

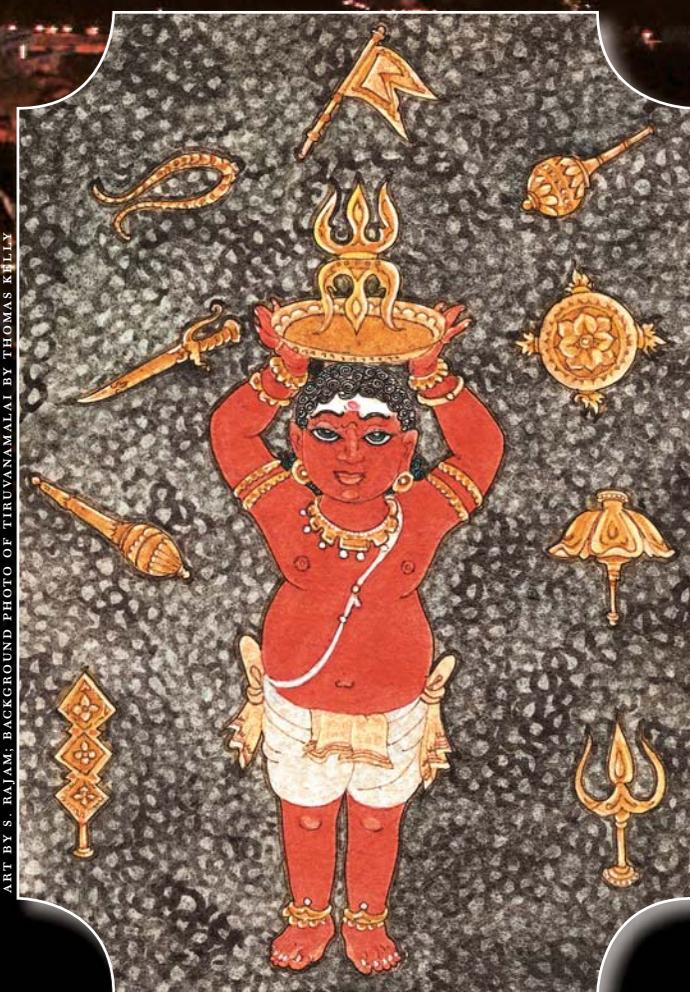
Sacred Symbols



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

Sacred Symbols

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



ART BY S. RAJAM; BACKGROUND PHOTO OF TIRUVANMALAI BY THOMAS KELLY

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 above his head a golden vajra (a “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.



वट

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.



ART BY A. MANIVEL

स्वस्तिक

Swastika 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.

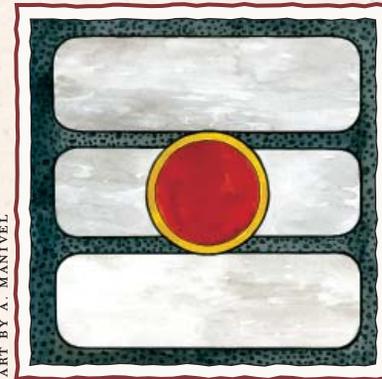
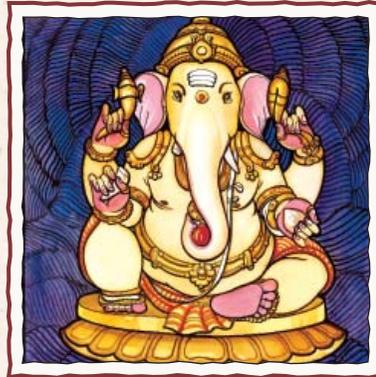


प्रणव ॐ

Pranava, Aum, is the root mantra and primal sound from which all creation issues forth. It is associated with Lord Ganesha. Its three syllables stand at the beginning and end of every sacred verse, every human act. Aum.

गणेश

Ganesha is the Lord of Obstacles and Ruler of Dharma. Seated upon His throne, He guides our karmas through creating and removing obstacles from our path. We seek His permission and blessings in every undertaking. Aum.



त्रिपुण्ड्र

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.

नटराज

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.



मयिल



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.

नन्दि

Nandi 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.

बिल्व

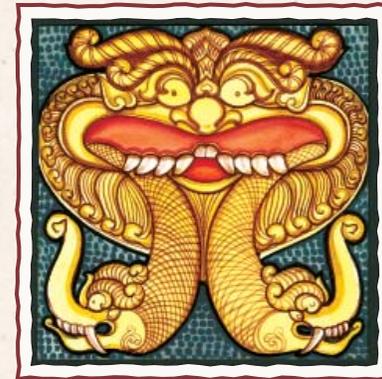
Bilva is the bael tree. Its fruit, flowers and leaves are



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.

महाकाल

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.

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.

अञ्जलि

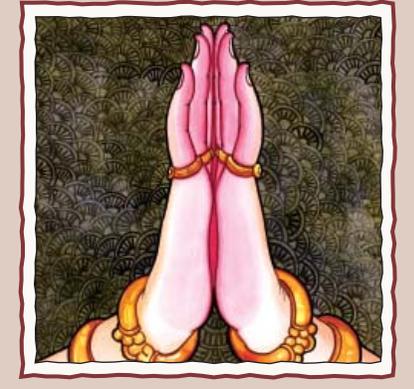
Anjali, the gesture of two hands brought together near the



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.

पद्म

Padma is the lotus flower, *Nelumbo nucifera*, perfection of beauty,



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.

गो

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.

मान्ङ्कोलम्

Mankolam, the pleasing paisley design, is modeled after a mango and associated with Lord Ganesha. Mangos are



the sweetest of fruits, symbolizing auspiciousness and the happy fulfillment of legitimate worldly desires. Aum.

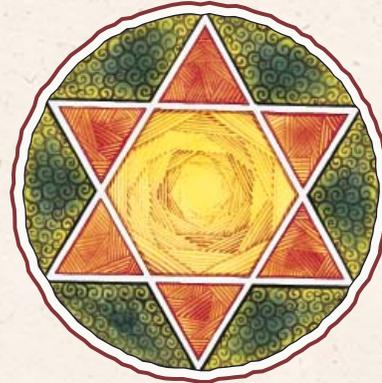
षट्कोण

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.

मुषिक

Mushika is Lord Ganesha’s mount, the mouse, traditionally associated with abundance in family life. Under cover of darkness, seldom visible yet always at work, *Mushika* is like God’s unseen



grace in our lives. Aum.

கொன்றை

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.



होमकुण्ड

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.



घण्टा

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.



गोपुर

Gopuras are the towering stone gateways through which pilgrims enter the South Indian temple. Richly ornamented with myriad sculptures of the divine pantheon, their tiers symbolize the several planes of existence. Aum.



குத்துவிளக்கு

Kuttuvilaku, the standing oil lamp, symbolizes the dispelling of ignorance and awakening of the divine light within us. Its soft glow illumines the temple or shrine room, keeping the atmosphere pure and serene. Aum.



திருவடி

Tiruvadi, the sacred sandals worn by saints, sages and *sat-gurus*, symbolize the preceptor’s holy feet, which are the source of his grace. Prostrating before him, we humbly touch his feet for release from worldliness. Aum.



कमण्डलु

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.



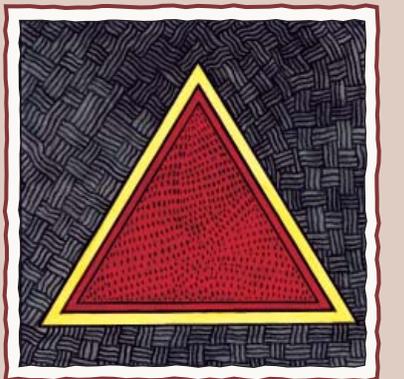
कलश

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.



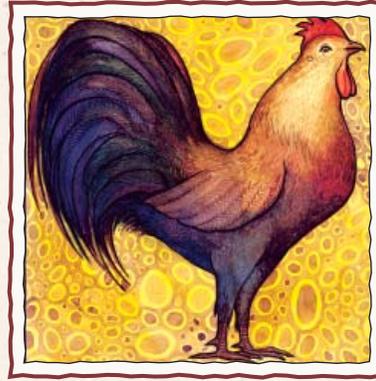
त्रिकोण

Trikona, the triangle, is a symbol of God Siva which, like the Sivalinga, denotes His Absolute Being. It represents the element fire and portrays the process of spiritual ascent and liberation spoken of in scripture. Aum.



சேவல்

Seval is the noble red rooster who heralds each dawn, calling all to awake and arise. He is a symbol of the imminence of spiritual unfoldment and wisdom. As a fighting cock, he crows from Lord Skanda’s battle flag. Aum.

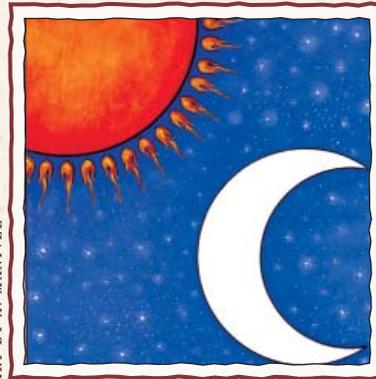
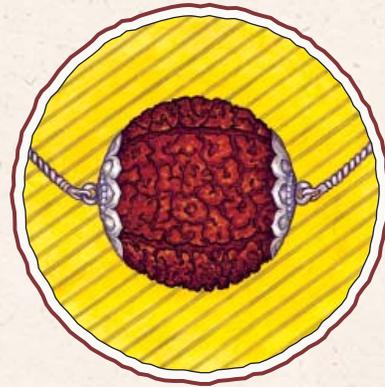


रुद्राक्ष

Rudraksha seeds, *Eleocarpus ganitrus*, are prized as the compassionate tears Lord Siva shed for mankind's suffering. Saivites wear *malas* of them always as a symbol of God's love, chanting on each bead, "Aum Namah Sivaya."

चन्द्र सूर्य

Chandra is the moon, ruler of the watery realms and of emotion, testing place of migrating souls. *Surya* is the sun, ruler of intellect, source of truth. One is *pingala* and lights the day; the other is *ida* and lights the night. Aum.

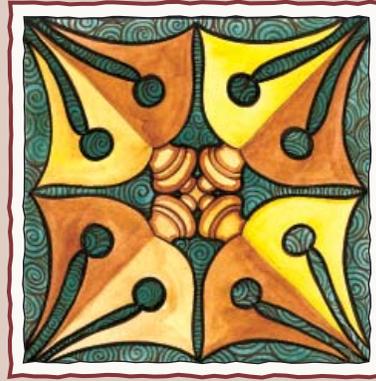


वेल

Vel, 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.

त्रिशूल

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.



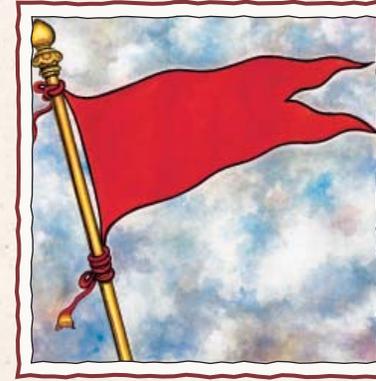
नाग

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.



ध्वज

Dhwaja, "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.



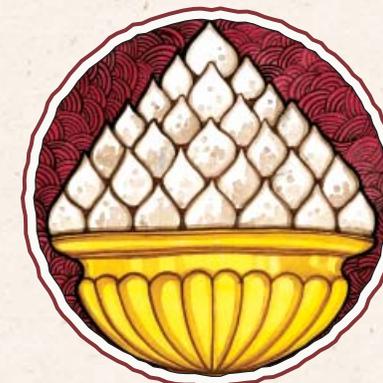
शिवलिङ्ग

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.



पाश

Pasha, tether or noose, represents the soul's three-fold 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.



कालचक्र

Kalachakra, "wheel, or circle, of time," is the symbol of perfect creation, of the cycles of existence. Time and space are interwoven, and eight spokes mark the directions, each ruled by a Deity and having a unique quality. Aum.



हंस

Hamsa, vehicle of Brahma, is the swan (more accurately, the wild goose *Anser indicus*). It is a noble symbol for the soul, and for adept renunciates, *Paramahamsa*, winging high above the mundane and diving straight to the goal. Aum.



मोदक

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 gladdening contentment of pure joy. Aum.