

6

Symbols – the Historical Artifacts of Identity

Dr. Mrinalini Thaker,

Associate Professor,

KSN Kansagara Mahila College,

Rajkot, Gujarat.

Abstract –

Symbols are conscious communication and language of the subconscious minds. They represent our multidimensional universe. Symbols surround us in numerous forms and form a complex part of our daily lives. They represent a nation's culture, heritage, and history and are part of collective human consciousness. Every culture has its own set of symbols, which are associated with different practices and perceptions. Thus, as a representation, a symbol's meaning is neither instinctive nor automatic. The paper discusses two powerful symbols namely Om and Tai-Chi and concludes how symbols have hidden meanings and doubtlessly they are historical artifacts one attires to identify with one's faith.

Keywords: Symbols, Conscious, Communication, Language, Artifacts, Identity, Religion, Culture

Symbols are conscious communication and language of the subconscious minds. They represent our multidimensional universe. Symbols surround us in numerous forms and form a complex part of our daily lives. Many religions and cultures around the world have been using different symbols for ages. In religious and cultural teaching, symbols are accessible as emblems of belonging. In many cultures around the world namely Indian, Tibetan, Japanese, Greek, and Chinese, just to name a few – people are taught and trained in symbols. Symbols have hidden meanings and doubtlessly they are historical artifacts one attires to identify with

one's faith. Nations prudently choose their symbols. Symbols have become an informal way to put forth an ideology or to express an abstract thought of a group of people who share the same goals. Symbols represent a nation's culture, heritage, and history and are part of collective human consciousness.

Being vehicles for communication within a frame of reference, symbols also convey influential meanings based on a set of collective values, potentials, and philosophies. They can cause us to think and behave in certain ways. Symbols can also lure us together via encoded information, or they can create blockades separating us. As our emotions, perceptions, and manners are influenced by these shared codes. One of the best-referenced theories about language among sociologists is the Sapir-Whorf theory. This theory states that our thinking is determined by language and that people who speak different languages, view the world and think about it relative to their own language. As one speaks a different language, one experiences a different world map. This simple theory has strong consequences for notions of culture, cultural relativism, and cultural symbolism. A symbol is a relationship between two things (Howe, 2004). Language associates and connects ideas. Thus, the mental link made between the symbol and the idea (meaning) is culturally determined. Cultural and religious symbols exist around the world because people attach meaning to them, making them icons to represent a place, a region, or a historical period – making them historical artifacts of identity. People's perceptions of the same symbol depend on their individual or collective mental, spiritual and emotional associations.

Many modern business enterprises also use symbols to boost their sale. As such Symbols have become global in our modern lives. Modern symbols are unequalled, transcultural, and transmedia. Well, it can be said that Symbols have various purposes, most of which can be condensed down into three main categories — to identify, to describe, or to create value. While today we mostly associate symbols with trademarks, and therefore commerce, early symbols served an entirely different function — to organize order from chaos.

From the embryonic period to the present-day humans have sought to use and understand the mystery of symbols. To the human mind, symbols are cultural representations of reality. Every culture has its own set of symbols, which are associated with different practices and

perceptions. Thus, as a representation, a symbol's meaning is neither instinctive nor automatic. In different ages, humans have interpreted and reinterpreted these symbols. Many of the symbols that we take for granted today as inert signs of religious or secular life that were created long ago. A symbol that heals in one country may be sore in another e.g. Swastik - in Europe and the West, it is a disturbing reminder of Hitler and the Nazis regime, while in China, India, and many parts of Asia even today, a version of the swastika signifies good luck and synchronization. Nonetheless, to determine the cultural origin of a symbol is to fall into a trap.

Accordingly, so far it is crystal clear that symbols have been used by all religions around the world. Symbols may be visual, like Cross or Om, or they may represent God as power like shivling. The fundamental concept of any field of knowledge is basically abstract and it forms the base of its complicated structure. This abstract principle can be comprehended and made concrete by following the principle of 'from seen to the unseen' and 'from known to the unknown.'

We can illustrate it by turning to maths. When teaching a point or a straight line the teacher proceeds to represent the same on the Board, with the words Let A be a point and let B another point, now joining AB gives us a line here the teacher uses the word *let* for the simple reason because the ideal point or the ideal straight line (which has neither length nor width) can never be represented on the Board. Here the point or the line is symbolic. Yet an entire geometry is built on this *let* and a whole building or a bridge is the practical outcome of this science.

Herein lies the utility and necessity of symbols. In fact, life is impossible without the use of symbols. In science as well as spirituality the use of the symbol is inevitable. Every language, Every nation, Every society, Every religion, Every sect, Every gender, has its own set of symbols.

Language is a system of symbols and rules that enable us to communicate (Harley, 2001). The symbols used in language can include speech sounds as well as writing. While religious symbols are used to convey concepts concerned with humanity's relationship to the sacred or holy and also to the social and material world. For a county or society symbols are intrinsic to

its identity and heritage. In the development of the symbol, religious experience, though, and logic are all connected, but each places different accents on the individual categories and species of the symbol. Consequently, we should remember that religion often draws its symbols and pictographic forms from the social, political, and economic spheres.

While Spirituality deals with human, creation, ultimate destiny- topics that are abstract as well as inscrutable. Here symbols and emblems become a center of energy and enhance spiritual progress. For long symbols have been used in rituals, magic, and divination. Symbols also have consciousness and humans have the capacity to work with symbols. The ability to work with symbols can be learned by initiations as in Reiki and other healing methods. Symbols connect us with universal energy. Symbols thus act as a trigger to awaken consciousness accordingly opening gateways to new realities and higher frequencies.

Let us discuss two powerful symbols, Om and Yin-Yang. Both these symbols have a special way to connect to the powerful and transforming energies of the Universe, thus creating, attracting, healing, and manifesting.



Om a powerful symbol (reference found in Mandukya Upanishad) is the universally accepted symbol of Hinduism. All cults and groups honor this symbol and use it. The sound of Om is itself powerful, and the symbol is the one that indicates subconscious, conscious, superconscious, and salvation. The use of this symbol in the right way can bring tremendous healing. The symbol of Om is an articular as well as a visual symbol for Brahma. Consequently, it represents the power that creates, develops, and destroys the universe.

This syllable OM is indeed Brahma. This syllable is the Highest. Whosoever knows this syllable obtains all that he desires. This is the best support; this is the highest support. Whosoever knows this support is adored in the world of Brahma.

(Katha Upanishad I, ii, 15-17¹)

It is the smallest mantra (मंत्र). It is also called mool-mantra, (मूल) means fundamental and ancient. It is a common practice to begin other mantra's with Om, like - Om namaḥ Shivāya - ॐ नमः शिवाय, Om shānti shānti - ओम शांति: शांति:

Even today in the majority of households that follow *Sanatan Dharam*, Om is the first word that is spoken in the newborn baby's ears. It is also the first alphabet that is taught to children when they first take a pencil in their hands. Any auspicious work begins with Om. Most of us begin our day or work or journey by uttering Om. This symbol is also found at the head of letters, at the beginning of examination papers etc. Today, Om is also a widespread symbol used in fashionable body art and tattoos. While many Hindus wear the sign of Om as a pendant. The symbol is even today seen at religious places, shops, industries as well as homes. Hence, Om is the most popular symbol and healing mantra in the spiritual community. Accordingly, Om the symbol is a heritage and cultural identity of Hindus.

Om is spoken at the beginning and the end of Hindu mantras, prayers, and meditations and is frequently used in Buddhist and Jain rituals as well. One of the most powerful mantras in Buddhism begins with Om. It is known as the lotus mantra and is chanted as *Om mani padme hum*. Om as a part of the bija mantra is regarded as sacred in Esoteric Buddhism. In Jainism "Om Namah" is used as a short form to the Navkar Mantra, which is the most significant mantra in Jainism and it also refers to the initials of the *Panca-Parameshthi* or the five supreme beings. While, *Ik Onkar* meaning One God, One Supreme Reality, and is considered a key principle of Sikh philosophy. It is also the opening phrase of the Mool Mantra from the Guru Granth Sahib, which is the first composition of Guru Nanak.



While Yin-Yang or the Tai-Chi symbol is part of the Taoist Symbols group. This symbol is used to describe how seemingly opposite or contrary forces are interconnected and interdependent in the natural world; and, how they give rise to each other as they interrelate to one another. The theory of the Yin, the Yang, and the Tao owes its origin or systematization to Chinese philosopher Lao Tse (The Old Master, 7th Century B.C.)

Eventually, the Yin Yang teaches humanity to not fight and oppose because of the differences but to sustain and maintain harmony by making use of both sides' values. It shows how opposite forces are complementary, interdependent in the real world. The Tai-Chi represents perfect and complementing balance. Yin Yang is a fundamental aspect of Taoist thought. Many critics believe that the symbol and concepts existed before Taoism, and coexisted with the Five Element theory. While the Yin Yang principles were adopted by Tao, they were also accepted by nearly all Chinese, regardless of religious belief. There are also other astrological explanations to this symbol, as in the case with other symbols also. This symbol has been found in more than one culture and over the years has come to represent Taoism.

Just like Om, Yin-Yang is still being pondered and discussed the world over by Taoists, Buddhists, Vedantists, Yogis, and students of traditional Indian and Chinese healers. Even though different religions interpret the symbol differently, the basic meaning of the symbol remains unchanged. We can thus say that Om or Tai -Chin and other symbols are not just a symbol or a single word but they are divine vibration of the Universe. Consequently, historically Symbols are used for identification as well as transformation.

Accordingly, the significance of symbols is threefold. Foremost, they are perceptible expressions of various philosophical doctrines that defined the relationship between the individual and the universe. Subsequently, they strengthen and control religious practices in their essence and form, and thirdly, they transmute the whole activity of art into something that is both creative and cultural. Moreover, by default power of symbolism to feed culture in a simple yet meaningful way, encouraged representation.

We can say that symbols are easily recognized artifacts that are used as means to communicate the history and culture of a particular nation. They can also be used to install pride and unity in a nation's population. Symbols express the history and culture of a nation. Consequently, Symbols are like artifacts, which act as prompts to remind people in the culture of its rules, beliefs, etc. They act as a way to keep people united. Symbols thus help to create a resounding mythos expressing the moral values of society.

Reference -

- From "The Upanishad - Vol. I", translated by Swami Nikhilananda, Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, New York, Copyright 1949
- Reiki and other Rays of Touch Healing by Katheleen Milner, ISBN 1886903972 (ISBN13: 9781886903975) Published October 1st, 1994 by Kathleen Milner