

## HINDU SYMBOLS

(Including emblems and sacred objects)

To the Reader

The fundamental concepts of any field of knowledge which form the basis of its complicated superstructure are essentially abstract. Unless these abstract principles are made concrete by following the principle of 'From the seen to the unseen,' 'From the known to the unknown,' they cannot be comprehended. Herein lies the necessity and utility of symbols. We can easily illustrate this by turning to the field of geometry. After defining a point or a straight line, the teacher of geometry proceeds to represent the same on the blackboard, with the words 'let "A" be a point' (A.), 'let "AB" be a straight line' (A-B). He has got to use the word 'let' for the simple reason that the ideal point (which has neither length nor width) or the ideal straight line (which has only length and no width) can never be represented on the blackboard. The point or the straight line figured there is at best symbolical. Yet, an entire science of geometry is built on this 'let' and a huge building or a bridge is the practical outcome of this science! In fact, life is impossible without the use of symbols. Even language is a symbol.

If the use of symbols is thus inevitable in secular sciences, it is absolutely necessary in religion. Since religion deals with such topics as God, man, creation, man's ultimate destiny, problems of good and evil, which are highly abstract and inscrutable, it is impossible to bring them within the reach of one's understanding without the use of appropriate symbols, emblems and imagery. However, once the central idea suggested by the symbol is comprehended, it will act as a source of inspiration giving a fillip to spiritual progress.

In this brochure, a brief description of the symbols, emblems and sacred objects, generally used in Hindu religion and culture, have been described.

It is earnestly hoped that this will enlighten the Hindus to some extent at least and whet their intellectual and spiritual appetite to know more and be benefited by it.

Swami Harshananda

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## Key to Transliteration and Pronunciation

sounds like

अ, a-o in son,	ठ ṭh-th in ant-hill
आ , ā-a in master,	ड ḍ-d in den
इ i-i in if,	ढ ḍh-dh in godhood
ई ī-ee in feel,	ण ṇ-n in under
उ u-u in full,	त t-t in French
ऊ ū-oo in boot,	थ th-th in thumb
ऋ ṛ-somewhat between r and ri, द d-th in then	
	ध dh-the in breathe
ए e-ay in May,	न n-n in not
ऐ ai-y in my,	प p-p in pen
ओ o-o in oh,	फ ph-ph in loop-hole
औ au-ow in now,	ब b-b in bag
क k-k in keen,	भ bh-bh in abhor
ख kh-ckh in blockhead,	म m-m in mother
ग g-g (hard) in go,	य y-y in yard
घ gh-gh in log-hut,	र r-r in run
ङ ṅ-ng in singer,	ल l-l in luck
च c-ch in chain,	व v-v in avert
छ ch-chh in catch him,	श ś-sh in reich (German)
ज j-j in judge,	ष ṣ-sh in show
झ jh-dgeh in hedgehog,	स s-in sun
ञ ñ-n (somewhat) as in French,, ह h-in hot	
ट ṭ-t in ten,	
• ṁ-m in sum,	:ḥ-h in half

## Praṇava (OM or AUM)

Praṇava or Om is the universally accepted symbol of Hinduism. All sections, cults and groups honour this and use this. Even Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism have adopted this. It is both an auricular and a visual symbol for Brahman; the Absolute of Hindu philosophy, and God of Hindu religion.

Literally the 'Praṇava' means 'that by which God is effectively praised'. It also means 'that which is ever new'. The word 'Om' is derived from the Sanskrit root 'ava' which has nineteen different senses. From these it is possible to construe that Om represents that Power which (1) is omniscient; (2) rules over the entire universe; (3) protects one from the evils of life; (4) fulfills the cherished desires of its devotees; and, (5) destroys ignorance and gives enlightenment.

Praṇava has been extolled highly in the Vedas, the Upaniṣads and the *Gītā* as also in other scriptures. The *Gopathabrāhmaṇa* of the *Atharvaveda* relates a story according to which god Indra successfully overcame the demons with the help of Om. The story can be interpreted to mean that man can conquer his beastly nature by having recourse to the repetition of Om. The *Yajurveda* exhorts us to try to realise Brahman through repeating and remembering Om. The *Kaṭhopanīṣad* declares that Om is Parabrahman itself. The *Muṇḍakopaniṣad* advises the spiritual aspirant to meditate on the unity of the ātman (the Self) with Brahman (God) using Om for japa. Śrī Kṛṣṇa avers in the *Gītā* that he is Om among words and that all religious rites are started with the repetition of Om. Not only that, if anyone succeeds in reciting the word Om at the time of his death, simultaneously thinking of God, he will attain the highest Truth. The *Yogasūtras* of Patañjali declare that Praṇava is the symbol of God and that one can get samādhi on Him by its repetition, and meditation of Him.

Actually Om comprises three independent letters a, u and m, each of which has its own meaning and significance. The letter 'a' represents 'beginning' (ādimatva); 'u' represents 'progress' (utkarṣa); 'm' represents 'limit or dissolution' (miti). Hence the word Om represents that power responsible for creation, development and dissolution of this universe, i.e., God Himself.

Swami Vivekananda has given a very simple but interesting and instructive explanation of the three letters comprising Om thereby bringing out the uniqueness of this great symbol: 'The first letter A is the root-sound, the key, pronounced without touching any part of the tongue or the palate; M represents the last sound in the series, being produced by closed lips; and the U rolls from the very root to the end of the sounding-board of the mouth. Thus Om represents the whole phenomenon of sound-producing. As such it must be the natural symbol, the matrix of all the various sounds. It denotes the whole range, and possibility of all the words that can be made.'

The full significance of this statement becomes unfolded only when we understand the Hindu theory of creation as mentioned in the Vedas and other scriptures. This theory can be summed up as follows: (1) Creation is not a linear process, beginning and ending at particular points of time, but it is a cyclic process going on eternally; (2) God creates this universe out of Himself by Himself. To put it in a technical language, He is both the material cause and the efficient cause; (3) Before beginning any particular cycle of creation, He utters the Vedic words denoting the various classes of beings and objects; conceives of the corresponding forms (remembering them from the previous cycles of creation) and creates them.

Contrary to the general understanding, this means that forms (rūpa) are preceded by names (nāma). Names are composed of letters which are sounds. All sounds are included in Om. Hence, the

entire creation which proceeds from Vedic words or sounds, proceeds from the basic matrix of all sounds, viz., Om. Since God is the origin of this universe Om and God are identical. Or, at least, Om is the best symbol of God.

God is one. Sages call Him by various names. Though these various names differ from one another, all of them have sprung from the same basic source of all sounds, viz., Om. Hence Om represents all names of God; or, it is the best name of God.

## 2 Śivaliṅga

The votaries of Hinduism can be divided broadly into three groups: Śaivites, Śāktas and Vaiṣṇavites. They are, respectively, the worshippers of Śiva, Śakti (Divine Mother) and Viṣṇu.

The cult of Śiva and the worship of his emblem, the liṅga, are as old as Hinduism itself. Nobody has been able so far, to indicate any definite period during which this cult originated.

Literally Śiva means auspiciousness and liṅga means a sign or a symbol. Hence the Śivaliṅga is just a symbol of the great God of the universe who is all-auspiciousness. Śiva also means One in whom the whole creation sleeps after dissolution. Liṅga also means the same thing—a place where created objects get dissolved during the disintegration of the created universe. Since, according to Hinduism, it is the same God that creates, sustains and withdraws the universe, the Śivaliṅga represents symbolically God Himself.

Whether the Śivaliṅga is a phallic emblem or not, is a moot point. Phallic cults have existed in all countries and in all civilizations. It is quite likely that the phallic cults of an aboriginal civilization were absorbed into Hinduism and the worship itself was elevated to honour the Father-Mother-Principle of creation. This is one view. That it is a remnant of the Vedic yūpastambha, to which sacrificial animals used to be tied, is another view. According to this view the Hindu temple is a metamorphosis of the Vedic yāgaśālā (sacrificial shed). That it is an imitation of the Buddhist stūpa is another guess that is sometimes hazarded. Since liṅgas have been discovered in the remnants of the Indus Valley Civilization (3000 B. C. ) and, since the ancestors of Gautama Buddha were themselves worshippers of Śiva, this view has not gained much credence.

Since God is beyond name and form, and since we cannot conceive of an abstract principle like Him, without the aid of concrete symbols, a spherical surface or emblem is perhaps the nearest approach to Him!

Śivaliṅgas may be cala (movable) or acala (immovable). The cala liṅgas may be kept in the shrine of one's own home for worship; or, prepared temporarily with materials like clay or dough or rice etc., for worship and dispensed with after the worship; or, worn on the body as iṣṭaliṅga as the Vīraśaivas do. The acala-liṅgas are those installed in temples. They are usually made of stones and have three parts. The lowest part which is square is called Brahmabhāga and represents Brahmā the creator. The middle part which is octagonal is called Viṣṇubhāga and represents Viṣṇu, the sustainer. These two parts are embedded inside the pedestal. The Rudrabhāga, which is cylindrical and projects outside the pedestal is the one to which worship is offered. Hence, it is called the Pūjābhāga.

The Pūjābhāga also contains certain lines technically called 'brahmasūtra', without which the liṅga becomes unfit for worship.

Śiva is said to be fond of bhasma or the holy ash. Hence wearing the sacred ash on the forehead and other parts of the body (as tripuṇḍra) is a must for the Śaivites. The ash is normally taken from the sacred fire, gr̥hyāgni, though readymade ash is also available. It is applied as three horizontal lines. These lines are said to represent: the three aspects of Śiva, the three syllables of Om, the three Vedas, the three selves the three worlds the three guṇas, the three fires and the three daily oblations. Wearing the tripuṇḍra is believed to purify the votary.

### 3 Śrīcakra

The Śrīcakra is perhaps, the most important and the most widely used symbol of the Śakti cult, the cult of the votaries of the Divine Mother. If God can be conceived of as the Father in Heaven, He can as well be conceived of as the Mother Divine also. Though God is neither masculine nor feminine, human nature being what it is, it is but natural that anthropomorphic ways of worship are resorted to in religion. Once this principle is accepted, what form of the Deity can be more fitting for worship and contemplation than that of the all-loving Divine Mother?

Even though Mother-worship is very ancient in Hinduism, the `Father' has not been neglected! In fact, the Father-Mother-Principle is one and the same. Just as fire and its burning power or the word and its meaning cannot be separated, even so Śiva and Śakti cannot be separated.

Though the three consorts of the Trinity-Sarasvatī of Brahmā the creator, Lakṣmī of Viṣṇu the protector and Pārvatī of Maheśvara, the destroyer-are the main deities in the Mother-cult, it is the various aspects of Pārvatī that are most widely used in worship, japa or contemplation. In fact, an entire branch of Hindu religious practice, the Tantras, has developed round this Deity.

Again, Durgā, Kālī and Lalitā are the three forms of Pārvatī which are most widely used for worship. The Śrīcakra is the symbol of the Lalitā-aspect of the Divine Mother. It is essentially a yantra, a geometrical diagram representing the form-pattern of the Goddess.

The Śrīcakra consists of a dot (bindu) at the centre surrounded by nine triangles (trikoṇa), of which five have their apexes downward and the other four, upward. The mutual intersection of these nine triangles form forty-three triangles in all. This is surrounded by concentric circles with eight lotus petals and sixteen lotus petals. This again is surrounded by three more concentric circles. Finally on the outskirts, there is a square (caturasra) or three lines, the lines one inside the other, opening out in the middle of each side as four portals.

According to the *Śākta Tantras*, scriptures of the cult of Mother worship, the ultimate Reality is one, a transcendental Absolute which is immutable and ineffable. It is pictured as Supreme Effulgence, Prakāśa. Desiring to become many, this Absolute starts reflecting on Itself. This deliberation is technically designated `vimarśa.' This vimarśa creates a throb or stir, spanda, which develops as vibration or nāda and gets concentrated to a point or bindu.

This bindu, like a dicotyledonous seed, contains the Śiva-Śakti principle as one closely-knit unit. It then gradually swells, giving rise to the polarisation of Śiva (father-principle) and Śakti (mother-principle), retaining simultaneously the original latent and potent status containing the Śiva-Śakti combination. These three units now form a triangle, as it were. This process goes on and on, until it results in the Śrīcakra. This is nothing but a representation of the Supreme Consciousness in its various levels of evolution.

We thus see that the Śrīcakra is a symbol of the Divine, its ovulation into the created universe as well as the universe itself. In other words, it represents the Absolute in all its aspects.

The Śrīcakra can be used for permanent worship, either in the form of a yantra (two-dimensional engraved figure) or a meru (three-dimensional embossed figure). The yantra can be drawn on a Bhūrja leaf, or plates of copper, silver or gold. The most common material for the meru is the pañcaloha (alloy of five metals-gold, silver, copper, tin and lead).

#### 4 Ūrdhvapuṇḍra

Literally the word means a religious mark (puṇḍra) which is worn upright (ūrdhva). In common parlance, it is called nāma. Since it has been ordained by the Vaiṣṇava scriptures that while marking the various parts of the body with the ūrdhvapuṇḍra, names of Lord Viṣṇu (like Keśava) are to be repeated and that the respective mark represents the respective aspect of the Deity indicated by that particular name, the word nāma (= name) has become synonymous with the ūrdhvapuṇḍra itself. Invariably associated with the śaṅkha or the conch on its left side and the cakra or the discus on its right side, this forms the chief symbol of the followers of Śrī Rāmānuja, who are known as Śrīvaiṣṇavas.

Lord Viṣṇu, the middle deity of the Hindu Trinity, does not seem to have had a very prominent place in the Vedas. But, by the time the Bhāgavata cult developed (through its basic writings like the *Nārāyaṇīya* section of the *Mahābhārata*, the *Viṣṇupurāṇa* and the *Pāncarātra śigamas* as also the famous *Bhāgavatam*) Viṣṇu or Nārāyaṇa had become the most important deity of the Hindu pantheon.

The word Viṣṇu literally means one who pervades everything, one who has entered into everything. So, Viṣṇu is the Cosmic Spirit, the Absolute, which pervades everything. For purposes of religious worship and meditation, He is described as endowed with a beautiful form, deep blue in colour. He has four arms wearing śaṅkha (conch), cakra (discus), gadā (mace) and padma (lotus). He wears a jewel, Kaustubha, on His chest. Single-minded devotion is the easiest and best means to please Him.

The followers of Viṣṇuism can be broadly divided into two groups: the Sadvaiṣṇavas (or Vaiṣṇavas who are followers of Śrī Madhvācārya) and the Śrīvaiṣṇavas. Both of them accept Lord Viṣṇu as the Supreme Deity and devotion to Him as the chief means of attaining spiritual beatitude. Śaṅkha and cakra as the religious symbols are acceptable to both of them. However, the Śrīvaiṣṇavas add the Ūrdhvapuṇḍra also.

The śaṅkha or the conch has the form of a multiple spiral evolving from one point into ever-increasing spheres. It thus symbolised the origin of the universe from a single source, viz., God. Being found in water, it symbolises the causal waters from which the universe was evolved and into which it gets dissolved. When blown, it produces a sound, which represents the primeval sound from which creation developed. It is also taken to be the representation of the Cosmic Ego. Its involute curve, can represent, on the plane of the microcosm, or the individual, the egoism which involves him in saṁsāra or transmigratory existence.

The cakra or the discus represents the Universal Mind, the unlimited power that creates and destroys all the spheres and forms of the universe, the nature of which is to revolve or to change. It also represents the Lord's will to multiply. Its six spokes represent the six seasons of the year, hence the changing universe, set on the unchanging axle, the pivot, represented by the magic syllable hrīm of the Lord. The circle round the wheel is māyā, the divine power of illusion. On the microcosmic plane, it can

be taken to be a true representation of the individual's mind, which is ever changing like the rotating wheel.

The Hindu religious tradition has always insisted upon its followers to wear religious marks appropriate to their faith, on their bodies, especially on the forehead. Ūrdhvapuṇḍra is one such mark. The meaning and significance of this symbol is rather obscure to discover. When marked on the forehead of the Deity in a temple, it may signify the power of that Deity to *uplift* the votaries. When marked on the forehead of the votary it may remind him of the need to take a spiritually *upward* path. It is sometimes interpreted that the two lines on the outside represent the iḍā and the piṅgalā (the two passages for the flow of prāṇic energy, intertwining the backbone) and the middle line (marked in red or yellow colour) represents the Suṣumnā passage (through which the kuṇḍalinī power flows after awakening). The three together represent the yogic path of spiritual ascent.

So, the total symbol (the Ūrdhvapuṇḍra along with the śaṅkha and the cakra) may mean that one who aspires after controlling the mind and subjugating the egoism should take to the propitiation of the Deity's merciful power or to the Yogic path.

The Ūrdhvapuṇḍra is marked as by the Vaḍagalais (the 'Northerners') and as by the teṅgalais (the 'Southerners').

Clay, white or yellow, is used for marking the outer lines and turmeric or śrīcūrṇa (a kind of red powder) for marking the central line.

### 5 Tiryakpuṇḍra (with bhasma)

Bhasma means 'that which shines,' 'that which destroys all sins,' 'that which produces auspiciousness,' and 'ashes'.

Fire is believed to reduce all substances to their primal state of purity. Hence, bhasma or ashes have always been considered as sacred by certain sections of the Hindu society, especially the Śaivas and the Śāktas (followers of Śiva and Śakti or the Divine Mother).

Bhasma derived from the Vedic fires is called 'Śrauta-bhasma.' It is to be taken out of the fire when the Vedic ritual is in progress and applied on the body. That derived from the fire lit up during a ritual performed as per the directions of smṛtis (secondary scriptures like the dharma-śāstras) is called 'smārta-bhasma.' If the fire is kindled by the Aghora-mantra (a mantra describing the aghora or non-fierce aspect of Śiva) with the wood of the bilva tree (*Aegle Marmelos*), the ashes are called 'śivāgni-bhasma.' This bhasma is considered to be extremely sacred and capable of destroying sins as also ritual impurities.

Wearing a 'tripuṇḍra,' a mark of three lines on the forehead with bhasma, using the fingers on the right hand (the thumb, the middle finger and the ring finger) is considered a must for all the devotees of Śiva. These three lines are supposed to represent: the three Vedas (*Rg, Yajus* and *Sāman*); the three syllables (a, u and ma) of Om; the three guṇas (sattva, rajas and tamas); the three śaktis or powers (kriyāśakti, icchāśakti and jñānaśakti) of Devī or Divine Mother; the three pressings of soma juice in Somayāga (prātassavana, mādhyandināsavana and tṛtīya-savana) and so on. The whole idea seems to be to bring into one's mind, various religio-spiritual concepts so as to feel pure and elevated.

Bhasma may be smeared over other parts of the body also, often to the accompaniment of appropriate mantras, thus purifying both the body and the mind. This is sometimes called bhasma-snāna or bath with bhasma.

Among the liṅgāyats (śaivites of Karnataka State) bhasma-dhāraṇa or applying the tripuṇḍra of bhasma on the forehead is considered as an important act of practice classed under `aṣṭāvaraṇas.' According to their philosophy, bhasma is really that which burns up all illusions and paves the way for the intuition of the inner Self. The ashes are only an external and gross symbol of the process.

Bhasma as consecrated ash is used for ritual purification (like the water of the Gaṅgā river) of objects defiled by the touch of undesirable (or sinful) persons or animals etc., for protection against inauspicious things or evil spirits or even for purposes of sorcery and magical rites.

Bhasma has to be prepared by burning cowdung cakes in fire with appropriate mantras. The process has been described in the *Bhasma-jābalopaniṣad*, one of the minor upaniṣads of the Śaiva cult.

## 6 Other Symbols

During the long history of Hinduism a good number of objects have acquired the significance of religious symbols, only a few of which will be dealt with here.

### AŚVATTHA

The Aśvattha (*Ficus religiosa*), the holy fig tree, is said to have issued forth from Indra and is considered to be the best of trees. The eternal tree of life with its branches below (in this world) and the roots above (in God) is described as an Aśvattha in the Hindu scriptures. There is a celestial Aśvattha tree under which the gods gather. So, the holy men, gods on earth, are fond of sitting under an Aśvattha tree. It is supposed to be endowed with magical powers. Childless women worship it and circumambulate it with the hope and faith of being granted children. Its wood is made use of, for preparing the sacrificial fire (through araṇi).

### BILVA LEAF

The Bilva-leaf, the leaf of the tree *Aegle marmelos* has long been associated with the worship of Śiva and his consort. It represents his vegetal form and is said to be very dear to him. Amulets prepared out of bilva leaves are believed to be endowed with supernatural powers. Medicines prepared out of the unripe bilva fruit are said to be very efficacious cures for certain diseases. A pledge taken over the bilva leaf is too sacred to be broken.

### BULL OR NANDĪ

Nandī ('the happy one'), the bull on which Lord Śiva rides is another common symbol. It represents virility and strength, the animal in man. In Śiva temples, there is always a recumbent bull placed in front of the chief shrine or just outside it with the head turned away from the deity but the gaze fixed on it. It is interpreted as the jīvātman, the individual soul, with its animal nature pulling it away from God, but His grace pulling him back to Him. According to some, it symbolises dharma or the moral law.

## **COW**

The cow has been held very sacred by the Hindus, for ages. It is an offspring of the celestial cow Kāmadhenu, which was created by Śrī Kṛṣṇa from his own body. Another version of Hindu mythology makes it a product of the churning of the milky ocean. The earth is often pictured as approaching God in the form of a cow. All the gods are supposed to be inhabiting its various limbs. The pañcagavya (five products from the cow, viz., milk, curd, ghee, urine and dung) is considered to be a sacred preparation used in expiatory rites. Gifting a cow is considered to be of great merit and killing a cow to be a heinous sin.

## **ELEPHANT**

The elephant is another symbol often met with in Hindu culture. By an analysis of the original Sanskrit word gaja, it is taken to be God Himself (ja = place of origin or birth of the universe; ga = the goal to be reached ultimately). Often used as a royal mount, it signifies royal power and might.

## **KUMBHA or KALAŚA**

The Kumbha or Kalaśa, a pot filled with water and decorated with coconut and leaves is very often used in ritualistic worship. It forms the body as it were, of the deity invoked for worship. Apart from being considered as a sign of auspiciousness, it is also used as a symbol of the Divine Mother. One of the important methods of conferring great honour on a guest is to receive him with a pūrṇakumbha.

## **LOTUS**

The lotus bud is born in water and unfolds itself into a beautiful flower. Hence it is taken as the symbol of the universe coming out of the primeval waters and manifesting itself in all its glory. It is also taken as a symbol of the sun. It rises from the navel of Viṣṇu and is the seat of Brahmā the creator. Hence the sacredness associated with it. Psychic centres in the body associated with the rising of the Kuṇḍalinī power are pictured like lotuses.

## **MOON**

The moon is said to be one of the by-products thrown up by the milky ocean when churned by the gods and demons for the sake of the amṛta or nectar. Hence it is considered to be the bowl containing the amṛta from which the ancestors and gods drink. Being the `ruler of the world of the stars' it is also the symbol of the world beyond death. It also represents the Cosmic Mind, the mind of Virāṭpuruṣa, the sum-total of created objects. It is often considered as the dwelling place of the ancestors.

## **ŚĀLAGRĀMA**

The Śālagrāma, a blackish rounded stone with a hole, is worshipped as an emblem of Viṣṇu. It is normally found in the bed of the river Gaṇḍakī (in North Bihar). Inside the hole are visible, spirals which remind one, of the cakra or the discus of Viṣṇu. Though eighty nine varieties are known to exist, only fourteen or nine are more common. They are never installed in temples but, worshipped in one's own home privately. Once a Śālagrāma is kept in a house, its worship, though simple, becomes obligatory. It is supposed to be endowed with mysterious powers. Even possessing and worshipping it will confer certain permanent benefits.

## **SNAKE**

Worship of snakes or serpents is very common in India and seems to have existed even from the times of the *Atharva-veda*. According to the Purāṇas snakes (called 'sarpa' or 'nāga') are the offsprings of the sage Kaśyapa and Kadrū (one of the daughters of Dakṣa Prajāpati). Sometimes they are depicted as created by the ten great sages like Marīci, Atri and others.

Nine great serpents are named in the mythological works. They are: Ananta, Vāsuki, Śeṣa, Padmanābha, Kambala, Śaṅkhapāla, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Takṣaka and Kāliya.

Serpents have been closely associated even with the major and popular Hindu deities like Viṣṇu (as his couch), Śiva (as his ornaments), Durgā (as the breast-band) and Gaṇapati (as belly-band or belt).

They are symbols of sex and fertility in many tribes.

They are considered as spirits guarding wealth hidden underground.

Nāga stones-stone-slabs containing etched figures of snakes-are very commonly found, established especially under *Aśvattha* (*Ficus religiosa*) trees.

Nāga motifs are a familiar scene in temple sculpture and architecture.

Manasā Devī (or Viṣaharā) is considered as the deified mother of snakes. Her worship is common in Bengal, especially on Āṣāḍha-kṛṣṇa- pañcamī (fifth day in the dark fortnight of Āṣāḍha, generally in July). In South India, it is celebrated as Nāgapañcamī on Śrāvaṇa-śukla-pañcamī (the fifth day of the bright fortnight of Śrāvaṇa, generally in August). On this day worship is done to anthills and milk is poured into their holes since snakes are believed to reside there.

## **SUN**

The importance of the sun to the Vedic Āryans cannot be over-emphasized if we accept the theory that they lived in the North-polar region. Being the giver of life, light and energy, the sun has naturally become a symbol of the creator. The famous *Gāyatrīmantra* has been addressed to God the creator in and through the orb of the sun. The sun can also represent the cosmic sacrifice from which the whole creation has proceeded. The Upaniṣads sometimes describe it as the celestial door leading to immortality.

## **SVASTIKA**

The Svastika is a symbol of auspiciousness (svasti = auspiciousness). It has been used as a symbol of the sun or of Viṣṇu or even of Gaṇeśa. It also represents the world-wheel, the eternally changing world, round a fixed, unchanging centre or God.

Svastika marks depicted on doors or walls of buildings or on animals, are believed to protect them from the wrath of evil spirits or furies of nature.

## TULASĪ

The Tulasī leaves and plant (*ocimum sanctum*), supposed to have been born at the time of the churning of the milky ocean, are considered to be dear to Lord Viṣṇu and are often identified with his consort Lakṣmī. Its presence in the courtyard of a house in a Bṛndāvana is believed to ward off the messengers of death. It is considered to be a purifier of sins; hence, its twigs are used in the funeral pyre. It is also well-known for its medicinal properties. Some purāṇas (Hindu mythological scriptures) go to the extent of telling that all gods and places of pilgrimage inhere in it.