Sacred Symbols
Endearing Icons of Mythology, Mysticism and Devotion Adorn Hindu Art, Architecture and Culture

Symbols adorn our world at every turn, in our spiritual, social and political experience. A ring or gold pendant silently strengthens and attests to wedded love. A sign with a truck silhouette on an angled line warns drivers of steep grades ahead. The red cross signifies aid in crises. Golden arches tell vegans to beware. The best known symbols are simple numerals: 0 through 9, which originated in India in the ancient Brahmi script. Historic images are etched in the mass mind; the mushroom cloud of the atom bomb forever represents nuclear destruction. But it is our sacred symbols, icons of Divinity and higher reality, that wield the greatest power to inform and transform consciousness. Taoists gazing upon a yin-yang symbol, Navajo Indians “pouring” a feather symbol in a sand painting, Muslims embroidering the crescent moon and star, Buddhists contemplating a mandala, Christians kneeling before the cross, Hindus meditating on the Aum, Pagans parading the ankh at Stonehenge—all these are potent meditations on cosmic symbols that are gateways to inner truths. To societies of prehistory, living fully in nature’s raw splendor and power, symbols stood for supernatural states and beings—as they still can for us today. A stylized image of a snake coiled round a clay vase, for example, represented cosmic life and regeneration. Wielded as tools by mystic shamans, symbols can shape the forces of nature and invoke astral beings. To conjure power, a medieval alchemist would enclose himself in a magic circle filled with geometric pictograms symbolizing inner realities. Today, as in olden times, religious symbols derive from the world around us. The sun appears in motifs across cultures from Mexico to Mongolia, including the Hindu swastika and the wheel of the sun, honored by Buddhists as the eight-spoked dharma wheel. Hinduism has amassed a vast range of icons from thousands of years back. Coins found in the Indus Valley carry emblems of the cow and of a meditating yogi across a 6,000-year corridor of time. Images from the Vedic age are popular motifs in Kashmiri carpets and Chidambaram saris. These often serve to identify and distinguish members of a sect or community. The simple red dot worn on the forehead is both a mark of our dharmic heritage and a personal reminder that we must see the world not only with our physical eyes, but with the mind’s eye, the third eye, the eye of the soul. India’s adepts and seers have excelled at symbolic imagery, transforming mudras (hand gestures) into instantly recognized emblems and transmitters of a Deity’s power or a particular frequency of energy. Each accoutrement of the dozens of Deities in the Hindu pantheon conveys a cosmic function or force. Today this ancient magic is with us everywhere, from the temple priest’s invocation to the Indian housewife’s drawing of multi-colored designs, called kolams or rangoli, on the ground as auspicious auguries, household blessings and greetings.

Left: a deva holds aloft his head a golden vajra (“thunderbolt” representing indestructibility), a celestial weapon wielded by the Vedic God Indra and other Deities. Other symbols, clockwise: shakti vel, cudgel, sword, noose, flag, mace, chakra with four flames, an umbrella and trident. In the background, a scene at night of the magnificent Meenakshi Sundareshwara Temple of Madurai, a bastion of Hindu culture.

Vata, the banyan tree, Ficus indicus, symbolizes Hinduism, which branches out in all directions, draws from many roots, spreads shade far and wide, yet stems from one great trunk. Siva as Silent Sage sits beneath it. Aum sits beneath it.

Swastika
Swaśṭika is the symbol of auspiciousness and good fortune—literally, “It is well.” The right-angled arms of this ancient sun-sign denote the indirect way that Divinity is apprehended: by intuition and not by intellect. Aum.
Nataraja is Siva as “King of Dance.” Carved in stone or cast in bronze, His ananda tandava, the fierce ballet of bliss, dances the cosmos into and out of existence within a fiery arch of flames denoting consciousness. Aum.

Mayil, “peacock,” is Lord Murugan’s mount, swift and beautiful like Karttikeya Himself. The proud display of the dancing peacock symbolizes religion in full, unfolded glory. His shrill cry warns of approaching harm. Aum.

Nandhi is Lord Siva’s mount, or vahana. This huge white bull with a black tail, whose name means “joyful,” disciplined animality kneeling at Siva’s feet, is the ideal devotee, the pure joy and strength of Saiva Dharma. Aum.

Ankusha, the goad held in Lord Ganesha’s right hand, is used to remove obstacles from dharma’s path. It is the force by which all wrongful things are repelled from us, the sharp prod which spurs the dullards onward. Aum.

Tripundra is a Saivite’s great mark, three stripes of white vibhuti on the brow. This holy ash signifies purity and the burning away of anava, karma and maya. The bindu, or dot, at the third eye quickens spiritual insight. Aum.

Anjali, the gesture of two hands brought together near the heart, means to “honor or celebrate.” It is our Hindu greeting; two joined as one, the bringing together of matter and spirit, the self meeting the Self in all. Aum.

Bilva is the bael tree. Its fruit, flowers and leaves are all sacred to Siva, liberation’s summit. Planting Aegle marmelos trees around home or temple is sanctifying, as is worshiping a Linga with bilva leaves and water. Aum.

Padma is the lotus flower, Nelumbo nucifera, perfection of beauty, associated with Deities and the chakras, especially the 1,000-petaled sahasrara. Rooted in the mud, its blossom is a promise of purity and unfoldment. Aum.

Mahakala, “Great Time,” presides above creation’s golden arch. Devouring instants and eons, with a ferocious face, He is Time beyond time, reminder of this world’s transitoriness, that sin and suffering will pass. Aum.

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Go, the cow, is a symbol of the Earth, the nourisher, the ever-giving, undemanding provider. To the Hindu, all animals are sacred, and we acknowledge this reverence of life in our special affection for the gentle cow. Aum.
Shatkona, “six-pointed star,” is two interlocking triangles; the upper stands for Siva, purusha and fire, the lower for Shakti, prakriti and water. Their union gives birth to Sanatkumara, whose sacred number is six. Aum.

Homakunda, the fire altar, is the symbol of ancient Vedic rites. It is through the fire element, denoting divine consciousness, that we make offerings to the Gods. Hindu sacraments are solemnized before the homa fire. Aum.

Kalasha, a husked coconut circled by mango leaves on a pot, is used in puja to represent any God, especially Lord Ganesha. Breaking a coconut before His shrine is the ego’s shattering to reveal the sweet fruit inside. Aum.

Konrai, Golden Shower, blossoms are the flowering symbol of Siva’s honeyed grace in our life. Associated with His shrines and temples throughout India, the Cassia fistula is lauded in numberless Tirumurai hymns. Aum.

Ghanta is the bell used in ritual puja, which engages all senses, including hearing. Its ringing summons the Gods, stimulates the inner ear and reminds us that, like sound, the world may be perceived but not possessed. Aum.

Kamandalu, the water vessel, is carried by the Hindu monastic. It symbolizes his simple, self-contained life, his freedom from worldly needs, his constant sadhana and tapas, and his oath to seek God everywhere. Aum.
The sacred symbols of Hinduism include:

- **Trishula**, Siva’s trident carried by Himalayan yogis, is the royal scepter of the Saiva Dharma. Its triple prongs betoken desire, action, and wisdom; ida, pingala, and sushumna; and the gunas—sattva, rajas, and tamas. Aum.

- **Dhava**, “flag,” is the orange or red banner flown above temples, at festivals, and in processions. It is a symbol of victory, signal to all that “Sanatana Dharma shall prevail.” Its color betokens the sun’s life-giving glow. Aum.

- **Naga**, the cobra, is a symbol of kundalini power, cosmic energy coiled and slumbering within man. It inspires seekers to overcome misdeeds and suffering by lifting the serpent power up the spine into God Realization. Aum.

- **Nagadak**, the holy lance, is Lord Murugan’s protective power, our safeguard in adversity. Its tip is wide, long, and sharp, signifying incisive discrimination and spiritual knowledge, which must be broad, deep, and penetrating. Aum.

- **Pasha**, tether or noose, represents the soul’s threefold bondage of anava, karma, and maya. Pasha is the all-important force or fetter by which God (Pati, envisioned as a cowherd) brings souls (pashu, or cows) along the path to Truth. Aum.

- **Modaka**, a round, lemon-sized sweet made of rice, coconut, sugar, and spices, is a favorite treat of Ganesha. Esoterically, it corresponds to siddhi (attainment or fulfillment), the glad-dening contentment of pure joy. Aum.

- **Sivalinga** is the ancient mark or symbol of God. This elliptical stone is a formless form betokening Parasiva, that which can never be described or portrayed. The pitha, pedestal, represents Siva’s manifest Parashakti. Aum.