

Lotus: Timeless Impressions of Infinite Connotations

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ABSTRACT

The lotus is the flower in which even the Gods discovered their majesty and grace, artists and poets found their subtlest inspiration of mystics, beauty and cosmic existence. The lotus flower has various symbolic meanings and each culture, region and religion illustrate and represent lotus differently. More than just a flower from the lakes and ponds, it personifies the myths, legends and texts of the country. Lotus as opposed to any other symbol or motif in Indian arts and crafts possessed a unique significance. Though one of the most written about flower with symbolic applications - spiritual and material, the information related to lotus is scattered. This review paper is an attempt to collate the information pertaining to the expressions of lotus in various forms and its impressions to streamline the information related to this timeless motif. Tracing the historical evidences and decorative imaginings of lotus as the subject is boundless beauty have been outlined. It covers documenting the impression of lotus as a flower from its natural form to decorative form with meanings that range from spiritual to cultural nuances.

Key Words : Lotus, Craft, Indian textiles, Motif, Symbol

INTRODUCTION

Lotus as a flower has many legends that range from mythical origin to spiritual significance which has inspired people from different walks of life through thousands of years. The flower has been popularised in architecture, poetry, painting and textiles (Fig. 1).

Lotus flower, is known to have existed for millions of years. This is seen in the fossil records which show that the flower has survived between 1.8 million and 10,000 years of Ice age, during which many plants went extinct. Having survived the various ages and catastrophic situations that earth as a planet has gone through in millions of year, lotus flowers are found all across the world

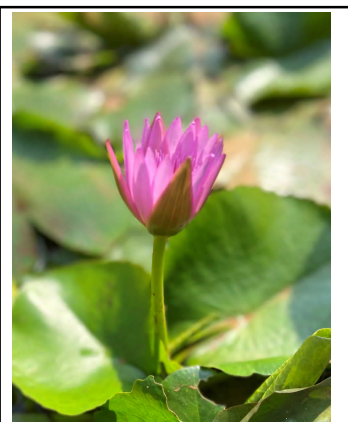


Fig. 1 : Indian Lotus in a pond

from Japan to Iran, India, Russia and Australia (Moulton, 2020).

Objective and Methodology of the study:

There is a need to collate all the scattered information on the national flower of India- Lotus to mark the seventy fifth year of Independent India.

The paper aims to review the information available through a systematic collation of information regarding the analysis of the flower and its various connotations across varied forms.

LOTUS - Decoding the natural form and botanical aspects:

Lotus is the popular name of a group of flowers belonging to the family *Nymphaeaceae*, an aquatic plant. Its two genera in India - *Nelumbo* and *Nymphaea* - are commonly known as lotus and water lily respectively, typified by *Nelumbo nucifera* (6:1). This is a larger and more striking plant than the blue and white *Nymphaea* water lilies of Egypt. The flower of Indian lotus is bright pink, white or blue. It is around 15-20 cm in diameter and

stands high above the surface of the water. The distinctive characteristics of a lotus (*Nelumbo*) are the shape of its petals - pointed oval are set in three rows. A large pistil in the centre is covered by a perforated casing - gynvecium, which may be as large as the palm of a hand. The pistil is surrounded by a thick fringe of stamens. The large, circular leaf is floppy and stands out of the water on a long stem. Carpels are completely free and irregularly sunk in torus as longitudinal section of the flower shows (Fig. 2).

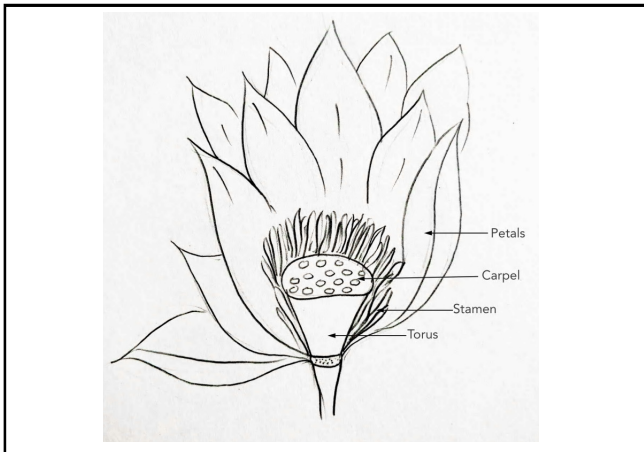


Fig. 2 : Parts of Lotus flower

In the visible art lotus has been represented quite faithfully. Although like every other work of art there are some artistic deviations. To some extent this flower has been stylised and abstracted, but its petals, torus and in some cases detached carpels make it possible to identify it with lotus as found in the nature. In the plastic art this flower has been presented from various angles. When shown from above the petals are arranged in two or more rows around the torus and detached carpels are visible (Fig. 3-6).

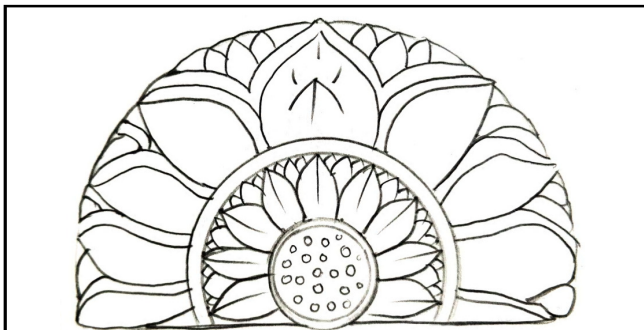


Fig. 3 : Lotus petals flower semi circular arrangement

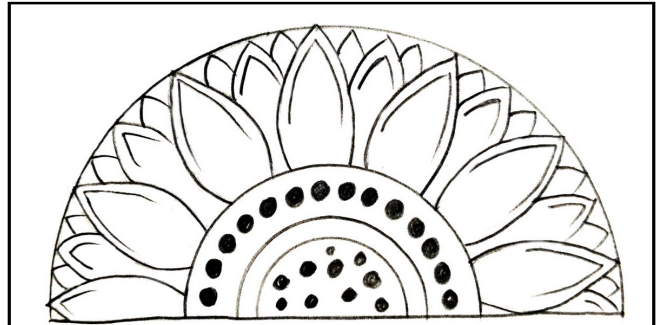


Fig. 4 : Partial lotus petals flower arrangements

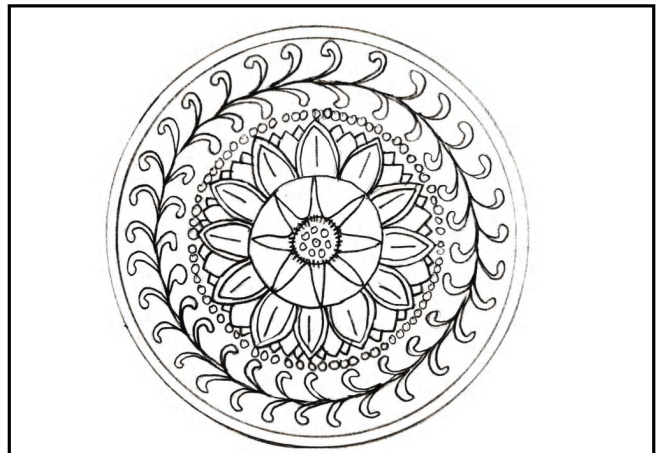


Fig. 5 : Lotus petals flower ornamented arrangements

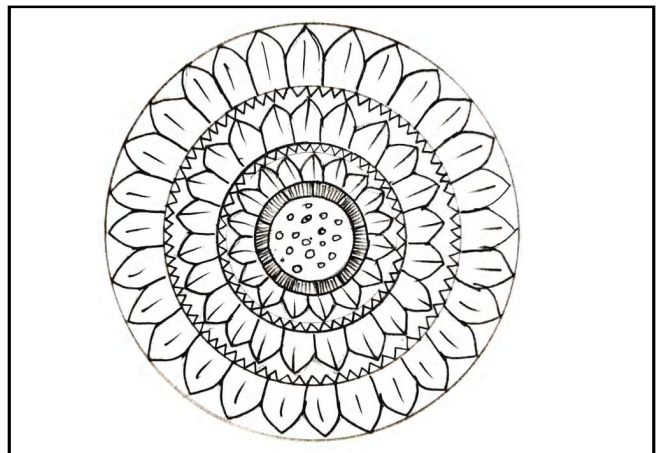


Fig. 6 : Lotus petals flower circular arrangements

The side view of the flower is characterised by a raised torus from the axis of the flower with hanging petals and carpels (Fig. 7-8).

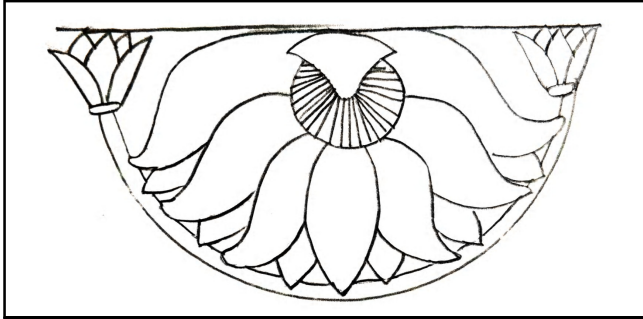


Fig. 7 : Lotus petals flower side view

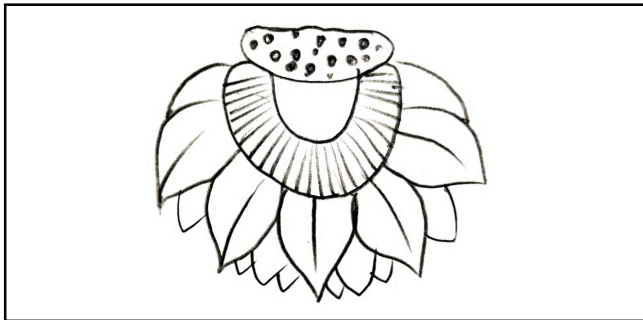


Fig. 8 : Hanging lotus petals flower simple arrangements

LOTUS - the mythological symbolism:

Lotus as a flower has said to hold in itself the elixir of life and often symbolised as ‘the eternal womb’. Out of the innumerable flora, lotus maintains itself as an emblem of special sanctity. The freshness and captivating beauty of the flower lends the proof go life supporting power as it rises from the depths of water spreading its petals and leaves on the water surface. This is the primary reason for lotus flower to be used as a throne or pedestal support of deities from various religions (The Lotus in Indian Art | Mystery of India, 2015). It derives from an abstraction of the patterns made by plant forms. It makes possible the creation of partially naturalistic designs with which there is no beginning and no end. Such a visible expression of infinite continuity within an ordered and unified system has religious symbolic connotations.

The presence and depictions - Hinduism:

One of the most accepted legends mentions that lotus flower was born from the womb of the ocean. The references of the same are in the legend of “*Samudra - manthana*”- churning of the ocean (Jain and Jain, 2006). The legend has it that once gods and demons agreed to jointly churn the ocean in search of obtaining nectar that was hidden in the bottom of the ocean. It is believed that

during the process of churning, the ocean revealed lotus with Goddess Lakshmi along with fourteen precious jewels (Moulton, 2020). Various vedic texts have varied depictions of the origin and versions of the same. Lotus the favourite flower of the Vedic seers of the Buddha and his followers, of the iconographers and artists also retains its prime position in the classical Sanskrit literature. It primarily is depicted as the standard of judgement of human beauty. This presence of lotus gained momentum from the later Vedic period and reached its peak in the literary works of the classical period. The poetic works and plays of this period are replete with such comparisons where the lotus has been used as an *upama* (simile) (Wilson, 1994).

There is a predominance of the lotus flower in association with the various Hindu deities, where it serves as their seats and as decorative motifs in the vast range of ancient Indian art. Lotus symbolise an assortment of thoughts and conceptions when associated with the deities. Vedas. *Puskara* is the earliest denomination of the lotus flower found in the Vedas. *Puskara* is the main word used in the *Rigved* to denote lotus. The word *Puskarini* denotes a lotus pond and has been used in that sense in the *Rigved* as well as in the *Atharvaved*.

The lotus is the embodied essence of water, as has been asserted in the myths. In the Gita, Sri Krishna, while explaining his omnipresence in all the things that exist in this world says: I being soma, whose essence is rasa nourish all plants. Lotus being the embodiment of this rasa is a symbol of fertility in connection with the goddess Shri Lakshmi. She has been invoked in one of the later additions to the Rigved called the Khilya-hymns. She is the older conception of Lashmi, the goddess of wealth and is inseparably associated with lotus, some of her names being padmalaya - one who dwells in the lotus. Shri Lakshmi enjoys descriptive names of aardra (moist), pushkarini and padminimi (both mean ponds full of lotuses). In connection with Shri Lakshmi lotus being a representative of earth and water (out of the combination of these two elements the lotus springs forth) and the embodied essence of nourishment symbolises fertility on which prosperity and wealth depend in the ancient Indian times. The Kushana statuette of Shri Lakshmi is the earliest representation of the goddess on stone. Goddess Shri Lakshmi is standing on two lotuses coming out of a brimming vessel. With her left hand she is holding her right breast - depicting that she nourishes the living beings. Lotuses are gushing forth from the brimming vessel, the

symbol of never ending spring of life and she is surrounded with these flowers. It indicates abundance and prosperity. Standing amidst a profusion of lotus plants she is prosperity and abundance personified.

Apart from the significance of lotus with Goddess Lakshmi, lotus features across numerous other deities. Lord Vishnu, the preserver of the universe is invariably seen holding the lotus in one of his four hands. Goddess Parvati, Surya the sun God as well as Bodhisattva Padmapani are other deities seen adorning lotus flower in their hands. The personification of river goddesses Yamuna and Ganda are seen holding a long stemmed lotus that resonate with the S- shaped elegant posture in the illustrations. The flower is also featured in timber and lithic temples all over India in form of rosettes and exclusive carvings on exterior as well as interior walls, doors, etc. The heads of deities is seen surrounded with a circular halo comprising of eight petals of lotus flower, where the numeric eight is seen to have mystical significance.

The influence in Buddhist Art :

The Indian lotus motif has a strong presence and influence in Buddhist art. There are various images of Buddha and Bodhisattvas often showing sitting or standing on highly stylised lotus flowers and the lotus is one of the Buddha’s auspicious sign (Fig. 9). The references of the same are seen in the stupas at Sanchi and Amravati (Fig. 10) (Wilson, 1994). The influence on these art forms from 3rd Century B. C. After Ashoka, the Mauryan emperor designed the motif of lotus for the base for animal figures in the pillars.



Fig. 9 : Lord Buddha on lotus

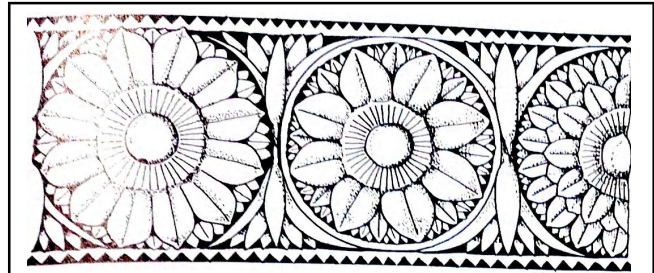


Fig. 10 : Indian lotus rosette carved in stone on Sanchi Stupa I, Madhya Pradesh, 1st century BC - 1st century AD

A legend believes that before Maya, mother of Buddha conceived him, she had a dream where a white young elephant holding a lotus in trunk entered her womb. The story continues to say that a lotus rose from each of the first seven steps taken by Lord Buddha after his birth (Moulton, 2020).

Apart from the *Mauryan* period, even the entire *Sunga* art sees lotus in a stronger presence surpassing all the other art motifs. Lotus was seen and perceived in varied forms, sometimes as a component or as an independent art. It ranged from medallions, geometric patterns, entwining creepers, elephants, celestial beings and in form of carvings on pillars, railings, gateways etc. (Fig. 12). The motif also superseded its presence during the *Gandhara* and *Kushana* art periods as well (Fig. 11 and 13). Through the years the iconographic norms established lotus with *Bodhisattvas - Avalokiteshvara* and *Lokantha*, the one carrying lotus in his/their hand/s. This led to the emergence of lotus-seated Buddha as an essential representation of Lord Buddha and *Bodhisattvas*. Thus through the years till present time,

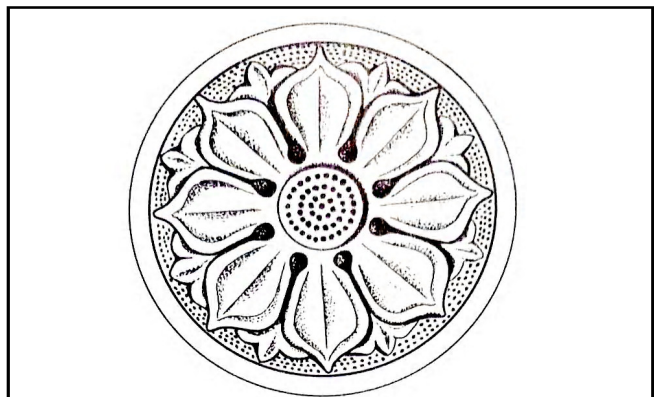


Fig. 11: Lotus rosette on base of a small gold reliquary from Gandhara, north west Pakistan, 2nd -3rd Century AD



Fig. 12: Details of lotus design on stone pillars from the Great Stupa at Amaravati, Andhra Pradesh, India, 1st-2nd Century AD

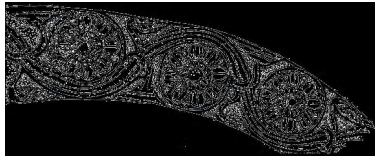


Fig. 13: On an arched border framing a scene from the life of Buddha, Gandhara, north-west Pakistan, 2nd - 3rd Century AD

lotus has inspired Buddhist minds - devotees and artists alike (Jain and Jain, 2006).

The presence in Chinese scroll and Islamic Art:

It is due to the trade route that led from Europe and Middle East to the Indian subcontinent and through the Central Asia to China that lotus as Motif sees a global presence. This is primary the reason that only after the 3rd Century do we see the emergence of lotus as a motif in China (Wilson, 1994). Having been imported into China, the Indian lotus and the scroll motifs were initially used exclusively as decoration, together with figures and other enrichments, in Buddhist temples and shrines and on metal vessels associated with worship. The Indian lotus, in more or less stylised forms and in flower scrolls started being seen as a major motif on porcelain. The flower scroll motif, however, retained throughout its long history in Chinese porcelain decoration the essential elements of its Buddhist architectural heritage (Fig. 14). Through these sources the motif gained popularity and ultimately became much copied in Europe. It also features in the various *Brahmanical* deities including Goddess Lakshmi and Ganesha and their iconography in Ankor Wat, Cambodia (Moulton, 2020).

Even in the Islam art, the motif took on different forms where the flower head, the floppy leaf and the scroll can be traced in the flower like border patterns. The motif finds frequent usage in carpets and other textile designs, Ionic plates and tiles. The usage with textile design patterns along with another popular pattern of

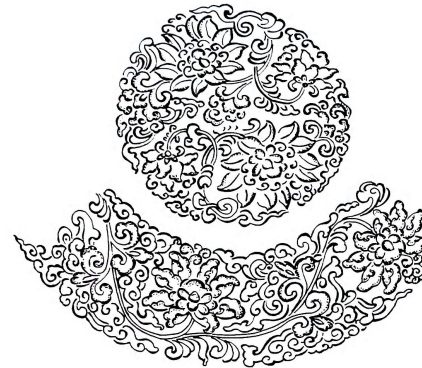


Fig. 14: Image14: Indian lotus rosette carved in stone on Sanchi Stupa I, Madhya Pradesh, 1st century BC - 1st century AD

pomegranate, this flower became a persistent motif in European decorative art. In England, the Indian lotus lent itself to the sinus lines of the Art Nouveau style of design in forms which are still familiar today in furnishing fabrics, wallpapers and carpets. It has become one of the most favoured flower motifs in European folk art and survives as a major motif even today.

The flower has a strong presence in Mughal architecture as well. Mughal emperors and their keen eye for beauty and details is seen in the various marvels developed during their reign. One of the classic example is Fatehpur Sikri which shows lotus motif with its aesthetic attribute, spirituality and canon of Indian art.

LOTUS - a motif:

Two major flower motifs based on water lilies have greatly influenced decorative art in many cultures until the present day. First, the Egyptian lotus, originated in Egypt in the third millennium, and second found its characteristic form as a motif in Buddhist art. Though all parts of the plant at one time or another inspired decorative motifs. Though quite distinct and unconnected, the two motifs share the same simple symbolism. The motif of “Kalamam” is one of the the most widely used motifs in the Indian textiles as well as crafts. It is the epitome of beauty that represents an eternal order of uniting earth, water and sky.

The lotus flower petals close at night and open with sun in the morning suggesting death followed by rebirth and renewal. The Buddhist art brought the first limelight on lotus as an important motif, decorative as well as meaningful. It represents the principal of growth and

symbolic of life that floats on the surface of creative water. The flower opens the petals with sun rise and thus symbolises Sun.

It is a common assumption that textiles at all times played a major role in the creation and dissemination of patterns, This assumption is based on common sense arguments and on the experiences of the role textiles play in the decorative arts in primitive as well as highly sophisticated cultures in more recent times. Details of dress and cloth depicted in painting and sculpture sometimes indicate patterns realised in woven materials. Patterns in other media like pottery, are sometimes recognised as those which are most typically produced by weaving. Fragments of surviving cloth support these arguments in a general way.

Lotus has attributed its symbolism and presence in various Indian textiles and crafts. The use of lotus flower in these textiles and crafts is beyond the decorative aspect and rather with deep rooted meanings and symbolism. The interpretations vary from the depiction of birth and universe to the epitome of beauty. The motif finds its omnipresence in all forms of textiles and crafts all over India.

In the woven textiles, lotus as a motif is seen in natural form in Paithani sais and as blossoms in the ikats of Sambalpur. The lotus with the mystic eight petals also is seen frequently in the Odisha ikat fabrics, where they represent the earth, water, air, fire, mind, intellect, ego and ether. The Paithani motif sees the natural resemblance with the cave paintings from Ajanta (Gupta, 2012). The motif also makes an appearance in the royal textiles of Benarasi brocades and Kanchipuram silks (Kankipati, 2021).

The motif of lotus also sees a strong presence in the embroidered textiles of India. In the Kantha embroidery from West Bengal, the central mandap comprising of lotus flower represents the essence of the universe. The embroideries from Gujarat also see the presence of this popular flower. Here as well it is seen as a central motif depicting manifestation of the universe. The counted thread Kasuti embroidery takes a very geometric depiction of the national flower. The flower is used as a combination with various birds like sparrows, swans as well as deer. The presence of this motif is also seen in the Chamba Rumal embroidery of Himachal Pradesh and Phulkari where it represents a symbol of auspiciousness and purity (Gupta, 2012).

It is not just the embroidered and woven textiles

that sees the appearance of this majestic flower. The flower sees its presence in painted - printed textiles as well as various handcrafted products of India. The famous Pichhavaï Paintings depicting the stories of Shrinathji have a strong influence of lotus flower. One such famous Pichhavaï textile is Padma Pichhavaï by the national award winning artisan holds a special place in the collection of National Museum of Handlooms and Handicrafts (Fig. 15). The Buddhist Thangka paintings also see a strong usage of lotus motif.



Fig. 15 : Padma Pichhavaï, cotton pigment painting by Vithal Dash, 1981, collection of National Handloom and Handicrafts

In present times, the motif sees a common occurrence in form of decorations during festivities and auspicious occasions. The usage varies from background decor, props as well tradition floor decoration - *Rangoli*.

Conclusion:

The Indian lotus which served a symbolic or religious purpose, have decorative potential and have become purely ornamental. It derives from an abstraction of the patterns made by plant forms. It makes possible the creation of partially naturalistic designs with which there is no beginning and no end. Such a visible expression of infinite continuity within an ordered and unified system has religious symbolic connotations. Lotus as a motif is impressive with its supremacy and inspirational thoughts and powerful impressions. This is primarily the reason that from Ancient India to present times, the flower sees rich symbolism. Thus, Lotus has been widely portrayed

across cultures due to its ability to sustain centuries in a dignified manner symbolic of honesty, purity, grace and beauty.

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