

Symbols and Graphic Representations in Indian Inscriptions

- H. S. Sarkar and B. M. Pande, vii+116 pp.
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'Reason is a very inadequate term with which to comprehend the forms of man's cultural life in all their richness and variety. Hence, instead of defining man as animal rationale, we should define him as an animal symbolicum. By so doing we can designate his specific difference, and we can understand the new way open to man — the way of civilization.'

(Ernst Cassirer, 1944, p. 26)

Man's abilities and behavior patterns seem to spring from his *self-consciousness*: from his self-awareness in the world and from his acute consciousness of his place in the world. By his abilities to see himself he is enabled also to see the world more clearly. He builds for himself, indeed, a picture of the world which embodies his observations and beliefs. Every man has such a world-picture, such *weltanschauung*. By permitting him to visualise, to imagine, it enables him to reason about the future as well as the past, to consider alternatives, to make plans. It facilitates, too, far more cool, rational thinking. Man, more keenly aware of the world, is cognisant now of its mysteries and of its dangers. Death, something which he has seen and remembered, finds a place in the world-picture, as well as pleasure, sorrow and fear. These too become matters for contemplation and for action.

The use of symbols is a primary characteristic of human mind, deployed and displayed in every aspect of thought and culture. In all his actions, other than purely reflex actions, a man responds as much to his picture of the world as in direct and immediate response to the world itself. To alleviate the mystery of the world beyond, the *au-dela*, the reach of the unknown, society forms a picture of the controlling forces, giving them human or superhuman forms through which man may apprehend the mysteries of the world. These pictures are projections: the society projects man's fears and aspirations onto the

world, who makes gods in his own image, and acts out in religious or civic rituals his hopes and fears. In this way the abstract becomes concrete: feelings or thoughts dimly felt or sensed, are given forms which are the symbols of the idea. Ernst Cassirer has well expressed this special feature of human experience and human behaviour (1944, 24-25):

No longer a merely physical universe, man lives in a symbolic universe. Language, myth, art and religion are parts of this universe. They are the varied threads which weave the symbolic net, the tangled web of the human experience. All human progress in thought and experience refines upon and strengthens this net. No longer can man confront reality immediately; he cannot see, as it were, face to face. Physical reality seems to recede in proportion as man's symbolic activity advances. Instead of dealing with the things themselves man is, in a sense, constantly conversing with himself. He has so enveloped himself in linguistic forms, in artistic images, in mythical symbols or religious rites, that he cannot see or know anything except by the interposition of this artificial medium.

At the end of his chapter on science in the same book he further says:

In language, in religion, in art, in science, man can do no more than to build up his own universe--a symbolic universe that enables him to understand and interpret, to articulate and organize, to synthesize and universalize his human experience. (Quoted by Charles W. Hendel in his introductory note in Cassirer, 1965, vol.3, pp. xi - xii)

In supramundane or transcendental concerns, aspects of the world-picture are actually given tangible symbolic form: images of the gods are fashioned,

regalia instituted for the rule and sorrow or desire expressed in song and dance. It is this pattern of activity, where man's understanding, feelings and thoughts about his world are given formal and often concrete expressions, with which we are concerned here.

A large part of even the visible, perceptible world, the *idam sarvam* of *Isavasya Upanishad*, a world in which man lives and conducts his pragmatic affairs, is beyond man's perception and therefore beyond his reasoning. But there is yet another world, a world beyond this world, a world described by *Chhandogya Upanishad* as "*asau loka*" which is completely beyond ratiocination or discursive reasoning. A glimpse, only a fleeting and momentary glimpse at that, of this world beyond the phenomenal world can be had as an intuitive experience that yields an insight into the structure of order. It is this insight that is articulated through the medium of symbols and myths.

It should also be emphasized here that symbols are also used to denote many ideas that are relevant only for the understanding of the phenomenal world. The nature of symbolic process consists in the fact that one thing, usually concrete and particular, stands for something else, usually abstract and generalized, and becomes a focal point for thoughts and emotions associated with that referent, or a trigger for a set of habits associated with it. There is a difference between "sign" and "symbol". According to Peirce sign is "something that stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity" and symbol is also a sign because of the fact that it is "merely or mainly used and understood as such". Other forms of sign he characterizes either as "index" (a sign affected by its object, as smoke by fire) or as "icon" (a sign that refers to its object only by virtue of its own quality, as a photograph does). What makes a sign a symbol is not, in the first place, any quality considered to be

inherent in a particular objective phenomenon but rather a particular form of subjective attitude centered on, but not restricted to, specific objects or acts.

What needs to be pointed out is that the use of symbols in apprehending the world, whether interpreted just in terms of *idam sarvam* or in terms of the cosmos in its traditional sense, is of two different orders. In the case of the world interpreted in terms of *idam sarvam*, the interpretation of the symbols that are used to connote object-relations may depend on the inductive method if such an interpretation is sought to be made by someone who is not conversant with the world view that these symbols are grounded in and derive their meaning from. This means that for all those who have not been socialized in the underlying world view or have not gained reliable and adequate knowledge of this world view, must construct the world view embedded in the symbols by examining samples of these symbols and come to a particular view of these symbols through the method of analysis, classification and generalization.

In contradistinction to this, symbols relating to what has been referred to above as *asau loka* and man's relationship with it are already embedded in the primal insight into the structure of order and cannot be meaningfully interpreted without a fair and dependable knowledge of the undergirding world view. *Symbols and Graphic Representations in Indian Inscriptions* by H. S. Sarkar and B. M. Pande represents the former. That is, it seeks to derive meaning and give the collective identity to these symbols with a view to locating them in a particular way of looking at things by collecting several samples, that also on selective basis, to reconstruct their form, substance and function.

Here a paramount difficulty faces the scholar. Insofar as symbols are apprehensible only through certain words or things that one is familiar with, the relationship between the word used and the meaning intended or posited by a particular word used as a symbol of this relationship or entity denoted is always in danger of being wrongly interpreted. This is so for two reasons. First, there is

always the danger that the meaning of the word or object used in everyday life may become dominant and push the real meaning of the symbol to the background. Second, if the meaning of symbols becomes clear only with reference to the world view it is grounded in, then the symbol can be interpreted in a variety of ways depending on the world view one prefers or is familiar with.

There are, as a matter of fact, different world views that can be used to interpret symbols of a particular socio-cultural unit. For example, James W. Heisig is of the opinion that "symbolism is the very life's breath of religion . . ." and argues that "It is through symbols that religion survives in our midst and through symbols we gain access to the religious life of the past or alien culture. . . . Nowhere throughout the broad spectrum of human culture do we consistently find the symbolic expression of sight, smell, sound, word, gesture, and ideas woven into a single fabric of such expanse and durability as in the realm of religion". But he cautions that as there cannot be a universal definition of religion, "the more precisely one attempts to isolate the nature of the symbol the greater the theoretical tangles". (*Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol.12, pp.198ff., ed. Mircea Eliade, 1987, Macmillan Publishing Company, New York).

Different theories of symbolism can be differentiated according to what factors are judged to be formative in the "symbolizing" attitude, viz. tradition and convention, biological needs and processes, the recurrence of natural phenomena, the structure of the human psyche, divine hierophanies and revelations and the like. Moreover, any further heuristic, classifying or explanatory models adopted to bring order into an actual given array of symbols need not prejudice from the outset the question of what symbol means for any individual or group, or what general patterns of meaning, if any, there are to be discovered among them. In short, we can say that *anything*—including icons and indexes—can become a symbol for *anybody* under

the right conditions without having to forfeit the whole of its presymbolic significance, and that it can by the same token lose its symbolic function in whole or part when those conditions are absent.

There are different interpretations of the process by which the symbols come to mean something to someone. Charles Morris, a behaviorally-minded anthropologist, includes symbols within the general class of signs but says that symbols—including religious symbols of an iconic and non-iconic nature—are signs that have been substituted for other signs by an interpreter, but that remain synonymous with the original that they replace, as in the case of transcript of a conversation. In contrast Susanne Langer has attempted to differentiate the symbol from the sign by virtue of its greater ability to articulate and present concepts. Or again, the logician, Susan Stebbing, while refusing to draw too sharp a distinction between a sign and a symbol, is still prepared to argue for a definition of the symbol as a sign *consciously* designed to stand for something.

However, a common, though largely tacit, assumption that runs through the entire spectrum of theories of symbolism is that the capacity to generate and use symbols is the universal property of human beings at all times and places, and does not differ essentially from the capacity for mentation in general. I have already mentioned Cassirer who made the point forcefully in referring to symbolization as the root of all social communication and to man as symbol-making species called *homo symbolicus*. The quest for the symbolic process, therefore, typically involves a quest for the structure of the psyche itself in order to explain how meaning can pass from one generation to the next through the mediation of symbols. The task is not very easy because what works as a symbol in one age may, even within one and the same tradition, cease to work for the next age, whether by becoming an index or an icon (in Pierce's sense) or by failing to serve as a sign altogether. Naturally, the same holds true of differences from one cultural setting to

the next, and even from one person to the next.

But, it can be effectively argued that Cassirer has lost sight of one very important aspect of symbols. This aspect has to do with something that shapes man's psyche to be sure; however, it is beyond it, a "beyond" that escapes the net of human reasoning. This apart, there are other problems that underlie the distinction between a synchronic study of symbols, which seeks to locate a symbol within a certain living context or fund of symbols, and a diachronic approach, which looks for an invariable pattern in at least religious symbolism. S. F. Nadel, an anthropologist using synchronic approach, stresses the utilitarian and purposive function of the symbol. Among the most representative examples of the diachronic approach at present is Levi-Strauss, but he, too, departs from his original stand in arguing that there is no way to clarify the process of signification without beginning from the concrete meaning of concrete symbols.

If the study of writing may be said to have begun no more than five thousand years ago in Mesopotamia and Egypt with those who established the first conventions for organizing visible markings into a writing system, a much longer history lay behind symbols, reaching back perhaps hundreds of thousands years into the impenetrable mists of the Paleolithic age, when people drew pictures on the walls of their dwellings. It was during that period, we may likewise suppose, that the first students of symbolism appeared. The famous sculptures and cave paintings discovered at Altamira (Spain) and Lascaux (France) are the fine examples for the study of the blend of social, religious, and aesthetic motives that lay behind them. We may think that the development of writing was an advance over cruder conventions of symbolism in the history of the progress of civilizations. However, this is also true that language was never able fully to substitute the symbols. Symbolism has continued to develop and flourish on its own within highly literate cultures. In general we may say that traditions

devoted to the use and interpretation of symbolism have accompanied the progress of intellectual thought at every step.

The turning point for contemporary interest in symbolic theory came around the middle of the eighteenth century with a group of thinkers, led by Johann George Hamann (1730-1788), Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803), Karl Philip Moritz (1757-1793), Heinrich Schubert (1780-1860) and Carl Gustav Carus (1789-1869), which is best known as Romantic movement. One of the more important thinkers was George Friedrich Creuzer (1771-1858) who utilized the comparative approach in developing a theory of symbolism by analyzing materials from Egypt, Greece, and Rome as well as India and Persia. His interpretations pointed to the important distinction between the pragmatic meaning of symbols as carriers of concrete tradition (including the scientific) and the religious meaning of symbols as the force to unify (*symbollein*) spirit and matter. There were widespread objections to Creuzer's work, in particular to his attempt to show the influence of oriental symbolism on Christian symbolism. Even today he does not receive the importance among scholars of symbolisms he deserves. Perhaps the most important of the Romantics was Johann Jakob Bachofen (1850-1887) who, being a historian of nonliterate ancient world, developed a universal, abstract theory of symbol rooted in the facts of history. For him, the fundamental theme of the ancient myth—and hence also the basis for the symbols that myths interpret—was that of gynecocracy, or "mother right".

The Romantic movement was followed by symbolists formed by a group of French poets in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Unlike the Romantics, the symbolists were preoccupied with creating symbols of ideal beauty appropriate to their age. Theirs was a quasi-metaphysical, highly theoretical attempt to idealize absolute Beauty, to promote its contemplation, and, at the same time, to create it by restoring a musical sense to poetry and

by using highly symbolic terms. It was a short-lived movement but has left its effect on symbolism in literature by cross-fertilizing it with anthropology, classics, and religion. The American counterpart of the movement, represented by writers like Poe, Melville, and Henry James, as well as European post-symbolists like Rilke, Blok, George, and Yeats, shared many of the symbolists' instincts for the mystical dimensions of symbolism. By bringing evocative, psychological power of the symbols to the surface they foreshadow all the developments in the twentieth century.

With the rise of modern anthropology the empirical method for the study of symbols, including those of the ancient world was becoming more disciplined. Here one may mention the important work done by Lewis H. Morgan (1818-1881) on Native American sacrificial rites; by William Robertson Smith (1846-1894) on Semitic sacrifice; by Henry Clay Trumbull (1830-1903) on the comparative study of sacrifice in India, China, the Near East, Africa, and Central America; by John Fergusson McLennan (1827-1881) on marriage symbolism, etc. Ethnological data gathered directly from primitive societies was beginning to accumulate, and empirical methods for the study of symbols, including those of the ancient world, were scientifically analyzed. Their attempt to translate the meaning of symbols into abstractions was more suitable to the modern critical mind. The most important figure here is Edward Burnett Tylor (1832-1917), rightly credited as the father of modern cultural anthropology. His contribution to the study of the symbol has no direct links to the Romantics. Influenced by the evolutionary theory he formulated a rather rationalistic and often condescending view of symbols. He was further influenced by F. Max Muller's theory of myth making faculty of primitive people. He thus uncovered a fundamental animism at the source of the symbolic process.

Another important influence on symbol theory at the time was James G. Frazer (1854-1941). His *Golden Bough* had grown out of his work on nature symbolism. With the turn of century,

interest in symbolism continued to grow in academic respectability. Franz Boas's (1858-1942) work on primitive art and symbolism is an important step in this direction. Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) sought to uncover their social implications. He did not care much about any "inner reality" in symbols; nor did he care where they came from. He was interested only in their effect on the society that used them. To this end, he proposed the revolutionary idea of viewing society as a system of forces conditioned by the symbolizing process: symbols were social because they preserved and expressed social sentiments. He was criticized by later scholars as viewing symbols too narrowly because he could not appreciate their polyvalent structure.

Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942) approached symbols with a keener sensitivity to linguistic implications and a more thorough theoretical understanding of the symbols. Like all symbols, words, for him, modify the human organism in order to transform physiological drives into cultural values. His main concern to classify and interpret symbolic forms — to show how process of symbolization bears on the formation and function of culture — was widely successful at undoing the generalized symbolic interpretations of myth that certain currents of anthropology had taken over from the Romantics. In interpreting the symbols through the empirical methods, anthropologists utilized the role of psychological factors and advances in linguistic theory along with the critical apparatus of philosophical hermeneutics.

Among the important figures of the latter half of the twentieth century, Victor Turner (1920-1983) has carved out for himself an important place in the study of symbols. He developed a thoroughgoing theory of symbolism out of his studies on ritual. Distinction between exegetical meaning (given by those who serve as indigenous informants), operational meaning (derived from observation of its use), and positional meaning (deduced from its place in the totality of symbols) is now

widely accepted in modern-day anthropology. Despite the emphasis that anthropologists since Durkheim have put on the pivotal role of social structure (as both matrix and offspring) in the symbolic process, the concrete form that symbols take in practice obliges us to take a closer look at the way they mirror the visible world of nature. Robertson Smith suggests, on the basis of his studies of Semitic religion, that symbols of divinity, even those closely wrought by human hands, were originally drawn from earth symbols, "natural" symbols.

Claude Levi-Strauss, in opposition to the classical "functionalist" approach championed by Malinowski, and the more traditional "symbolic" approach that describes symbols primarily in terms of their meanings, proposed the theory of "structuralism" which resurrected interest in myths and symbols as phenomena more basic than the meaning they bear for those who use them, the sociological function they fulfil, and the social system that gives them shape. His attempt to locate a universal human nature in common, relatively stable mental structures underlying all variation in behavioral expression, has helped both to reinstate the quest of the Romantics for a generalized theory to keep anthropology sensitive to insights in symbolic theory developed in other disciplines.

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) and Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961) developed psychological theories of the symbol which greatly enriched the study of symbolism in the twentieth century. Freud used dream symbols of the neurotically disturbed as fundamental data on which to base his theories of how one's perception of the past is distorted, displaced, condensed, and filtered according to the internal consciousness and unconscious dynamics of the psyche. Even those who, like Malinowski, were repelled by Freud's neglect of social factors, or who, like Levi-Strauss, rejected the primacy Freud gave to the sexual meaning and etiology of symbols, have had to acknowledge the significance of unconscious factors in the formation of myths and symbols.

By seeing symbols not merely as private symptoms of unresolved repressions but as expressions of the psyche's struggle for realization and individuation, Jung opened the door to a more positive assessment of many neglected esoteric and mystical traditions of East and West. Jung remains one of the outstanding witnesses to the power that the study of symbolism exerts over the inquiring intellect.

The evolutionary psychology has provided us the 'standard social science model' of the mind, to which most archaeologists implicitly subscribe. It presupposes that at birth it is a *tabula rasa*, waiting to be stamped with socially determined beliefs and perceptions. The evolutionary psychologists take the view that a considerable degree of modularity exists in the mind, involving specialized psychological mechanisms: for example, a language acquisition device, classification and categorization of animate as opposed to inanimate objects, etc. Furthermore, these mechanisms, which are human universals, have resulted from the operation of natural selection over a long period of time. These issues raised by evolutionary psychology are extremely important for archaeologists concerned with long term human evolution, and it is not, or should not be, just a one way process, with archaeologists borrowing ideas from psychologists; on the contrary, the latter make assumptions about the nature of the environment of evolutionary adaptedness which only archaeologists can investigate. However, such views also have considerable implications for archaeologists concerned with the more recent past, since they suggest that there exists a stock of human psychological universals which can be deployed in inferential arguments; the arguments over these issues are not the ones which archaeologists can avoid.

Thus it is clear that symbols are not confined to any particular field of knowledge or experience. They are found in almost all the branches of knowledge and experience. In arts, language, mathematics, sciences, in fact

almost everywhere. It is also clear that there exist numerous, more often incompatible, approaches to the study and interpretation of symbols. However, we can distinguish, broadly speaking, two streams of interpretation of symbols. First to be mentioned are those which stand for something we already know. The second includes those which aim at giving information about things they symbolize. The first kind of symbol need not have any resemblance to things symbolized. In the second kind it gives us information about the nature of something not otherwise known. In the case of the latter, resemblance is essential. Both kinds of symbols occupy important place, particularly in religions. They are drawn from almost all levels of creation: earth, stone, fire, water, plants, trees, metals, pots, colors, birds, animals, reptiles, etc. Sometimes different elements are combined to represent a complete symbol of qualities. Symbols are not confined to any particular period, place or people and their significance is not confined to things within the normal experience of men. They have been perceived as universally essential and helpful for various spheres and purposes of life and thought. They are sometimes found potent enough to establish contacts between the known and the unknown, the visible and the invisible.

The universality, utility, range, expressiveness and elusiveness of symbols have made their study at once engrossing and fascinating. Among all the peoples of the world the Greeks in Europe, the Egyptians in Africa, the Indians and Chinese in Asia have shown remarkable aptitude for symbolism. Of all these symbol-loving peoples the Indians occupy a prominent place for their creative genius, transcendent imagination and vision. R.P. Tripathi (Rai Govind Chandra, 1996, p.viii) says:

Apart from transmuting crude symbols into refined forms and imparting lofty significance, they (Indians) have created a host of new ones which make it easy for man to mentally and spiritu-ally climb not only to Olympian heights, soar in the etherial planes even beyond the

electromagnetic region, across the phenomenal to the nominal, and even beyond the regions where even speech and mind are left behind, what to talk of the intellect. Such an attitude and vision is difficult to visualise, let alone to understand and describe.

However, it must be admitted that giving 'meaning' to symbols has been a red herring since, as we all know, things mean different things to different people. The problem in a prehistoric context is the lack of a key to the code given in the observed patterning of the symbols, since such codes are culturally specific, the key being the reference of the symbols. The same may be true in the case of a symbol occurring in the historical period. Material symbols are not necessarily arbitrary and often play particular roles because of their specific physical properties. And, as indicated earlier, the key to the symbols used in prehistoric times can be gleaned from other sources, including texts, if they are available, delineating the world view undergirding a particular socio-cultural unit. However, this is not to deny that external information can be useful in understanding their physical remains. The use of historical or ethnographic information need not inevitably involve the projection of the present onto the past. It does not seem particularly helpful or illuminating.

We find a number of symbols on our ancient punch-marked coins which reappear in sculptures, inscriptions and in our architectural devices. They all have meaning and purpose and are beckoning us to examine them and unravel the mystery which shrouds their significance. Although much has been written on different symbols—stamped, scratched, drawn—on coins, sculptures, monuments, paintings, and pottery, etc. or in the form of graffiti designs or signs available in the Harappan, chalcolithic and Megalithic periods or as mason's marks and tattoo marks, both ancient and modern, very little effort seems to have been made to study the symbols present on Indian inscriptions in totality. Signs available on certain inscriptions have been commented upon by different scholars in the process of editing or

translating them, primarily on the basis of their similarity with some of the symbols or signs available on the ancient punch-marked/tribal coins, or those available on different types of art objects. Sarkar and Pande, too, rely on such a method for arriving at a coherent body of interpretation of symbols on Indian inscriptions. They do not, however, justify why they have adopted one strategy among a variety of interpretative modes, to bolster their interpretation of symbols and graphic representations in Indian inscriptions.

Besides the short introduction in the beginning (chapter one, pp.1-7) and epilogue, at the end of the book, (chapter nine, pp.91-98) the authors provide descriptions and discussions on symbols on the selected inscriptions in the remaining seven chapters. Chapter two (pp.8-19) deals with early symbols which are divided into four different (A-D) categories, viz, (A) Taurine and double-limbed symbols; (B) Triskelion and *triratna*; (C) Triangular variety of symbols; and (D) Other miscellaneous symbols such as Tree-within-railing and other plant devices, Hill surmounted by crescent, structural representations, animal figures, water-vessels, and indeterminate symbols. Chapter three (pp.19-22) is solely devoted to discussing the Svastika and Chapter four (pp.30-37) discusses the supposed symbol for 'Om' or 'Siddham' symbols. In Chapter five (pp.46-56) floral, ornamental and vegetal symbols are discussed. Chapter six (pp.57-62) discusses the wheel and conch-shell symbols and finally in Chapter seven (pp.63-70) various miscellaneous symbols, (different from D type narrated above), viz. the circle, criss-cross design, endless knot design, the star, the cross and vertical lines, symbols resembling Brahmi alphabet, conventional representation of signature, Bull-head with crescent, representation of bird's wing and others have been discussed. Chapter eight discusses the graphic representations of animal symbolism, fishes, birds, mythical figures, religious edifices, human figures, gods and goddesses, imprecatory scenes and sculptural ornamentation and miscellaneous

representations. The select Bibliography given at the end (pp.99-102) should have been a little more exhaustive and more accurate, considering the topics discussed in the book. Index (pp.103-116) is painstakingly prepared and praiseworthy.

Pande in his preface (p. vi) has used a caveat by saying that "this work cannot claim to be an exhaustive study of all symbols and graphic representations in inscriptions. . . . Since this monograph is being published almost in its original form as written more than twenty-five years ago . . . several examples had either been omitted or missed . . . examples published in post-1973 publications of *Epigraphia Indica*, *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum* and other later publications have not been included." However, when he himself has taken note of such books as K.K.Thapadiyal's *Studies in Ancient Indian Seals* (1972), Savita Sharma's *Early Indian Symbols: Numismatic Evidence* (1990) and Rai Govind Chandra's *Indian Symbolism: Symbols as Sources of our Customs and Belief* (1996), one would have expected him to have taken into view such important publications as A. Sen's *Animal Motifs in Ancient Indian Art*, *Symbols in Art and Religion: The Indian and the comparative Perspectives* (1972), edited by Karel Werner, and A.L. Srivastava's *Nandyavarta: An Auspicious symbol in Indian Art* (1991), what to say of more than a dozen quite important articles published in the reputed Indian and International journals after 1980.

The authors may be correct in assuming that "symbols occurring in Indian inscriptions may have conventionalized or naturalistic forms", but certainly are not very right when they express doubt about the imprecatory scenes belonging to the realm of symbols (p.5). They have chronologically divided the early symbols in two categories on the basis of their appearance in Indian inscriptions from the third century BC to about the third century AD. The first category describes the symbols belonging to third century BC and in the second category they have included all those symbols appearing in the records of the

period between the first century BC and the second-third century AD. They conclude that the "second phase seems to be relatively richer in symbols than the first" (p.8). It may be because the number of inscriptions at their command was more in the second category than the first one. Hardly does any inscription of the second phase have as many as a group of seven symbols on one inscription as the Sohagaura inscription of their first category has! Taurine, Triskelion and *triratna* symbols have been described in the traditional manner but their assertion that one of the *two-limbed symbols* is "quite similar to the *vajra* in Indra's hand" (p. 14, fig. 2: 10) may look totally speculative. A.L. Srivastava's book on *Nandyavarta* contains a detailed discussion on *triratna* and *nandipada* symbols. It may be mentioned here that the trefoil symbol on the cloak of the "priest-king" of Mohenjodaro has been compared with the "sky-garment" of the Vedic God Varuna by Asko Parpola (1985). It would be worth considering this as a cosmogonic symbol which gave rise to the *triratna* or triskelion of the later period.

Svastika (both *vama-avarta* and *dakshina-avarta*) was one of the earliest auspicious symbols that appeared on the Indian epigraphs, although its antiquity dates back to the Harappan times. This, however, does not figure in authors' category of early symbols. The antiquity of a symbol cannot be solely determined on the basis of its appearance in inscriptions. Other factors should also be taken into account. Svastika continued to appear on the Indian inscriptions right up to fourteenth century AD, and still continues to be an auspicious mark in any of the religious rites in India among the Hindus. Its various forms and meanings have been discussed in detail. The authors' suggestion that "All this change, all this rise and fall in the popularity of this symbol in India, may portray corresponding change in the philosophical outlook due to the rise of new ideology or contact with culture" (p. 27) requires further probing.

The classification of supposed symbol for 'Om' or 'Siddham' into at least thirty-one variants, the history of which covers

a period of about a millennium and a half, and in space the entire sub-continent, is really praiseworthy. However, when discussing the *anji* as an auspicious sign the authors could have taken into account the article of Pundit Padmanatha Bhattacharya Vidya Vinoda on this symbol in an ancient copper plate inscription of Assam (reproduced in the *Readings in the History and Culture of Assam*, 1984, Gauhati, Published by Kamarupa Anussandhan Samiti, Gauhati., pp. 11ff). Pundit Vidya Vinoda has given an alternative meaning of this sign. He says:

As regards the meaning of the name *Anji*—it is said that it is derived from the root *anch*, to luminate; 'A' (of Deavanagari lipi)[the representative letter of the alphabet (*Bhagavadgita*, X:33)] is luminated by Her—indicating that no letter can be 'expressed' except through Her . . . The sign . . . does not represent any particular letter or syllable (like Om)—but is the sign of the *Kundalini*—the serpent-shaped divinity that pervades every letter and regulates its pronunciation. She is in fact the creative energy bringing out every letter. In whatever form. . . . She is seen at the beginning of any inscription, the right way to reproduce that form and it will not be correct to put Om to represent the same. Om is the representative of the Vedic Brahma, whereas (*Anji*) is the symbol of the Tantric divinity "*Kundalini*".

The authors' treatment of the Floral, Ornamental and Vegetal symbols, the wheel and conch-shell is fulsome. They are right in saying that the "conch-shell is a living symbol in Brahmanical rites and has some magical properties . . . which does not find any expression in its representation in different Indian epigraphs" (p.62). However, the cosmogonical meaning normally associated with the wheel does not find any place in the authors' description of the same. Various symbols have been put under "miscellaneous symbols". They seem to be on right track when they say that the circle "represents the universe, the

cosmos in higher philosophical and cosmological speculations" (p. 65). The readers may also probably consult for the meaning and significance of 'Bull's head with crescent' symbol Sen's book, 1972, pp. 55-65, and Appendix (The Horn), pp. 105-115. Similarly for birds as symbol I would advise the readers to go through the same book (pp. 91-98). This chapter of the book under review is rather cursory and quite sketchy.

The authors have discussed the Graphic representations under the headings, Animals, Fishes, Birds, Mythical figures, Religious edifices, Human figures, Gods and goddesses and Imprecatory scenes and sculptural ornamentation. I cannot do anything better than to suggest that the books of Rai Govind Chandra (1996) and A. Sen (1972) be consulted to appreciate the full implications of these graphic representations as well as to know the historical and comparative meaning of all these representations. However, so far as the imprecatory scenes are concerned, they are well represented in the eighth century sculptures found in the Ratnagiri excavations of Devala Mitra and many more such sculptures having imprecatory scenes lying in the Orissa museum. The authors' claim that "the records of the Bastar region in central India introduced a new element in such scenes" (imprecatory and Benedictory) in the eleventh century AD (p. 86) is far from the truth. The benedictive scene (Garuda with serpent in its claws, conch-shell, wheel and lotus) depicted on the Guakuchi Grant of Indrapala of Kamrupa, 980-1010 AD. (*Kamarupa Sasanawali*, 1981, p. 102, Pl. III, Gauhati, originally in Bengali, published by Pt. Padmanatha Vidya Vinod in 1931 from Rangpura), and the imprecatory ones referred to above, are sufficient proofs that such a claim of the scholars is unfounded.

However, they have not been able to do justice to this arduous task because of their preconceived notions which distracted them from an objective approach. With a very limited data at their command they came down to certain generalizations which are not only unwarranted, but are factually

wrong as well. The authors get into some very sticky areas by discussing, far too cavalierly, the question of the identification of certain symbols. Probably because the authors are trying to do so much within such a short compass, the book's argument has a number of failings, the most notable being an anachronistic account of the origin and evolution of certain symbols. They are not able to convincingly argue for any of their identifications. They have invariably accepted the oft-repeated identifications and did not propose any new interpretation to any of the symbols discussed in the book.

In raising these questions, I am not trying to diminish the accomplishment of this important publication. Those interested in a bird's eye view of the traditional but nevertheless thoughtful and comparative account of some of the Indian symbols would do well to consult this book. The book is decidedly user-friendly as the narrative is succinct without being cryptic. The text is well integrated; coverage of a topic in one section is cross-referenced whenever the subject appears in another chapter. The most apparent merit of this volume is its graphics. Of particular value are the many diagrams, charts and schematics used to illuminate the narrative. The comparative chart given at the end of the book of different symbols available in different mediums in different periods of time adds to the usefulness of the book.

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