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LOTUS – THE NATIONAL FLOWER OF INDIA: A MYSTICAL SYMBOL IN INDIAN TRADITION, ART AND CULTURE

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Abstract:-The symbols refer to etymological intentions that inculcate the relative reality and their abstract forms. The symbols meant for the communication of abstract, invisible, inaudible and unexpressed subjects to express in concrete, visible and audible forms. Indian art, culture and religion have always been closely related to symbols since ever. In the traditions of worship there are plentiful instances of animate and inanimate objects to pacify the devotion; such as trees, flowers, leaves, fruits, seeds, animals, birds, mountains, rivers, stones, metals, arms etc. This review intends to bring about a comprehensive idea about the lotus in Indian tradition, art and culture.

Keywords: Art, Architecture, Culture, Hindu, Iconography, Lotus, National flower.

INTRODUCTION

Lotus, the National flower of India symbolizes spiritualism, purity, fecundity, wealth, knowledge and enlightenment. The most important thing about lotus is that even after growing in muddy water it is unaffected by its impurity. Lotuses, cherished for their tranquil beauty, are delightful to take a look at as their blossoms open on the pond's surface. It is the foremost sacred plant of India. It blossoms on and above the water surface, arising from the mud under the water. The flower blooms in the morning sun and closes in the eventide. Representing the whole nature (biosphere), the root lies in the mud (lithosphere), the stalk traversing the entire depth of the waters (hydrosphere) culminate into leaves resting on it; the flower opens into the light and air (atmosphere). The flowers emit a fragrance of the subtlest vibrations of par excellence. This impressive plant, having its existence in earth, water and light, ordains their transmutation from earth to light, from mud to scent, through water to gleaming colour in the regularity of its shape, not only dictated as it is in all the directions of space, but also in the regularity of its movement, opening and closing with the measure of time, of days and nights that accomplishes the whole cycle of this vegetal world (Fig. 1).

1.1 Names in Indian Languages

English - Sacred Lotus, Indian Lotus, Chinese Water Lily; Sans. - *Ambuja, padma, pankaja, kamala*; Hindi - *Kanwal, kamal*; Beng. - *Padma*; Mar. - *Kamal*; Guj. - *Suriyakamal*; Tel. - *Kalung, erra-tamara*; Tam. - *Ambal, thamari*; Kan. - *Kamla, tavaregadde*; Mal. - *Thamara, senthamara*; Oriya - *Padma*; Kashmir - *Pamposh*; Punjab - *Kamal, pamposh*; Mundari - *Salukid ba, upal ba, kombol ba*; Assam - *Padum*; Khasi Hills - *Soh-lapudong* [1].

1.2 Botanical Characteristics

Nelumbo nucifera Gaertn. syn. *Nelumbium nelumbo Druce*; *N. speciosum Willd.* (Family - Nelumbonaceae). It is commonly called sacred lotus in reference to the sacred and symbolic status the flower holds in Buddhism and Hinduism. It is native to Asia and Australia. It is a large-flowered lotus that typically grows 3-6' tall

in shallow water and spreads by thickened rhizomes rooted in the mud. This is a marginal aquatic perennial that features rounded, parasol-like, upward-cupped, waxy green leaves (to 2' across) that appear above the water on long petioles which attach at the middle of the leaf underside (peltate). Large, cupped, fragrant, pink or white flowers (8-12" diameter) appear in summer on stiff stems above the foliage. Each flower blooms for about three days, opening in the morning and closing at night each day. Flowers are followed by nut-like fruits that are imbedded in the flat surface of a turbinate (inversely conical) receptacle (2-3" diameter) which resembles the shape of a watering can rose. Receptacles acquire a woody texture when dried (suggestive of wasps' nests) and are highly prized for dried flower arrangements. The rhizomes, leaves and seeds of lotus are edible and are sometimes used in Asian cooking [1-2].



Fig. 1: Lotus (*Nelumbo nucifera*), the National Flower of India

1.3 Nativity and Variety

(1) *Nelumbo nucifera* - This is the Indian or Oriental lotus that is also native to the Philippines, Northern Australia, Egypt and the Volga river delta at the Caspian Sea. It appears pink colour.

(2) *Nelumbo lutea* - This is native to the United States. This has pale yellow blossoms and is smaller than the familiar pink lotus.

In addition, Egypt has a long tradition of being the breeding ground of two native species of lotus - the white, alluringly called as *Nymphaea lotus* and the blue enticingly named - *Nymphaea cerulea*. It is said that the *Nelumbo nucifera* or more simply, the pink lotus, was introduced in the country from Persia sometime in history. Significantly, while all three have been depicted in Egyptian art, it is the sacred blue lotus that has been the most preferred in hieroglyphics (a form of writing using picture symbols). Interestingly the blue lotus, with its pointed petals is found everywhere in Egypt till date.

Pink, white or blue, the lotus is perhaps the only flower that competed with the gods in being known by a variety of names. In Sanskrit language, more than fifty synonyms of this flower exist.

1.4 Economic Importance

Farinaceous rhizomes (*kamak-kakdi*, *bhen*, *bhaseed*) used as vegetable. Fruiting torus used as (*kamal-gatta*, *kaul-chapani*) contains round or oblong carpels which are eaten after removing the outer covering and intensively bitter embryo. Carpels are sweet and eaten raw, roasted boiled candied, or ground into flour; considered more nutritive than cereals. Flowers were once used for extraction of perfumes. Young leaves, petals, and flowers are eaten as vegetables. Rhizomes yield a kind of nutritious arrowroot, given to children in diarrhoea and dysentery. Carpels demulcent and nutritive. Leafstalks yield a fibre. Petals pedicelles and embryos contain an alkaloid nelumbine, which acts as a cardiac poison [1-2].

1.5 Cultivation

Lotus can easily be grown in organically rich loam soil in unagitated water margins exposed to full sunlight. In larger ponds, the lotus roots are anchored directly in the muddy bottom near the water margin, where after establishment, it will spread and colonize. For water gardens or small ponds, plant roots are planted in large containers or planting baskets with up to 24" of water covering the crowns. Planting baskets grown lotus plants are easier to control and if desired, can be relocated.

2. Lotus in Traditions

Beauty bounds no limit; this is true for the lotus since ever as it has cut across religious boundaries and geographical borders and emerged as not only a most popular metaphor but also as a benchmark for beauty in varied contexts. There is bounty of references to the lotus in Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Islam, Christianity and other religions as well as in various cultures like India, Japan, Malaysia, Nepal, Egypt, and Mexico. Poets and authors generously weave it into their creations and writings, philosophers meditate over it, artists and architects adorn their creations with it and the creators of the world simply preferred this flower to manifest their feelings. Thus we find that the lotus has always been the first and often even the only choice of the divinities. The flower serves as their pedestal, adorns their bodies and most significantly, it is chosen as a simile and metaphor to account the beauty of the deities. The ubiquitous popularity of the flower and its incontestable significance leads us to conclude that there is indeed more mystical in the lotus than just what our senses can perceive [3].

2.1 Lotus in Hinduism

Similar to all other ancient symbols, the lotus has deep philosophical meanings as well. Thus this flower was revered in almost all the ancient civilizations of the world. Lotus is a symbol of spiritual perfection par excellence. It is a symbol of creation and rebirth. Since it finds its birth in the muddy waters yet blooms unstained, which teaches the devotee to seek to rise above the impurity and cast off the illusions of the world and get transformed into perfect spiritual being through enlightenment. The lotus appears in images and sculptures in both as a full bloom and as artistic style engraved petals on the pedestals of the divinities. A fully blossomed lotus represents the prosperity and good luck because of the presence of adequate amount of edibles and nectar. There are several instances where the lotus comprises as metaphor and similes for organs of the divinities such as the unopened buds are often used as metaphor to the eyes of lord Rama *kamal nayan* a synonym used for him. Similarly body colour of the lord Rama has been compared to that of blue lotus by sage and poet Balmiki as *Neelambujmn shymal komalangam...* in Ramayana [4].



Fig. 2: Lord Vishnu reposing on his *Shesh shayya* with lotus emerging from his navel



Fig. 3: Lord Brahma, the creator of the world seated on the sacred lotus

A. Lotus as Symbol of Creation

(i) Lord Brahma and Vishnu

The Hindu mythology deciphers the creation of the world in terms of the blooming of a lotus. According to the Hindu scripture *Srimad Bhagavatam*; before creation, the whole universe was submerged in water and Lord Vishnu was reposing on his *Shesh shayya* (the serpent bed of *Adishesha*). In mystical terms, *Rajo-guna* (the active element) manifested in the form of a lotus that emerged from the navel of Lord Vishnu. On this navel lotus was seated Lord Brahma, the creator of the world. A thought struck Brahma, "Who am I, seated on the stem of this lotus? How has this lotus come into being without any basis? It must certainly have one. Let me find out." Thinking thus, Brahma entered the lotus through the minute pores of its stem. It was a futile search and Brahma returned to his base, the lotus, and decided to meditate to find out the answer. It then dawned on him that the source of his being was shining within himself [3]. Simultaneously, he also saw Vishnu reclining on *Adishesha* whose form was like the stem of a lotus. Incidentally, it is because of the fact that the lotus stalk emanated from Vishnu's navel that he earned the name of *Padmanabha* - one who has a lotus in the navel (Fig. 2, 3).

(ii) Vedic Goddess Aditi

The first scriptural references to Lotus headed Goddess *Aditi* appear in the Rig Veda. Her form as *Aditi* is also known as *Lajja Gauri*, *Adya Shakti*, *Matangi*, *Renuka*, and many other names. She is the most ancient Goddess form in the religious complex that is today referred to as Hinduism and a symbol of the feminine principle of creation or infinity (Fig. 4). Two verses of the Rig Veda are mention worthy here:

"*Aditi is the sky; Aditi is the air; Aditi is all gods ...; Aditi is the Mother, the Father, and Son; Aditi is whatever shall be born.*"

(*Rig Veda*, 1.89.10)

"*In the first age of the gods, existence was born from non-existence. The quarters of the sky were born from her who crouched with legs spread. The earth was born from her who crouched with legs spread, and from the earth the quarters of the sky were born.*"

(*Rig Veda*, 10.72.3-4)

The most comprehensive monograph to date on Vedic *Aditi* or *Lajja Gauri* is Bolon's *Forms of the Goddess Lajja Gauri in Indian Art*, published in 1992 by Penn State University Press [5-6]. Here is her lyrical description of the idol:

"The modeling of the female figure is supple and sensitive. The suggestion of soft, sagging stomach flesh, like the slackening of a woman's abdomen after childbirth, is masterly. The breasts are firm with folds of flesh beneath them. The arms and shoulders are delicate and feminine. The legs, in *uttanapad*, are spread more naturally than in other [*Lajja Gauri*] images with the knees up, the feet are flexed with soles up, and the toes are tensed. The nude body is ornamented with necklace, *channavira* [body-encompassing jewelry that hangs from the neck, crosses between the breasts, passes around the waist and up the back], girdle, bracelets, and armlets that are like a vine tendril wrapping around the arms and actually ending in a leaf. Tassels of the anklets also seem plantlike. There is a cloth woven through the thighs.

"... The half-open lotus flower, sitting like a ruff on the shoulders, is turned three-quarters toward the viewer. The goddess holds, to either side of her lotus head, a half-open, smaller lotus flower, the stalk of which winds around her hand. The fingers themselves have a tentril-like quality. The fingers of the right hand seem to form a *svastika*, symbol of fortune and well-being. No doubt, the suggestion of her relation to vegetation is intended. ... This image is a masterpiece of fluid modeling and conscious symbol-making." [5-6].



Fig. 4: Lotus headed Goddess *Aditi/Lajja Gauri* – a stone sculpture from Naganatha Temple, Bijapur District, Karnataka, India, c. 650 CE, now in the Badami Museum[6].
(Right image – an artistic version of the same)

Whatever Lajja Gauri's ultimate origins, She is clearly a very auspicious Goddess. Everything about Her suggests life, creativity, and abundance. Her images are almost always associated with springs, waterfalls and other sources of running water -- vivid symbols of life-giving sustenance. Her belly usually protrudes, suggesting fullness and/or pregnancy; in earlier sculptures, Her torso was often portrayed as an actual pot, another ancient symbol of wealth and abundance. Lajja Gauri's head is usually a lotus flower, an extremely powerful, elemental symbol of both material and spiritual well-being. The often vine-like portrayal of Lajja Gauri's limbs suggests a further creative association -- the life-giving sap of the plant world; She is vegetative as well as human abundance. Her images are virtually always prone, laying at or below floor level in her characteristic *uttanapad* posture, as though rising from the Earth itself, a manifestation of the primordial Yoni from which all life springs. Indeed, Her birth/sexual posture unambiguously denotes fertility and reproductive power. This is Devi as the Creatress, as Mother of the Universe, as the Life-Giving Force of Nature, in a bold, uncompromising display of the Divine Feminine Principle. The late scholar David Kinsley, who wrote several popular studies of the Goddess in India, noted that Lajja Gauri's headlessness is meant to focus her devotee's attention away from her individual personalities, and upon her cosmogonic function as the Source of Everything That Is. He wrote in 1986: "Some very ancient ... examples have been discovered in India of nude goddesses squatting or with their thighs spread ... The arresting iconographic feature of these images is their sexual organs, which are openly displayed. These figures often have their arms raised above their bodies and are headless or faceless. Most likely, the headlessness of the figures is intended to focus attention on their physiology, placing the emphasis on sexual vigor, life, and nourishment." [5-6].

B. Lotus and Hindu Goddesses

The goddesses such as Lakshmi (the goddess of wealth) and Saraswati (the goddess of knowledge) have the closest affiliation with the lotus. Goddess Laxmi keeps lotus in her hands, wears a garland of lotuses and all her limbs are comparable to a lotus. Dr Ananda Coomaraswamy has classified Lakshmi idols into three categories – lotus-seated (*Padmasthanita*), lotus-holding (*Padmagraha*) and lotus-residing (*Padmavasa*) [7]. As per the Vishnu Purana, at the time of her emergence, Lakshmi was seated on a lotus and also held the flower in her hand [8]. There are numerous iconographical, sculptural and numismatic evidences and references that depict Lakshmi and Saraswati in relationship with the lotus (Fig. 5, 6). In the Sunga period sculptures, she is shown as seated or standing on a lotus. A miniature image of the Kushana period shows her holding a lotus and a Sunga coin shows her standing on a lotus with a flower in her hand [8-9]. There is carved image of Saraswati seated on a lotus on the Bharhut column.



Fig. 5: Goddess Laxmi seated on the lotus (*Padmasthanita*, *Padmagraha*).



Fig. 6: Goddess Saraswati seated on the white lotus (Swet-padmasna).

2.2 Lotus in Buddhism

According to Buddhist beliefs, Lord Buddha had the sign of a lotus on his feet and at birth, wherever he placed his foot, lotuses bloomed. Most Buddha images show him seated on a lotus in bloom. The lotus symbolizes his other worldliness, his great compassion for creatures of the world, his immortality and enlightenment besides his impeccable purity of mind and body.



Fig. 7: Lotus in Buddhism

Buddhas seated on a lotus in bloom or on a lotus-seat have been found in chaityas, viharas, stupas and caves in many countries. Not only Buddhas but Bodhisattvas too are lotus seated and holding a lotus. A Bodhisattva is one who has the capacity and potential and the qualities needed to become a Buddha. One such example is the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara. He is the most worshipful and revered Bodhisattva and very popular in China, Japan, Korea and other Eastern countries [9]. He holds a lotus with a long stem in his left hand and is generally seated on a lotus in full bloom. The lotus is also associated with various other Buddhist gods and goddesses like Tara, Paramita and Kwan Yin (Fig. 7). Besides religion and culture the lotus also plays a significant role in Buddhist philosophy and rituals.



Fig. 8: Lotus in Hindu *Shri Yantra* (Left) and Buddhist *Mandal Yantra* (Right)

The most revered Buddhist mantra is '*Om Mani Padme Hum*' - "Oh jewel within the lotus, we bow to you." The Buddhist Mahayana treatise is titled *Sadharmapundarika Sutra* meaning, "the lotus, a key to the religion of truth. It is otherwise called *Lotus Sutra*. According to another sutra, the image of Universal knowledge rests on a white lotus which is also the heart symbolizing self-bliss and ultimate bliss. A chant goes that when the white lotus descends on earth it changes everyone's life for the better. Buddhist ages, with reference to the cosmos, are also initiated by the appearance of a lotus. Again, it is this flower that augurs the birth of a Buddha. If there are no blossoms, no Buddha will appear. At the beginning of the current era, the *Bhadrakalpa*, there were 1000 blossoms signifying the birth of 1000 Buddhas. Four virtues are attributed to this flower - scent, purity, softness and loveliness. It was this belief that elevated it to a privileged status amongst flowers. Not only in this life but also in the afterlife, the lotus has a special place in Buddhist tradition. Buddhist mandalas (yantras) depict different Buddhas and Bodhisattvas inside a lotus or on its petals.

The Yantra has a specified pattern which cannot be changed as it represents the diagrammatic energy form of the deity, whereas the creation of a 'Mandala' is open to the artist's inspiration and creativity in Shri yantra of Hindus lotus is the base (Fig. 8).

2.3 Lotus in Jainism

Jains consider a full-blown lotus as an auspicious symbol. Their Tirthankaras, Yakshas, Yakshinis, Yoginis, Vidyadevis are all associated with the lotus in some form or the other. Jain beliefs give special importance to special dreams, which they term as *Mangala Swapna*. According to Jain texts, whenever a future Tirthankara is to take birth, the mother has an auspicious dream. The *Kalpa Sutra* extensively describes 14 dreams that Tirthankara Mahavira's mother saw. Out of them, four were connected with the lotus. They are - a pitcher filled with water and lotuses; a big lake full of lotuses and water creatures; a garland of different flowers and a vision of the four-armed goddess Sri. The latter was seen holding a lotus in her hand and surrounded by elephants performing *abhisheka* (ritual of pouring sacred water) to her. As far as art and architecture are concerned, the lotus is extensively sculpted on stone [8-9]. One such is a famous white marble statue of Jain Sarasvati from Pali that shows her standing on a lotus. *Ashtamangala* are a set of eight auspicious symbols in Jainism and out of them six are associated with lotus (Fig. 9).



Fig. 9: Lotus in Six out of eight, *Ashtamangala* Fragment of a Jain *Vijnaptipatra*, (Source - Brooklyn Museum)

2.4 Lotus in Yoga and Ayurveda

Yogic and Ayurvedic wisdom of ancient India, deal with the human body and its wellbeing with seven chakras or nerve centers. Each of them is symbolized by the lotus with different number and colour of petals (Fig. 10).

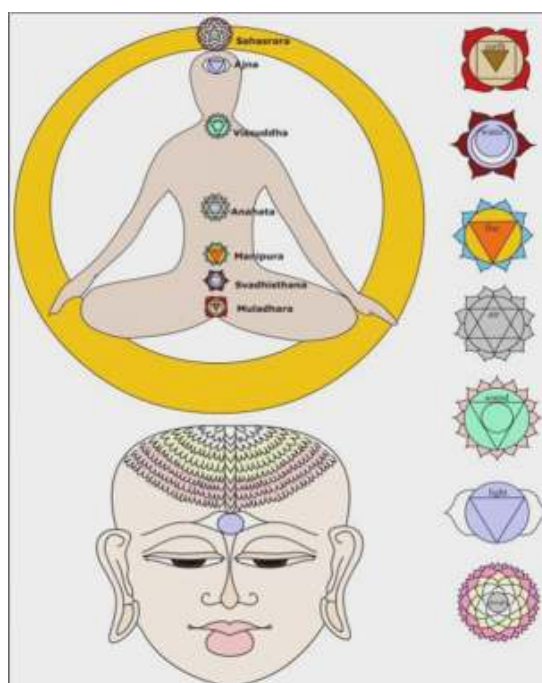


Fig. 10: Lotus with different number and colour of petals in 7 chakras.

No.	Chakra	Symbol
1.	<i>Muladhara</i> or root chakra	Lotus with four red petals
2.	<i>Svadishtana</i> or sacral chakra	Lotus with six vermillion petals
3.	<i>Manipura</i> or solar plexus	Lotus with ten blue petals
4.	<i>Anahata</i> or heart chakra	Lotus with twelve petals
5.	<i>Vishuddha</i> or throat chakra	Lotus with sixteen petals
6.	<i>Ajna</i> or third eye	Lotus with two white petals
7.	<i>Sahasrara</i> or crown	Lotus with 1000 petals representing the infinite

3. Lotus in Indian Art and Architecture

The lotus occupies pride of place in the vast repertory of Indian ornamental motifs, among the symbols and devices that recur in traditional art and architecture. The fundamental difference between Indian and western art is that the Indian art is profoundly based on spiritual and religious intends while the western art lays great emphasis on photographic realism and the naturalistic treatment of human and animal forms. Every object portrayed in Indian art has a religious and symbolic significance [10-11]. Among the flowers lotus is the most preferred symbol that embodies the Hindu philosophy of complete detachment from worldly affairs and purity of heart and mind. Figure 11 (A-F) depicts lotus in Indian art of architecture through ages.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

It was not only in the tradition of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism but also in other Indian religions like Sikhism, Islam and Christianity where the lotus occupied a significant place. The Sikh gurus glorified the lotus as an embodiment of strength, chastity and power along with the ability to remain detached from whirls of impurities. The flower was therefore used as a motif at the dome of the Golden Temple at Amritsar. Many churches of Kerala and Goa feature the lotus motif. In Goa, four evangelists, on either side of Jesus, stand on full-blown lotuses on the podium in Bom Jesus Church. In Islamic architecture, the lotus firmly acclaimed its place, as can be seen from the fact that the padmakosha or sheath of lotus petals is the most popular form in Mughal architecture. The famous Charminar of Hyderabad and Islamic monuments at Bijapur have numerous representations of the lotus [10-11].

Beyond the borders of this country, the Egypt too has lotus vested with several tales, philosophical and mystic meanings of blue lotus. The blue lotus has been famous in Egypt since ever as the most perfect type of flower. The blue lotus (*Nymphaea cerulea*) belongs to the Water-Lily family. However, it is distinctly different from the blue lily. The blue lotus is also known as Egyptian lotus, blue water lily and sacred lily of the Nile. Fossils of this plant that belong to the Jurassic period (about 160 million years ago) have been discovered. Further evidences show the prolific growth of this plant before the Ice Age.

The blue lotus is associated with various gods. Ra (ancient Egyptian sun god with the head of a hawk), the universal creator god is believed to have first appeared as a beautiful child floating on a great blue lotus. The blue lotus thus symbolized the origin of life. Interestingly, the ancient Egyptians believed that the Nile valley area was the birthplace of human civilization and there is a remarkable similarity between the shape of the flower and the Nile and its tributaries.

A vast ocean of Indian literature is full of references to this unique flower. The oldest literary work of the world, the Vedas, enshrined with references to the lotus. The great poet Kalidasa, mastered his poetry to adorn the beauty of nature and women with the metaphor of lotus [11]. Besides Sanskrit poets, Nobel Laureate Rabindranath compared the Indian culture with that of lotus as; "Indian culture is like a blooming lotus of a hundred petals, each of its petals representing a regional language and its literature."



Fig. 11: A – Painted ceiling from a cave temple at Ajanta enclosing lotus flowers within, B – Lotus carved ceiling of Jain temple, C & D – The motifs and ceilings from 2nd century BCE to 7th century CE onwards, E & F – Columns with lotus motif [11].

The long tradition coupled with its significance that the lotus earned through ages adorned it the enviable status of the national flower of India. In fact, post-independence, many of the coveted government awards have also been named after the flower – the *Padmashri*, *Padmabhushan* and so on. The influence of lotus has not only spanned religions, cultures and continents but also the ages, and it is expected that the mysticism of the lotus all over the humanity is not likely to over in the millennia to come. Indeed, the sun will never set on the lotus as long as the human civilization and culture will exist.

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- Contemporary Research Index
- Academic Paper Database
- Digital Journals Database
- Current Index to Scholarly Journals
- Elite Scientific Journal Archive
- Directory Of Academic Resources
- Scholar Journal Index
- Recent Science Index
- Scientific Resources Database
- Directory Of Research Journal Indexing

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