

Important Fertility symbols and Rites (Northern India)

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Abstract: *Man has always been fascinated by miscellaneous elements in nature. Amongst them all, the most astonishing is the principle of world i.e. 'seed' and 'womb', and the vital role played for their existence is by 'prana' or breath. This theory led to the evolution of the cult of fertility. In almost all religious practices fertility is represented with symbols, rituals and prayers. In plain language symbols used to depict fertility, can be living or no-living, diagrams or may be just gestures.*

I. Introduction

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Symbolism is humankind's oldest form of visual communication. Artists have incorporated symbols into their work since man first began to delve into the world of visual expression. As early as 25,000 BC, Stone Age artists carved female figures with swollen abdomens and breasts as symbol of life and fertility.

Man has always been fascinated by miscellaneous elements in nature. Amongst them all, the most astonishing is the principle of world i.e. 'seed' and 'womb', and vital role played by 'prana' breath. This theory led to the conception of fertility. In Harappa¹ culture, Mother Goddess is a symbol of Earth, as from Earth grows all life sustaining vegetables and other crops. Devdutta Pattanaik² says, "Archaeological excavations across Europe and West Asia have revealed pre-historic paintings and features indicating the awe of the ancient artist with the life giving capacity of woman."

The promotion of the generative power of earth, water and humans has always been a centre of concern for all religions honour the power of procreation.. in all religious practices fertility is represented with symbols, rituals and prayers, in plain language symbols used to depict fertility, they can be living or non-living beings, diagrams or may be just gestures. These symbols are called fertility symbols. Fertility symbols are used almost worldwide. To celebrate the power of fertility many religions practices fertility rituals. Fertility gods are worshipped to celebrate the power of procreation. In Hindu life, fertility rituals and fertility symbols are ingrained in daily life. It is harder to say since when Hindus are worshipping fertility Gods and Goddesses. The earliest found terracotta figurines were painted over with red wash. As red is a colour of fertility, and undoubtedly represent the mother earth or the lady of creation. In Himachal Pradesh, 'Kungu' is widely used on all ceremonial occasions. Turmeric powder when treated in galgal juice gives a vermilion red colour which is locally known as 'Kungu'. Since colour red symbolizes fertility thus Kungu is used to make Tikka on forehead as a blessing for fertility, plenty and fecundity.

S.Nagar³ says ringstones and discs of stones with a variety of formal reliefs have been found at many sites. The nude goddess of fertility also stands projected over a large number of stones discovered from Harappa, Mohenjodaro and various other sites of the historical period. Some of these ringstones beautifully depict the nude goddess flanked often by birds, animals and trees, besides other decorative motifs.

A special role in the fertility network is played by the ritual repertoires connected with blossoms and fruits. A blossom is a promise of fruitfulness to come; it displays its sexual organs openly, exudes a fragrance that attracts fertilising insects and honeybees and in form, colour and odour creates the mood of spring. Trees were considered great givers. A tree or its residing tree spirits could be asked for gifts of nature directly related to its biology and botany.

When we talk about tree spirits, we have to mention Yakshas. As Sinha⁴ says, "the word Yaksha is for the first time found in the Jaiminiya Brahmana where it means a "wondrous thing". Yakshas are considered to be a grand conception symbolising the mysterious principle of life and creation. Yakshas are widely accepted as much as by Buddhists as by Jains and Brahmans. Yakshas are constantly represented in the early Indian Art of Bharhut, Sanchi and Gandhara. Yakshas are considered as tree spirits who dwell in sacred trees. One of the most celebrated Yaksha is Kubera. Kubera is a god of power and productivity⁵, worshipped especially for treasures.

Yakshas also have intimate connection with waters. Kubera's inexhaustible treasures are a lotus and a conch. Sinha⁶ quotes A.K.Coomaraswamy saying, "the fact is, that the Yakshas control, not so much the waters as mere waters, but that essence in the waters which is one with the sap in trees, with the seed in living beings." As per say Yakshas also represents the figures of fertility. Yakshas are vegetative spirits directly controlling and

bestowing their Bhaktas with fertility and wealth. Savitri Dhawan⁷ also says that there is an intimate connection between the trees and the Yakshinis. It is further explained that Goddesses born in trees ought to be worshipped by those desiring children, and are designated as Dryads. The Mahabharata also speaks of Dryads⁸ as “goddesses born in trees to be worshipped by those desiring children.” They are shown commonly standing under the tree, holding a branch of tree in one hand, sometimes one of their legs is entwined around the trunk of tree. The trees represented usually are Mango or Asoka tree. There is a custom of barren⁹ woman embracing trees to make herself fertile. She is supposed to worship Sij, Sal in full blossom, Ashok, Mango, Mahua, Akh, Asvattha, Vata, Tulsi, Coconut, etc. It is obvious to worship Asoka tree amongst them all as it is tree sacred to Shiva and thus worshipped for fertility.

M.S.Randhawa¹⁰ says, “ in Salabhanjika pose, where a woman is shown plucking flowers of a Sal tree, derives from the nativity legend of Buddha in theLumbini Garden where Mayadevi, supported by the Sal tree, stretching her arm to catch the flowers, delivers holy child”, as this motif is associated with the birth of Buddha the Vrikshakas or Salabhanjika motif became a symbol of fertility. The Salabhanjika festival¹¹ was also celebrated in an Ancient city of Sravasti, with great fervour when the Sal tree flowered.

The notion that a woman fertilizes tree and a tree fertilizes a barren mother has been deeply rooted in ancient Indian past.in the case of salabhanjika the tree fertilizes a woman whereas Dohada means fertilization given to a tree by a woman. The Salabhanjika is one of the most attractive and beautiful motifs of Indian art and thought. Symbols play a very important part in our material and spiritual life. Water has always been regarded as a purifier and life giver, a symbol of fertility. Water is the most important element of fertility. Water as a symbol of fertility is among the objects that are considered to be ‘shubh’ or auspicious. It is believed, as one sets out on a journey, if he meets a woman walking towards him, carrying a claypot filled with water, it is considered a good omen and the journey is deemed to meet with success. In Northern India whenever an important journey is to be started a small girl of family stands with a water jar in her hand at the door, and one crosses the door after putting a coin or two in a water jar.

In Indian Art, the pot of abundance or the overflowing pot, ‘Purnaghata’ is the commonest¹² of all auspicious symbols. The word ‘Purnaghata’ means the pot overflowing with plants and could represent the Goddess of fertility. According to Hindu mind water is female, and thus the pot filled with water symbolizes female womb, and is thus looked upon as a simple fertility rite and as the most auspicious symbol. The main purpose of ‘purnaghata’ is to, “ identify natural fertility with human fertility, so that the productivity of nature becomes increased by the imitation of female reproductivity.” says Sinha¹³.

As per Hinduism, the waters are female and Lotus is their generative organ. Lotus also known as Padma in Sanskrit language also means female sexual organ.

Symbols of human fertility are richly drawn from nature, the Gods, animals and crafted products. Human fertility and desire can also be symbolised in animal form, popularly as snake. Serpent worship is especially linked to prosperity and offsprings. The great festival in the honour of the serpent is the Naga Panchmi which is celebrated on the fifth day of the month of Sravana.

The bird, harbinger of spring also invokes fertility. Most commonly seen is parrot. Parrot in Hindu mythology is a vahana of Kamadeva- the Lord of Love and thus appears as a common site in marriages. It is believed that the Jadao pendant, prepared for the Bridal trousseau also signifies fertility with parrots engraved intricately on a tree of life. In Northern India newly married woman is given parrot as a gift to bear children.



The lamp is also a famous symbol of fertility. A lamp with a basin as a womb and phallic wick for burning unites complimentary powers of fertility. Its a tradition thus, the lamp, full of male and female symbolism is carried by the sister of bride as she walks behind the couple to their marriage altar.

Symbols may have profound meaning for some yet not meaning anything for others. For a symbol to have significance its mening must be known to the viewer. There are numerous fertility symbols and rites found in India. Every conceivable plant, animal or bird in one or the other form is looked up to as a fertility symbol. Tree, Lotus, water, plants, Fish, Snakes, Parrots, are to name a few and the list is endless.

In Northern India, marriage ceremonies start almost five days prior to the Marriage and each ceremony symbolizes important events of life. One such ceremony is 'Batna'. On this day Boy and Girl are anointed with a mixture of oil and turmeric by five married woman who are themselves mothers of Boys. It is a general custom to send some of the mixture to the bridegroom and vice versa. Main purpose is the communion between the Boy and Girl. As oil is parallel to animal fat and turmeric is a sacred plant resembling the colour of ripe grain. Thus it is meant to fertilize bride and to protect groom from evils.

Likewise married woman from Groom's family visits the Bride's family two day prior to marriage commonly known as 'Chunni'. On this day the to-be-Bride is wrapped in a "Phulkari" by Groom's family, denoting the blessings for procreation. Phulkaris and Baghs are worn by women of Punjab during marriage festivals or any important auspicious occasions. As name says 'Phulkari' was 'flower-work' done on Orange colored Khaddar fabric. It was embroidered taking themes from daily life mainly, parrots, peacocks, flowers, trees depicting life...spring and thus representing procreation. Phulkari is gifted to Bride in her trousseau. Many of the rites performed are done with the intention of promoting the fertility of human beings, domestic animals and crops. As we have already discussed water is a prime giver of life and fertility. A fruit of life parallels fruits of love and thus is a commonest fertility rite to fill the bride's lap with fruits and to bless her with fertility.

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