

Symbolic motifs in Traditional Indian Textiles and Embroideries

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Abstract

Indian textiles whether woven or embroidered, are always known for their textures and motifs. use of vibrant colours, excellent execution and hidden interpretations of the motifs used in creation of these textiles have always lured people worldwide. Establishment of trade routes with foreign lands and influence of different emperors who ruled India resulted in import of many indigenous motifs to be integrated with Indian ones rendering them stylized form. The interpretation of these motifs may be discovered from sources that have nothing to do directly with textiles but the development of a particular motif is undoubtedly is the result of religion, customs, natural surroundings and social beliefs of that particular area to which its creator belongs. Though always speculative, the meaning of the motifs used in decoration of textiles may change with cultural context but the symbolic meaning of various motifs remains same wherever they are applied.

Key words: Textiles, symbols, motifs, Culture, Religion.

INTRODUCTION

India, world famous for its crafts and culture has a diverse, rich and lengthy textile tradition. In fact, the traditions of many crafts in our country can trace their origins back, almost to about 5000 years ago, to the ancient Indus Valley and Mohenjo Daro civilizations, and they have been created and developed through the ages against a background that is richly woven with the myths and imagery of sign and symbol.(Bhatnagar Parul).

The record of ancient and medieval Indian textiles exists mostly in literature and sculptures. The pattern of textiles seen in early sculptures clearly indicates that Indians excelled the art of weaving, printing and embroidery techniques since very early times. The mention of weaving in Rig-Veda- the oldest sacred book of Hindus, gives first literary information about textiles in India. Ancient Indian epics Ramayana and Mahabharata also give account of a variety of fabrics worn by people at that time. The craftsmen took their inspiration from legends of Vedas, Puranas, other sacred stories as well as nature and shaped various motifs. Laced with religious beliefs, environment, culture, history, architecture and daily life activities, motifs and patterns created by Indian craftsmen are a symbol of artistic intellect. The symbols represent concepts and beliefs personified in human, animal forms, floral and geometric shapes. Enjoyed

as aesthetically appealing artworks, the motifs as well echo some philosophies and wise sayings and sources of religious and social lessons to the people.

The word symbol is taken from Greek word 'Symbolon' which is anything that stands for or becomes a representation or identification for something other than its actual meaning. Meaning of many symbols get changed with time and they represent something other than their earlier association but at every stage it has to be accepted collectively by a culture, philosophy, region, or any group of people.

In textile patterns we see an immense library of images and this warehouse of symbols with which we surround ourselves is to insure health, happiness, good fortune and long life. These motifs are open to endless interpretations and variations of use.

II. LITERATURE SURVEY

As India is a land of varied cultural background, it undoubtedly lent uniqueness to art by reflecting local tradition region by region. As a result each region developed its own distinctive style. Indians use all the embroidery stitches known to the rest of the world, but with local variations and innovations enhancing their aesthetic appeal. Each area has its own special style, largely determined by environmental influences (Chattopadhyay K.D. 1975).

Daud ali in his literary work "Ancient India" mentions that one of the important activity in ancient India was making beautiful textiles. Hindu and Buddhist sculptures of ancient times bear testimony to India's rich textile traditions. India had numerous trade links with the outside world and lured the foreigners with its exotic textiles. The establishment of trade routes to and from the Indian subcontinent brought many non-indigenous motifs to be integrated with the traditional Indian motifs. Floral designs were introduced by Turkish and Persian invaders. Vied as a map of miniature paradise, Gardens had a symbolic significance for Mughals, they inspired designs in carpets made during Mughal period.

Indian embroidery is thought to have developed contemporaneously with that in ancient Assyria and Babylon (Doreen Yarwood). In the Indian subcontinent, embroidery has been practiced for centuries not only to adorn textiles for temples, houses, clothing and drapes for animals, but it also has a symbolic and traditional purpose (Paine, 1990; Harvey, 2002; Crill, 1999). The rich embroidery belt of India stretches from Gujarat, through Rajasthan to Punjab, Himachal Pradesh unto Kashmir down to U.P. (Joshi Damodar, 1980).

The textile and embroidery art in each region in India reflected geographical location, climatic conditions, local tradition and developed its own distinctive styles. Most varied floral and natural motifs in Kashmir wore the testimony of Persian and Mughal influence. The weaving craft provided one of the most reliable hallmark of Indian people. The intricate designs introduced in silk clothes were truly described as 'poetry in Fabric form'(G. K. Ghosh, Shukla Ghosh). Marco Polo visited India during thirteenth century and had written about the finest and most beautiful cloth in all the world-buckrams like the tissues of spider webs found on coromandel coast, using indigo for dyeing textile in Cambay and spinning of cotton in Gujarat.(Wilson, Kax.1979)

From early times embroidery was worked in gold and silver threads. Characteristic motifs include the elephant, the peacock, the lotus and the mango (Doreen Yarwood 143). In India, the peacock, lotus, elephant and above all, the mango has provided inspiration to embroideries of different times. the mango is an overwhelming favourite and variations are found in different parts of country under names associated with other objects of more or less size and shape, e.g. windblown cypress in Kashmir and the cashew nut in the Deccan (Brij Bhushan Jamila, 1958).

Indian designs and motifs play an integral part in the objects they embellish. According to Jaina Mishra, traditional textiles made were normally made for personal use and the different motifs used in them almost always reflect the beliefs of the people who made it. These textiles had a message embedded that the individuals within the group are familiar with even though we as

outsiders may be able to see the common motif all over, but do not understand what it is or why it is there. The message or meaning does not have to be deep or complex. It could just be the depiction of an animal from their daily lives. Traditionally the work was not meant for commercial purposes but was done more as personal adornment or as a gift to their families and friends. For generations the skill for this type of work was handed down from elder to younger ones.

Fabrics communicate at multiple levels. The raw material used in it tells about geo-climatic conditions and trade links whereas the technique reveals the level of civilization as well as link with others. The motifs tell us of its legends, its myths, its beliefs and the way of life of its creator. (Jamila Brij Bhushan 1958)

Varied patterns found on textiles are often symbolic, based on religious and cultural background, steeped in the belief that the symbols and motifs used will ensure fertility, prosperity, protection from evil spirits to the wearer, or the patterns are linked to religious beliefs. Hindus often use animals and symbolic figures, such as Lakshmi (goddess of wealth), Krishna, or the elephant god, Ganesh. On the other hand geometric and linear designs that emphasize technical skills, using dazzling, brilliant colors and the play of light on floss silk to enhance the visual impact of the work produced is prominent feature of Muslim textiles. Difference in work is based on traditional customs of tribes, regions, religions, castes.

was passed from mother to the daughter (Mittal, 2004).

Symbol is anything that is used for identification of attributes, or meaning of an object beyond its actual character, shape, form, color and use. The symbols normally spread beyond their originating region or culture. With time many symbols change their meaning and represent something other than their earlier association. The meanings of the symbols may vary from region to region or from culture to culture but over all there is a common sutra that ties them all.

The present study is undertaken to obtain an insight in various symbolic motifs used in various traditional Indian textiles and embroideries.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research approach was employed for this study. Form analysis, a variation of content analysis was used to systematically document the symbolic motifs used in the decoration of the embroideries and textiles of India. Form analysis is used in studies evaluating the appearance and use of nonverbal elements. Information related to motifs in textiles and embroideries were collected from primary and secondary sources.

The National Crafts museum, Delhi, The National Museum, Delhi, Surajkund Mela, Faridabad, different state Emporiums, Exhibitions and fairs related to textiles of India were visited to get an insight into the motifs used in various traditional textiles. M.S. Randhawa library Punjab agriculture university, Library Punjabi university Patiala were visited to gather information. Various articles, magazines, books and internet were searched.

Result and Discussion

Paisley Motif

The design motif known as paisley is a textile pattern characterized by colourful, curved abstract figures, is taken from the ancient Aryan boteh (botteh) motif. 'Botteh' is a Persian word meaning bush, shrub, cluster of leaves or a small dense forest of small trees or bushes. Due to huge shawl production in Paisley, Scotland, the pattern was given the name paisley. Paisley, an important motif is widely used in Indian textiles and embroideries, is a droplet-shaped motif which resembles a mango so it is called mangai motif or Ambi which means mango in Punjab. It is also known as Carrey design named after Urdu word for mango seed.



Ambi Shape



Early Paisley Motif

Of Indian and Persian origin, the kidney shaped motif evolved from 17th century floral and tree life designs used in Mughal textiles. The early motifs usually were of single type of plant with large flowers, numerous consolidated and micro flowers and thin stems and leaves in curved shapes in which the components of the pattern would scarcely connect or cover with another (Frank, 1986). With time, the designs became denser, more flowers and leaves.

Influenced by many cultures the paisley design came to the west as a result of the trade in cashmere goods from the Kashmir in 18th century and thence to Europe. With close proximity of Kashmir to China and middle east influence of all of these cultures led to the development of the paisley design.

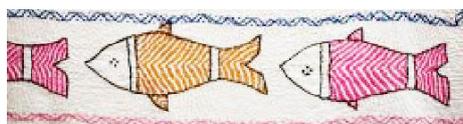


Paisley Motif in Saree Pallu

The paisley design is rich in spiritual and symbolic meaning. In India, the paisley signified the time of harvest, a time of both socio-economic and spiritual significance. The Paisley motif was made for the King of the India for royal purpose like crowns or court garments. Beside Kashmiri shawls the paisley motif traditionally is widely used in beautiful Kanchipuram saree, Buttidar Baluchari saree of West- Bengal, Daccai Jamdanis, Banarasi brocade, Tancoi silk saree and white embroidery of lucknow -chickankari embroidery, zardosi work and kantha embroidery. As all these art forms were patronized by Great Mughals and royals, the use of royal ambi motif made them fit for the approval of their owners.

Fish Motif

In most of the folk cultures and folk lore, the fish is considered as a universal symbol of fertility and symbol of purity in many cultures. Fish is known for its beauty and free flow body is thought of as a symbol of the life force, a force of regeneration and reincarnation and a charm against the evil eye. The Hindus think of it as sign of good fortune. They appear as Matsyavtar-saviours in Indian myth, *avatars* of Vishnu and Varuna.



Fish Motif in Kantha of Bengal

Its symbol in Chinese culture is commonly found in most places of business or wherever a person wishes to enhance abundance.

In Nakshi Kantha fish is one of the most popular and mindfully chosen motif usually shown in water which is symbolic of purification and regeneration and universally accepted as source of life. Beside Kantha the motif is also used in Madhubani.

Parrot Motif-

Parrots are love birds considered as vehicle of Kamadeva, God of love and sex in Hindu mythology. It symbolizes sensual desires, courtship and passion seen in Indian art mostly in company of Krishna and Radha, Hinduism's eternal lovers.



Parrot motif in Patola, Paithani and Appliqué work

Motif of parrot is generally found in textiles from West Bengal, Patolas of Gujarat and Paithani of Maharashtra, applique work of Orissa, Rajasthan embroideries and resist textiles.

Peacock Motif-

Considered as a pious bird by the Hindus, peacock is one of the most important motif used in embroidery and textile ornamentation be on cotton or silk fabric alike. Rasleelas of Lord Krishna or dances too are associated with peacock. The motifs is favourite of people of Punjab and Himachal Pradesh and can be seen as a decorative motif on the walls in bright colours. A vehicle of goddess Saraswati, it finds mention in Rig-veda and Atharva-veda. The peacock motif was found on pottery excavated from Indus valley site, in Mauryan Buddhist sculpture, Gupta-period artefacts, Mughal miniatures, and in present-day wall paintings and textile indicating it as a potent symbol. It signifies love and beauty, immortality, courtship, fertility, celestial regalia, divine forces and virtuous strength. The image of peacock is also used in the Vedi or the marriage podium as a defensive charm to save the bride and groom from the evil eyes



Mor in Patola Of Gujarat

Kantha Of Bengal



Peacock embroidered in Phulkari of Punjab

All Indian textiles, whether printed or embroidered, peacock motif is profusely used on light background with dark colour combinations. In Phulkari, folk embroidery of Punjab the peacock motif is shown as two triangles (representing male and female) forming the body and the arrows at the back and in Kaatiawar and Kutch mirror work embroidery, the peacock is used in different forms. In Orissa Patola peacock motif is very popular.

Conch shell motif-

The word 'Shankha' is a Sanskrit word used for conch shell. Shankha or conch shell is an attribute of Lord Vishnu. It means 'naad' in Hindu scriptures. In various Hindu rites, the conch-shell is used to produce a sound for creation of positive vibes in the atmosphere by blowing through it. It is believed that shankha is brother of Goddess Lakshmi, has the power to bestow opulence and grant wishes. According to Hindu beliefs, conch shells is considered as an auspicious object where in the centre of the Shankha resides moon, Varuna in the womb, Prajapati at the backside and Saraswati in the front and if skilfully blown, it keeps away evil spirits. Always held by Lord Vishnu on his right hand, the shankha is considered as divine jewel, hence worshipped and held in high esteem by Hindus. Known for its medicinal value, shankha is mentioned as uparasa in Ayurveda or the Vaidya shastras. The shankha is a recurring motif in sculpture, stone carving and painted murals of Ajanta. Due to its spiral shape it is believed to be shaped from the holy waters showered from heaven. In Bengal, it is still common to see young girls waving conches on arrival of the Bengali New Year. Shankha is an important motif in

the traditional textiles of Orissa and Kantha embroidery of Bengal.



Conch shell motif in sarees of Orissa

Kalasha Motif:

Amongst all auspicious symbols used in Indian art throughout history, Kalasha-the holy ceremonial water jar hold a special place. It is an important part of ceremonial occasions and wedding in Hindu culture. It is a symbol of the universal mother goddess, abundance, fertility, good fortune and success in life. The kalasha or Purna Kumbha as one of the auspicious (mangala) symbols are found in the Hindu, Buddhist and Jain sanct, represents the womb and the fertilizing waters of life. Perhaps, that is why a ghata-sthapana is performed during Navaratra festival. Seed-grain is planted in the pot as a symbol of fertility.

The motif of the Purna Kumbha is seen in the carvings of the sculptures, and paintings of ancient India. During puja the Purna Kumbha is decorated with the auspicious signs like Swastika and filled with water and on its mouth are placed leaves of mango tree and a bowl of rice with a coconut on top. The water in Kalasha is considered as amrit - the inexhaustible elixir. It was a ritual to sprinkle Kalash water accompanied by mantras over the head of devotees to ensure plenty, purity, prosperity an enriched and fulfilled life.

With time craftsmen started using it as motif in the enrichment of textiles through weaving, embroidery or printing.



Kalasha Motifs in Sarees of Banaras and Painthani

Lotus Motif:

Symbolizing purity, peace and cosmic harmony, the lotus represents the very core of mandala with its multi-petal depiction indicating the multiplicity of universe. In Hindu religion eight petalled lotus is depicted springing from the naval of Lord Vishnu, the protector, upon which Brahma the creator sits. Here universe is represented by lotus (where each petal represents, earth, fire, air, ether, mind, intellect and ego) which is growing out of central sun with Brahma as giving rise to concepts of fertility and richness.

Lord Krishna's feet are compared with lotus and Lakshmi- the goddess of wealth is often referred to as Padma or Kamala, both meaning lotus so the flower symbolize her, prosperity and material wealth. She is always shown holding lotus flower in her hand.



Lotus motif in border of Kanjivaram saree

In Indian textiles lotus is used in varied forms as a motif. whether it is Chamba rumal of Himachal Pradesh or Kantha of Bengal, Phulkari of Punjab or Kasuti of Karnataka, Picchvais of Nathdwara or Gujarat embroidery as well as Ikats and Painthani, lotus motif is liberally employed in accordance with local beliefs and traditions full of meaning and significance. The inspiration behind liberal use of motif in textiles specially wedding sarees may be the fecund aspect of lotus that is spirituality or the longing to be blessed by goddess Lakshmi for prosperity and royalty.

The Elephant -

Widely used as motif in Indian textiles, Elephant is a symbol of wisdom, fertility, prosperity, strength and royalty. As vahan of Indra- the Vedic deity, the elephant is associated with rain and fertility. It was depicted on the seals excavated from Indus valley sites and on the Hindu and Buddhist architecture. The elephant, considered an auspicious animal is strongly built and conveys wisdom along with its inherent strength. Elephants were used by kings during wars in India thus came to symbolize the God of Warriors. In Asian cultures, the elephant is a symbol of good luck, happiness and longevity. The elephant is admired for its memory and high intelligence and in Indian culture, elephants are a symbol of mental strength, earthiness and responsibility. Considered as the representation or the living incarnation of Lord Ganesha, elephants are believed to bring good luck and prosperity. Ganesha is the god of success and the destroyer of obstacles and evils.



Elephant motif in Patola and embroidered textile

Traditional Gujarati sarees Patola and Gharchola, Kimkhabs of Banaras, embroidery of Rajasthan and Madhubanis of Mithila have elephant motif in richly decorated form depicting war scenes and royal extravaganza.

Rudraksh Motif:

Rudraksh beads are known to be spiritual and medically curative. The word Rudraksh is made of two words- Rudra(Lord Shiva) + Aksha(Eyes) meaning Shiva's eye. According to Hindu mythology Lord Shiva meditated(Tapasya) for one thousand years to destroy evil in the world and finally when he opened his eyes he saw people in pain all around and a drop of tear from his eye fell on the ground resulting in germination of tree bearing fruit of Rudraksh. Because of this association with Lord Shiva the seeds are considered highly auspicious believed to be holding the creative energy of Shiva, bestowing the wearer with similar powers .



Rudraksha Motif

Possessing ascetic charm, a symbol of peace and power, the beads are adapted in designs in multiple ways in woven so The boota or central part of the flower surrounded by petals is considered akin to a rudraksha and sarees having this design central to the overall pattern are considered as Rudraksha weaves.uth Indian sarees such as Kanjivaram, Gadwal, hand woven sarees of Orrissa.

The Sun : Sun is considered as source of life and has been worshipped by people of varied cultures and religions. Depicted as the only divine form visible to human eye sun plays a vital role in Hindu rituals. According to Hinduism, sun rides a chariot drawn by seven horses that represent the seven colours of light. Chronicled in the Rig Veda Gayatri Mantra , the foremost mantra in hinduism and hindu beliefs, is also a prayer to the "giver of light and life" - the sun (savitur). In Hindu mythology, the sun god is worshipped as a symbol of health and immortal life. In Hindu mythology, the sun god is worshipped as a symbol of health and immortal life. The Rig Veda declares that "Surya is the Soul, both of the moving and unmoving beings". An obeisance to the Sun God yogis and munis devised the Sun Salutation which is a comprehensive exercise, which contributes to mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being. Taking creative inspiration from sun textile artists adopted it as textile motif in various stylised forms in Kanjivarams of Tamilnadu, Ikat sarees of Orissa, Phulkari of Punjab, Kantha and Gujrati embroidery



Sun Motif in Kantha and Ikats

Bel buti:

Creeping vine motif (Bel) was originated in Persia, Mughals adopted it as motif in ornamentation of textiles. Its thin leafy curvy stems laden with flowers, buds and fruits has inspired the textile weavers and embroiderers to create marvellous patterns. It is one of the most commonly used motif by designers in Block printed fabrics of Muslipattnam, Sanganer and chamba rumals. It is also liberally used on Kashmiri shawls.



Chintz fabric with creeper motif

Purely artistic by nature, Buti is a floral motifs found in saris. There may be a small buti and large buta, which are depicted as flowers, sprigs or bushes. The smaller buti are usually woven in repeated rows across the sari field while the buta are usually created in rows along the end piece. The term buta or buti are Persian by origin but have symbolic value for Hindus and used widely in Indian Sarees and textiles liberally to fill the empty spaces.

The Tree of life:

Found across civilizations, Tree of life is an ancient motif having a long history. According to Hindu mythology it is known as Kalp- Taru or a symbol of wish fulfilment. The idea illustrated by this motif is that all living things on this earth are inter connected. With branches of tree reaching out to sky, roots deep in earth, the motif projects the idea of sustenance of all life forms amid fertility, knowledge, nourishment, protection and in the end death.

The first evidence of tree motif can be seen in murals of Ajanta caves belonging to Gupta period a tree motif is seen narrating jataka tale with its branches interconnecting smaller related scenes from the tale. During Mughal period it evolved into a widely used decorative motif and started appearing in textile in varied naturalistic, geometric and abstract forms exclusive to wealthiest classes only. During 17th to 19th century palampore or cotton bed coverings it was portrayed as a central flowering tree surround by vases, animals or birds and leaves with a series of narrow and broad borders of curvilinear patterns based on flowers and leaves.



The tree of life motif in palampore and kalamkari

In England the motif was incorporated in textiles and bed spreads with crewel embroidery taken as symbol of fertility and renewal meaning the leaves of the tree will die in fall and again will regenerate in spring.

Indian textiles and art forms adapted this motif with different interpretations. Form shawls of Kashmir to hand painted kalamkari of Masulipatnam of Andhra Pradesh , Gond paintings and Mata ni pachedi art- The Kalamkari of Gujarat this motifs used in diverse forms.

Conclusion:

Man has this innate desire to express his creative and aesthetic instincts in various art forms since ages. Indian tradition of crafts is richly woven with the myths and imagery of sign and symbol. Motifs in Indian textiles reflects the artistry of craftsmen in connecting religion and social beliefs of common man with art but nature also played a vital role in their creations thus resulting in creation of exquisite textiles which not only convey the deeper meaning of the idea or concept which are sought to be expressed. From the study it was seen that signs and symbols in the forms of motifs in Indian traditional textiles and embroideries are the secret language of textiles carrying forward mythical beliefs with ageless beauty. Motifs created on textiles through weaving, dyeing, printing, painting and embroidering may protect wearer from evil eye or may symbolize fertility or abundance

With time these motifs, myths, signs and symbols may have acquired newer cultural expressions but the symbol endure eternally and the intrinsic beauty of these motifs never faded away furthermore enhanced by perception of their symbolism.

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