, or an amalgamation of more than one concept...

I'll come out of this before its too late to return...



Representation of Elements and their form

THE CONCEPT OF TIME

(DOUBLE CONCEPT)

As I happened to read and find more about how this element is dealt in Hinduism I found a dual concept..

Firstly the cyclical concept. It is believed that everything that begins, remains and ends and then begins again... and so on
- while the time goes on and on at the back of everything, this is the second or the linear concept, where in time has always existed, never begun and shall never end.

This element of TIME, as conceived by the spiritually superior, has been given a concrete comprehensible form of a human, i.e.

SIVA (MAHAKAAL)

- who by his attributes and acts represents time.

All elements surrounding the image of Siva are closely or remotely associated with time element.



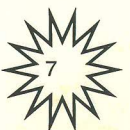


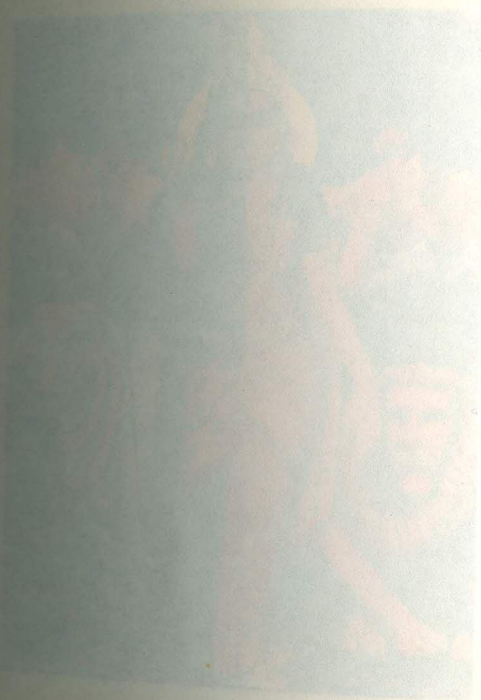
Siva Mahadeva,

- *the immortal principle in the mortal beings...*

Attributes of Siva:

1. The crescent
 - The waxing and waning cycle showing time
 - movement of time
 - The bright and dark halves of the month
 - fasting creates rhythm of pranic vibrations for peace of mind and body
2. The Ganga
 - Perineal flow of life descending from heaven
 - endless modalities and form from the beginning to end of time...- eternity and purity
3. The matted locks
 - vast and complicated as the affairs of the world
 - impossible to unravel
4. The trident / Trisul
 - signifies triadic pattern
 - creation, preservation and destruction or the 3 Gunas
 - rajoguna, sattvaguna and tamoguna
5. Third eye
 - TRIYAMBAKA
 - spot symbolic of seat of wisdom
 - used to destroy evil (thoughts)
6. Cobra
 - Periodical shedding of old skin for new
 - denotes cycle of time
 - principle of reincarnation
7. Garland of skull
 - everything that begins; ends - mortality, transience...



- 
- 8. Nandi the bull
 - the seat of kama
 - god of love
 - signifies fertility
 - fulfilling the cycle of life
 - Nandi means Ananda
 - experience of joy or bliss
 - 9. Tiger skin
 - king of wilderness
 - *trishna* - desire under control
 - 10. Ashes
 - signifies the transience of the mortals
 - 11. Poison
 - signifies the evil thoughts
 - swallowed and suppressed
 - held in the throat and unable to affect the functioning of the body
 - 12. Mountain abode
 - controller of the highest subtlest centres of the mind as described in yoga

Other connotations of Siva

Siva is also considered the lord of Fertility as we are all well aware of the Linga worship. The Nandi bull signifies this while various elements like the tiger skin on which he sits, the necklace made of skulls etc., show that he is the King of wilderness since initially Siva was considered the God of Destruction and much feared as Rudra, his forerunner.

Ardhanariswar form

Eternal man - Juxtaposed - eternal woman (uma - maheshwara)

Combining characteristics of human being or animal

basic truth of both physiology and psychology

both elemental passions need to meet with their counterparts

These counterparts in the metaphysical exposition
and iconographic formulation are inseparable

Cause of generating life forms - repeats the cycle of life... and time...



*Rigveda "What you describe to me as Male
are in reality also female.*

*He who has the penetrative eye of the mind
discerns this truth, and not the blind
who sees with the physical eye only."*

"Siva overwhelmed with the love and devotion of Parvati
decided to remain inseparable from he in body and soul.
This is the symbolic conception of the inseparable Siva and Sakti
that of the male and female principle"

-Siva Mahadeva (V.S.Agarwal)



Nataraja

Destroyer of the universe - king of dancers

The ring around the nataraja

- signifies the cosmos and concentration of the cosmic energy in the centre i.e. siva
or the time which manifests and dissolves all
- also the continuous movement and eternal motion of the universe through creation , preservation and destruction... The time element....

The demon

- signifies ignorance, ego which has to be under controlled

The fire

- destruction of universe

The damru

- sound denoting new creation

Ganapati

*Vinayaka - son of Siva and Parvati - remover of obstacles...
Lord of Ganas*

two aspects of life

Sthanu & Pramatha

Sthanu is the form that goes or rather gels well with the dictates of the nature and is in complacence with the vertical axis - this is to say in the symbolic fashion. This is considered as beautiful. While Pramatha is the ugly form which goes against the laws of nature and is not in rhythm with the central axis, this is the cause of all obstacles, troubles, etc.



| | |
|------------------------|---|
| Brahmanaspati | - Lord of magnitude due to large size (brahamand) present inside and outside an individual |
| Elephant head | <ul style="list-style-type: none">- denotes superior intelligence (elephant - most intelligent of animals)- to denote inflated ego or the conscious 'I'- largest size of the animal symbolic of the largest element Ahamkar |
| Snake around the waist | - cosmic energy |
| Broken tusk | <ul style="list-style-type: none">- use of tusks to fight- remove obstacles |
| Gana form | - outer imperfection - inner beauty |
| Mouse | - vehicle - symbolises equal importance of the <i>mighty and the minute</i> |
| Sweets | - to imply the inner sweetness of the seemingly ugly |

Due to these qualities entrusted to Ganesha he is to be worshipped during any ritual, as he is considered the remover of obstacles. Thus prayers to Ganapati are offered before beginning any task.

He is considered the lord of Ganas. Ganas in the Indian art are those figures which have their proportions distorted from those stipulated for the human form. They are opposed to the normal behavior and dispensation of nature. This is known as Ghora, the terrible or the hideous aspect, personified as a Gana. In every assembly the Ganapati must take the foremost seat amidst the Ganas, otherwise the assembly becomes a failure.

"Oh, Ganapati, be seated here in our midst, for you are verily the supreme over all by the power of your mind. Whatever physical vastness be in the members of the assembly, the leadership rests in him who has a big mind. Whatever action is done anywhere cannot be accomplished without you. Such, O Maghavan, is thy greatness..."

The form of Ganesh is verily to denote the conflict of the good and the bad within the human mind. He is worshipped to keep these mental obstacles away and not the physical ones. Thus to keep one's destructive ideas under control of the serene ones and accomplish one's task successfully.

BRAHMA

The creator of the universe, also called the prajapati - father of all creations...

Attributes:

- | | |
|--------------|---|
| 4 heads | -He is shown with four heads facing all four directions symbolizing that he has created the entire Universe. |
| The Vedas | -the vedas he hold in his hand symbolize supreme wisdom and that he meditates upon each age (kalpa) and recreates the universe. |
| The kamandal | -in his hand is used in the ritual of prayer prior to tapasya (meditation) after which he creates the new universe. |
| The lotus | -on which he is seated is a symbol of purity, as the lotus usually grows in muddy waters but is untouched by the dirt and mire from which it emerges. (so is he unaffected by the world around him) |

To show the closeness of creation and preservation Brahma is shown emerging from the lotus which grows from the navel of Vishnu, the preserver.

- | | |
|------------|---|
| The Swan | -which is his vehicle a symbol of purity. It is reputed to be able to separate milk from water and consume only pure milk i.e. to say reject all corruption and defilement. |
| The rosary | - it may be indicative of his predominantly spiritual bent. |



Vishnu

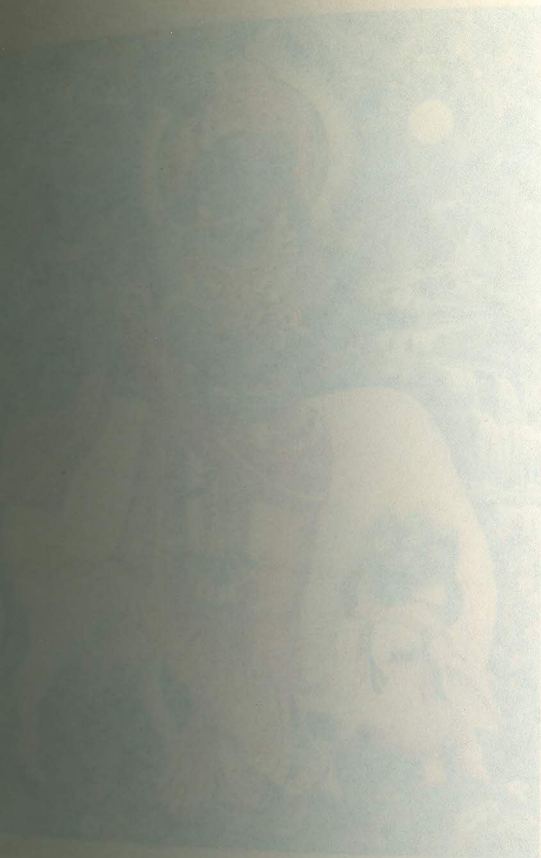
The benevolent, preserver of the world...

Attributes:

He is shown in various stances and lying, sitting, sleeping standing.

The 10 avataars of Vishnu are also a series of symbolic approach to the hierarchy of lower to higher living creatures.

- | | |
|------------|--|
| Snake seat | -He is represented as lying on the many headed cobra, Ananta, in the ocean of milk. Ananta denotes the cosmic energy while the ocean symbolises Ananda - endless bliss and grace |
| Color | -The blue color of Vishnu symbolises infinity as correlated to the blue of the sky which is limitless. |
| The Shell | -The Shankha or the conch shell he holds in his hand is symbolic of the Music of the cosmos (the conch has a hum when placed to the ear) This is symbolized to the continuous drone of the world... |
| The gada | -or the mace is for the removal of the evil in the world |
| The lotus | -it is the symbol of purity of the cosmic universe the same essence as explained for Brahma (the preserver is unaffected by the dirt of the world around him) |
| The Garuda | - his vehicle . The eagle symbolized power and piety. It is also the destroyer of destructive creatures like snakes, rats, etc... and has been given this status due to its piercing vision which can spot the smallest of things from a great distance. He is the implacable foe of the serpents. |



*Vishnu is linked with these eternal antagonists,
Sesha representative of the cosmic waters and
Garuda the conquering principle for He is the
Absolute, the All containing Principle.
The Absolute becomes differentiated in polarized
manifestations and through these the vital
tensions of the world process are brought into
existence and maintained.*

(Heinrich Zimmer, Myths and Symbols in Indian
Art and Civilization.)

The lotus emerging from the navel of vishnu stands to signify the procreative faculty of the navel and the lotus representative of the manifested universe of whom Brahma is the creator and so is shown seated on the lotus.

Water under which Vishnu resides is life bestowing, sustaining and fertilizing substance and therefore it remains as the emblem of life.

Krishna

The eighth incarnation of Vishnu to releave the world of the untruth and the evil.

Whenever unrighteousness triumphs and the rhythm of the world order is disturbed, he manifests himself in the world and redeems it from its woes and foes.

Attributes

The images of Krishna always portray a very calm and serene atmosphere, all the nature is in peace and no evil pervades.

The flute -To denote the smooth moving of time the flute denotes by its very character that the lord is blowing his power into the nature to remove the evil.

Cowherd -His position as a cowherd can also be a symbolic statement as the care taker of the human race against the evil and provide the required nourishment for maintenance.

Peacock feather -The peacock feather in his head gear probably stands to signify the control gained over pride as the peacock symbolises the element of pride which resides in humans.

The blue colour is the same which is used to show Vishnu , to symbolize infinity.



All the acts associated with Krishna such as overpowering of the kalya snake (which symbolizes evil to the society) or killing of a demon are with serenity and there are no battles fought **by** Krishna because he is the preserver and the mild tempered God friendlier than Brahma or Siva. He always worked peacefully to bring peace through various channels and means.

All other forms of krishna and attributes shown in various images are a combination of the representation of the attributes of Vishnu himself.

The number of Gods and Goddesses that flood the Hindu Pantheon are around 3 crore, but these comprise of the various small, animal gods, nature gods, saktis, etc. which are either related to each other by some myths or are independent of each other. But since most forces of nature are interlinked with each other the mythology somehow spins the stories to show close or distant connections between the Gods.

The most popular of the Hindu religious imagery are the Siva, Vishnu, Ganapati, Hanuman, Rama, Krishna, and Goddesses comprise of Lakshmi who is Vishnu's consort (consort represent the Sakti or the energy of the God), Saraswati - consort of Brahma and as Lakshmi is worshipped for wealth, Saraswati is worshipped for knowledge, that is why she is clad in white, with books and a veena in her hand and the necklace which indicate meditation. She is shown mounted on a white swan for the same reasons of purity.

The **process** I followed to conduct this project was threefold - firstly images in terms of paintings were documented after finalizing a few deities. After which I started intuitively deducing or by means of references from encyclopedias about animals for the mounts, or the symbolism of usage of animals and birds, various musical instruments, flowers, etc. Trying to establish a connection between the properties of the object and the reason for its usage in a particular image. e.g. use of snake in the siva images, or the elephant head for the Ganapati...and so on....

Many of these deductions turned correct when I actually referred to books stating the symbolic meaning of these pictures while a lot of them which I was not able to judge were found...still many remain to be compared and found...

I have presented here a small abstract of what I thought of as I read the Hindu 'religion' and proceeded with the main task of the project...

Hinduism as I saw or realized is more of a system, system of creation, living, dying, survival or retreat, of caring, loving, accepting, rejecting, and not a religion in the core sense. Thinking over it - there were no prophets to propagate or preach the doctrines of hinduism, it was a series of scriptures, that were written by the people for the people and over the centuries tons of millions of people came to follow this system, accepting it more religiously than socially. That is how I believe that the bare facts, physical, emotional and spiritual came to gain the epithet of a religion. It does not ask people not to sin, but states in the face of sinners that what wrong has been or will be done will somehow be straightened of its own accord, the price for which will not be spared. Taking the theory of the existence of a cosmos in every living particle - it juxtaposes the existence of man and universe - which of the two is bigger or more self-contained is a question unanswered and needs no answer.

Let me get a bit more explicit - none of the deities in the hindu pantheon are separate from each other or self-existent. They are, to put it in simple words, icons used to denote highly metaphysical concepts. These concepts are not just imagined, they can actually be proved with science, logic and maths. So how could one call hinduism a religion?

This is a statement which tingles my mind as most people might consider this gibberish or even belittling, as icons to them are Gods - (not a bad idea to have the core rules of life as one's Gods...! In fact it is better than vague images of a supreme who is impossible to comprehend) In fact these icons ARE Gods to me too...

But religious beliefs and systems to be followed in life (social customs) are so intricately confused by people by either irretrievably adhering them to each other or by absolute separation that it is difficult to convince oneself that both are in fact in their true nature required to be one and the same. In our case our social system includes a religious system, which in the above case would be nonsense because they are the same thing.

This can be more clearly realized by viewing civilization thousands of years ago, what man worshipped, why and how these elements of worship came into existence, (this I have mentioned in the introduction of this report) One can get a clear idea of how religion was derived or forced upon and of how inseparable religion and system are and how differently we treat them, thus make life unnecessarily complex.

Every individual has a unique system of living his life, his likes dislikes, etc and if we were to combine the system of life and religion, his daily rituals, chores, and style of life would become his religion, which leads or we can say which he follows at his own good will and therefore creates his own future, his life and the world around him- all born out of his own mind - some taking physical form and some embedded in his mind and soul. Thus when one is posed with a question with regard to the juxtaposing of the gross universe with man- is it not apt that the cosmos or the universe is also its own creation, or that of the guiding principle, who like an individual (be it a person or a cell) which self sustains and multiplies at the same time creates on its own...automatically, so be it an invisible cell or the entire manifested universe - are they the same thing?

An over all comprehension of the symbolism is far nearer to real world than trying to integrate the different associations made with the images. These images represent the facts, facts of life. To begin with :-

Vishnu is the all pervading self correcting order of the universe. As we all have realized that everytime things go against nature, there is some element that happens to straighten out the wrong. So this self sustaining, self running, self perpetuating power which is itself the grid on basis of which the universe works is given the image of VISHNU.

Now as we see in these images a lotus stem emerging from the navel of Vishnu , lets call him the self perpetuating order, signifies the unfolding of the universe on the basis of this grid which can only be felt or realized but is unseen.

On the lotus is seated Brahma from whom we term the universe as Brahmand and this signifies the manifested form of the unmanifest order. He represents the gross universe and every being living and non-living present in it.

Further, Siva is the form given to the element of time and fertility both representing the movement and regeneration of life.

Various other images are either ofsprings of these three major concepts or come by some means as an association of these. It is said that the Hindu pantheon consists of 33crore deities, but once the concept behind the images is clear the number does'nt seem as scary to comprehend!

Each concept has a counterpart of a female consort. These stand to signify the '**Sakti**' element in each deity. Thus Parvati with Siva, Laxmi with Vishnu and Saraswati with Brahma.

Saraswati the goddess of knowledge - is obvious because Brahma is considered as the know- all since he is the creator of the manifest universe. This is again related to the fact that man is the maker of his own destiny and his future is born very much from his own mind. So the same goes with connoting Brahma, as it is said that, the manifest universe is born from the mind of Brahma. These appear to be very abstract concepts which are not tangible and can either be understood or ignored. It is the unmanifest that guides and restores the cosmic order within which the manifest thrives.

There is another interesting parallel in terms of the cosmos. Every cell is a cosmos within it. As mentioned before, man is the maker of his own destiny - it can be understood that each man plays the role of Brahma at one level. Further down even the minutest cell has a 'Brahmand' of its own. It has its own self running, self perpetuating, order. So one could view the Brahmand at both the micro and the macro levels.

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