



RESEARCH PAPER

From Divinity to Decoration: The Journey of Lotus Symbol in the Art of Subcontinent

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PAPER INFO ABSTRACT

Received:
November 24, 2017

Accepted:
December 13, 2017

Online:
December 30, 2017

Keywords:

Islamic Art,
Lotus,
Punjab,
Symbolism

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The importance of symbols in the art of Subcontinent is well-established in literature. As we move across cultural connotation of a symbol there is an intriguing shift depending upon the aesthetic use of the symbol. The paper focuses on the journey of lotus symbol in the art of Subcontinent. It maintains that the symbol has been used in the Subcontinent in two principal ways. One set of representations is loaded with spiritual connotations exemplified in Hindu and Buddhist architecture and sculpture. The other use is decorative and appears along with the arrival of the Muslims in the Subcontinent. In both cases there is a similarity in appearance but there is a clear difference in connotation that is endorsed by its position as an architectural element. The study highlights an important transition of a symbol in the art of Subcontinent through providing examples from the ancient, medieval and recent past.

Introduction

A symbol functions as a referent and compels us to recall an associated meaning embedded in culture. According to Ross Murfin, a symbol is 'something that, although it is of interest in its own right, stands for or suggests something larger and more complex- often an idea or a range of interrelated ideas, attitudes and practices' (Funch, 1997, p. 97). The fact that the associated meaning goes way beyond in complexity as compared to the simpler form of a symbol imparts an order of power that turns an ordinary appearance into an extraordinary expression. The symbol as an expression of something larger becomes a device of an instant, precise and focused communication of the entire complexity of a certain paradigm or perspective. However, all of this happens in lieu of a prior condition, which may be called a 'shared subjectivity'. For instance, the use of symbols in art to communicate a group of interrelated ideas bespeaks of an association that the

viewer already possesses as a psychological and cultural construct. This prior association in a shared subjectivity between the artist and the viewer is what turns an ordinary visual element or object into a powerful symbol. Another important pre-condition, which one can observe in most of symbols is a correspondence that exists between the formal qualities of a symbol with various points of emphasis in the associated ideological construct. The associated meaning of a symbol also changes with time depending upon the transitions in socio-cultural reality and therefore in shared subjectivity.

The above can be illustrated with a simple example. The symbolic association of red colour with revolution has went through a transition of meaning. The first use of red colour with an associated meaning of revolution goes back to French Revolution, when in 1871, Commune revolutionaries started wearing red sashes (Leith et al., 1998, p. 308). In Russia, the word for red colour was 'kransy' which meant beautiful. The colour was adopted by Russian revolutionaries and after 1917 Revolution, everything became red. A poem called *Kumach* (a cotton fabric of bright red colour) by Nikolai Aseev written in the 1920s begins with: "Red dawn, Red morning, Red speeches at the Red Gate, And red people in the Red Square." It clearly shows how red became an all-encompassing colour in Soviet Union. In the 1920s, Red dawn meant a new beginning, and red speech meant beautiful speech. In the post-revolution scenario, due to the bloodshed involved, the red colour became associated to blood and then with evil, violence and murder (Karpova & Kartashkova, 2009, p. 18). The socio-cultural change and experience substituted the initial ideological meaning.

The case of lotus as a symbol in the artistic repertoire of the Subcontinent is an interesting undertaking with regard to the change in meaning and use. The initial usage is rooted in a religious and spiritual paradigm. The correspondence between formal qualities of lotus and that of ideological construct is well-established and the lotus expresses a complex, abstract and intangible ideas of purity and creation. However, as the socio-political and socio-cultural reality of the Subcontinent changes, one observes a transition in the meaning and significance of the symbol. This transition becomes most obvious after the arrival of Mughals. From the Divine stature, lotus became a decorative element. The transition was not sudden, there was an intermediary phase. From the spiritual repertoire of Buddhism, it became a part of aesthetic lexicon of the Muslim art traditions by becoming a feature of arabesque patterns. This status sustained in the Mughal period amongst the aesthetes and nobles who viewed arabesque patterns as a symbol of divinity. However, for the general public, for the craftsmen, particularly by the end of Mughal period, lotus became a mere decorative motif in the design vocabulary. The present study traces this change and discusses the factors responsible.

The Divine Connotations of the Lotus Symbol

Lotus flower (botanical name Nymphaeaceae) has been used in image making for almost four thousand years. Most ancient cultures hold it sacred and symbolic. It is called Nilufar in Persian, and in Asian tradition has been named padma, kamal or kanwal in the vernacular, and held a sacred rank.

One of the reasons for its sacred position is that the lotus plant, found in murky ponds, takes root in the mud while its petals emerge from water. Since the flower forms above the surface, it remains clean even in the presence of mud, which allows to associate ideas such as purity with the flower. According to Kramrisch, the lotus is a symbol of transition, "With its roots in the mud, its stalk traversing the entire depth of the waters on which it rests, its leaves and flowers open to the light of heaven, the lotus belongs to this world and to those below and above, to light, earth and water" (Kramrisch, 1994). Moreover, the flower responds to sun by opening and closing, and, some of its variants respond to the moon in the same way. It is no surprise that the lotus was associated to the Sun god in Hinduism and a variety of religious ideas. The purity of the petals compelled Hindu philosophers to maintain that one should live a life as a lotus flower, untouched by evil ("The Lotus in Indian Art | Mystery of India," 2015).

In the Hindu and Buddhist contexts, the most profound association of religious and spiritual ideas with lotus corresponds to the life cycle of the plant. The whole vegetation cycle of the plant occurs above the water surface. In the part of the plant, called pericarp, the bud transitions into flower and then gives birth to a new plant. The beginning and the end of the life cycle is accomplished in the pericarp without any pollution from the muddy water. The flower becomes the seat of procreation and regeneration. The process of the birth of lotus is metaphorically linked to the production of pure words or knowledge as in the case of Vedas. And the sound and word are significant aspects of the creation of the universe according to the Hindu beliefs. In the extended metaphor, the formation of lotus flower is bringing forth the divine potential of things to the actual reality. In this context, it was compared to Brahma, the Supreme god of Hinduism (Coomaraswamy, 1927). It is believed that "when the divine life substance is about to put forth the universe, the cosmic waters grow a thousand-petaled lotus of pure gold, radiant as the sun" (Zimmer, 1946, p. 90). The Bhagavadgita mentions that Brahma sits on a lotus throne (Davies, 2013, p. 122). Similarly, it is strongly associated with goddess Lakshmi and the association goes back to Rig-Veda, wherein, the goddess is associated to the lotus flower in multiple ways (Zimmer, 1946, p. 91). Lakshmi is the goddess of fertility, abundance, richness and royalty (Dallapiccola, 2007, p. 12). In similar associations with goddess Lakshmi, lotus then also symbolizes peace, purity, prosperity, and beauty (Ana-Maria, 2016, p. 252). The goddess Lakshmi is always depicted standing on a lotus throne, which symbolizes that the feet of the deities do not come in contact with earth, hence imparting them an exalted position (Coomaraswamy, 1971, p. 28). For instance, in the following terracotta figurine of goddess Lakshmi from 1st century BCE, the

lotus forms the base or pedestal on which the goddess is standing. This position of the lotus is expressive of the symbol of lotus in terms of its creative potential on one hand and of purity on the other.



Figure 1. Gaja-Lakshmi. Terracotta. Uttar Pradesh. 1st century BCE. 14.6 cm height. Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Photo courtesy: John Anderson

The significance of lotus has been such in Hinduism that every god and goddess is in some way associated with lotus(Ward, 1952).Even the drops of water that freely flow off the lotus petal due to their coating is compared to the smile of a religious man who is free of worldly attachment (Ph.D, 2001, p. 486).

Amongst the mystics of ancient India, the heart which was regarded as seat of spiritual consciousness, was also referred to as lotus (Kapoor, 2002).It is in the lineage of the rishis and mystics that Buddha was born as a culminating point of the tradition. The association of the lotus with human heart was further extended by Buddhism, wherein, lotus symbolized enlightenment(Ward, 1952). This symbolism is remarkably expressed in a depiction of Prajnaparamita in the following sculpture from the Swat Valley of Pakistan dated 7th century.Prajnaparatima refers to a body of ideas in Mahayana Buddhism on the perfection of wisdom and it is personified in the following sculpture. Prajnaparatima sits cross legged on a double lotus pedestal. The posture is meditative and is considered a hallmark for achieving nirvana. The hands are placed on the heart which is the seat of spiritual consciousness. The prominence

and proportionality of lotus clearly conveys the significance of the flower in attaining enlightenment (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Seated Prajnaaramita, Brass inlaid with silver and copper, 7th century CE, Swat Valley, Pakistan, Collection of Samuel Eilenberg

A full blown lotus expressed the teachings of the Buddha and the eight petals of the flower are associated with the Eight-Fold path of Self-Conquest. For instance, a fresco from Ajanta caves, shows Buddha seated on a lotus flower. The flower is also depicted independently with eight petals.(Figure 3)



Figure 3. Frescos from Ajanta Caves, India, 2nd to 6th century BCE

It is believed that with the birth of every Buddhist, a lotus bud rises above the surface of water in the mythological lotus-pond of paradise (Getty, 1988, p. 193). There is a dedicated sutra in Buddhism which is called 'lotus sutra' in which the flowering of the lotus has been used as an extensive metaphor for Buddha's life and teachings. The flowering is more emphasized than the plant itself (*The Lotus Sutra*, 2014).

It becomes clear that lotus has a profound iconographical value both within the macrocosm and the microcosm. It is in this cluster of ideas and values that lotus had a symbolic importance for a Hindu or a Buddhist. The sacred value of the plant existed in a shared subjectivity of Indian culture. The use of lotus in sculpture, architecture and painting has been a corollary of its significance in the religious traditions. Whether it's the lotus leaves, the bud, the flower, the petals, and above all the process of its flowering all are associated to various religious ideas. Correspondingly, in art, these associations are recalled through a deliberate use of the symbol. The Buddha holding a lotus flower means the offering of wisdom or compassion. In a sculpture from the Gandhara period, this use of lotus symbol can be observed in a depiction of Avalokitesvara. Avalokitesvara is believed to be a Buddhistava who embodies compassion of all Buddhas. Lotus symbolizes the offering of compassion. In another depiction from 9th century Bihar, India, the lotus can be seen being held in the hand Avalokitesvara standing on a lotus pedestal. (Figure 4,5).



Figure 4. Avalokitesvara holding a lotus, 3rd century, Kafirkot, The British Museum



Figure 5. Avalokiteśvara holding a lotus flower. Nālandā, Bihar, India, 9th century CE..

There are ample examples where Buddha can be seen as resting upon a lotus flower. For instance, in the following sculpture, the feet of Buddha resting upon a lotus flower symbolize the Divine status of the sage.(Figure 6)



Figure 6. A seated Buddha in Dvaravati style, 6th century CE

Lotus has also been depicted in relief in Buddhist stupas. The following image from the Great Stupa of Sanchi shows lotus flower in concentric circles with boundary marked by beads and reels.(figure 7) The lotus-within-lotus formation corresponds to the idea of the chakras of soul and body that constitute the microcosm and macrocosm(Huntington & Bangdel, 2003, p. 477). The seven flowers correspond to the seven chakras(*The Handbook of Tibetan Buddhist Symbols*, 2003, p. 242).



Figure 7. Lotus relief from Great Stupa of Sanchi

The above examples show the absolute reliance of both Hinduism and Buddhism on symbols in order to explain reality. The importance of symbol in Indian thought has been the most consistent feature throughout documented history. If one observes closely, it can be inferred that the Indian religious thought developed by explaining the fundamental truths of reality in observation and experience through the language of symbols. In the absence of scientific tools of inquiry this was the most perceptive act to communicate a complex idea to the masses. Symbols provided a means to express the intangible. And this language of symbols was a necessity since both Hinduism and Buddhism believed in a dual reality, i.e. the world of essences and the world of appearances. The appearance or form always meant something beyond itself and therefore instead of looking at a form as reality in itself, it was seen as symbolizing a deeper truth. Both Hinduism and Buddhism held the world of appearance or the world of sense perception as an illusion. The real was considered unfathomable. In Chhandogayya Upanishad the ultimate reality is explained as follows, "In the beginning this world was non-existent and was immersed in Tamasa-imperceptible, destitute of distinctive marks, unattainable by reasoning and undefinable-as if in profound sleep" (Haldar, 1950). So we do not find a rational explanation of phenomena in Indian thought as we observe in scientific paradigms or materialist philosophy. The phenomena of ultimate reality are instead explained through comparative associations. For instance, the story of the beginning of the world in Upanishads is expressed in a symbolic language. It goes, 'an egg which lay idle for a year after its creation, and was split open. Of the two parts of the shell one was silver, one gold. The silver shell is Earth and the gold is Sky. The outer membrane is mountain; the inner cloud is mist. What were vessels are rivers' (Haldar, 1950).

The dual conception of reality meant that the observable is an illusion or 'Maya' while the intangible, unthinkable, indefinable is the truth, and that truth can only be learned through association. This is why lotus has a profound significance since it is relatable to a plethora of religious ideas. The lotus instead of being a concrete existence referring to an abstract idea is, therefore, in Indian parlance, an abstraction that refers to the concrete. Till date, the lotus symbol exists in all its richness of meaning exemplified by the Lotus Temple in Delhi, India (Figure 8). Completed in 1986, the temple is a great example of how cultural experience overrides religious identity. The temple is a place of worship for the followers of Bahai faith. The lotus shape at once creates a significance in the Indian mind which belongs to the sacred.



Figure 8. Lotus Temple, Delhi, India

Lotus as a Decorative Motif

Lotus evolved as a decorative motif in Muslim art especially during the Mughal period in the Subcontinent. The incorporation of the lotus symbol in Muslim artistic repertoire comes from two sources. One was the prevalent significance of the symbol embedded in the Indian culture while the other was through the influences that came from the Sassanid, the Byzantine, Persian and then the Chinese culture. Except the Chinese culture, the rest can be traced back to Egypt, where lotus was a significant symbol. The Greeks also provide a mythological account of a human race known as the lotus-eaters. Till the arrival of Islam, the use of lotus both as a mythological symbol and as a decorative ornament was prevalent in Persia. In Sassanid and Achaemenid period, lotus was in use as a decorative motif. The Persepolis is probably the where the plant motifs are used only for decorative purposes (Figure 9). It is believed that Achaemenid kings employed many architects and artists from neighboring areas like India and Egypt for building Persepolis who imported lotus motif to Persian architecture. This is

evinced by the fact that an Indian sculpture was excavated from the tomb of Darius(Nicholson, 1819, p. 20). The mythological use is obvious in Taq-e Bostan, where Mehr god is standing on a lotus flower (Figure 10).. During the Abbasid period, Chinese motifs infiltrated Islamic art and lotus was one of them. Bloom and Sheila are of the view that “Although increasingly schematized, these flowers may have triggered an interest in observing nature more closely, and by the 15th century accurately rendered, botanically distinguishable flowers had entered the repertory of Islamic art”(Bloom et al., 2009, p. 224).



Figure 9. Depiction of lotus, 5th century BCE, Persepolis, Iran



Figure 10. Lotus under the feet of Mehr god, 4th century CE, Taq-e Bostan, Iran

The use of the lotus motif in the early Persian art had a mythical connotation comparable to that of Egyptian but later on, particularly in the Muslim period, lotus became a strictly decorative motif with more realistic representation. It was primarily used as an element in surface embellishments in the Safavid period and beyond. The association of the lotus with divine attributes changed after the Muslim aesthetic developed to its fuller potential. In the decorative connotation, the spiritual element was reconfigured as an expression of divine beauty. In this context, only the appearance was most relevant, the various supernatural attributes associated with the structure of the lotus and to the patterns of its growth diminished.

With the Chinese influence playing its part the lotus motif became a popular decorative component in the 14th century architectural embellishments in both Persia and Central Asia (figure 11).



Figure 11. Lotus as decorative motif in Persian architecture, 14th century, Iran

It can be witnessed in the drawings of Timurid period exemplifying the metal work (Figure 12). Similarly, the lotus motif is visible in a Herat monument used exclusively as decoration (Figure 13), which clearly shows the shared aesthetic repertoire of both region featuring common elements.

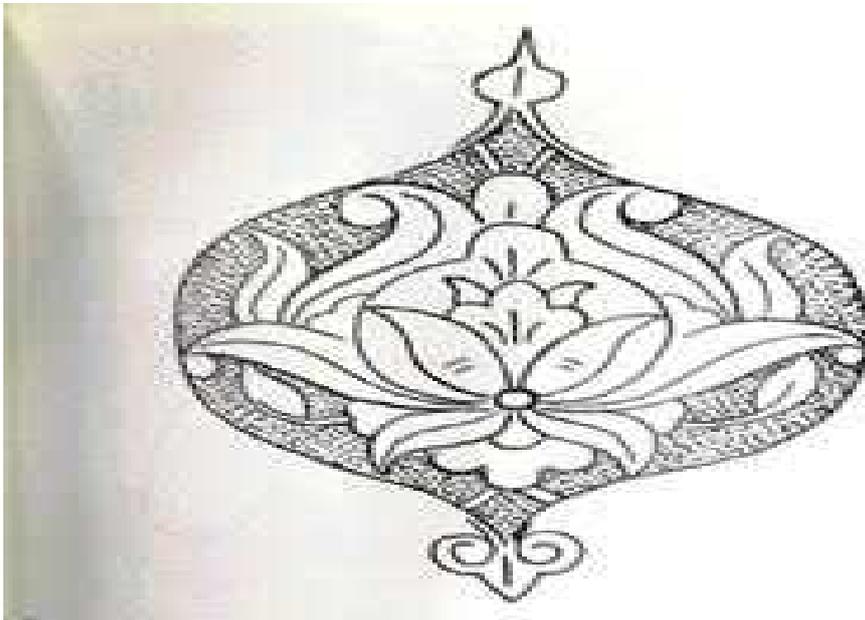


Figure 12. Timurid period drawing of lotus to be used for metal work



Figure 13. Lotus as a decorative element, Herat, Iran

In the Subcontinent, before the Mughal empire, we find the use of lotus motif in Muslim architecture of the Sultanate period. Lotus buds have been an inspiration of Qutub Minar fringes and then a decorative use of the flower can be seen at the Tomb of Iltutmish in the Minar complex (Javid et al., 2008). However, George Michell, who has done extensive work on Sultanate architecture is of the view that this use of lotus was borrowed from indigenous resources while the use of lotus as a component of arabesque patterns was later and it came from Persia (Michell & Zebrowski, 1999, p. 115). The indigenous use can be witnessed in the Lotus Mahal in Vijaynagar, India that is a blend of Muslim and Hindu architecture (Kleiner, 2013, p. 35). The pyramidal domes are crowned with inverted lotus flowers (Figure 14).



Figure 14. Inverted lotus as canopy, Lotus Mahal, 14th century, Hampi, Vijaynagar, India

The decorative use of plant motifs in the Subcontinent is most obvious in the Mughal architecture that came into being as an amalgamation of Persian and Indian traditions. However, the positioning of the lotus symbol reveals that it was more than mere decoration. Babur in fact built a garden titled Bagh-e Nilufer commemorating the significance of lotus. The remains of a lotus shaped pond are an evidence of how indigenous symbolism was important for first Mughal ruler (Figure 15). Similarly, in Diwan-e Khas, at Fatehpur Sikri, a lotus shaped fountain occupies a central place with its pericarp sprinkling water in the Rang Mahal (Figure 16). The pillar of lotus throne in Diwan-e Khas is also inspired by lotus (Figure 17).

Even the domes of Taj Mahal are believed to be inspired by lotus buds (*Journal of the Indian Institute of Architects*, 1974). The top of every dome is crowned by inverted lotus flower motif (Figure 18). This use became one of the permanent features of domes in Muslim architecture. However, the most distinct use of lotus flower is found in the arabesque patterns of the Mughal period, where it becomes completely decorative. A panel from Taj Mahal with exquisite *pietra dura* work shows lotus as a central motif (Figure 19).



Figure 9. Lotus Pool, Bagh-e Nilufer, 16th century, India



Figure 10. Lotus fountain, Diwan-e Khas, Fatehpur Sikri, India



Figure 11. lotus throne, 17th century, Diwan-e Khas, Fatehpur Sikri, India

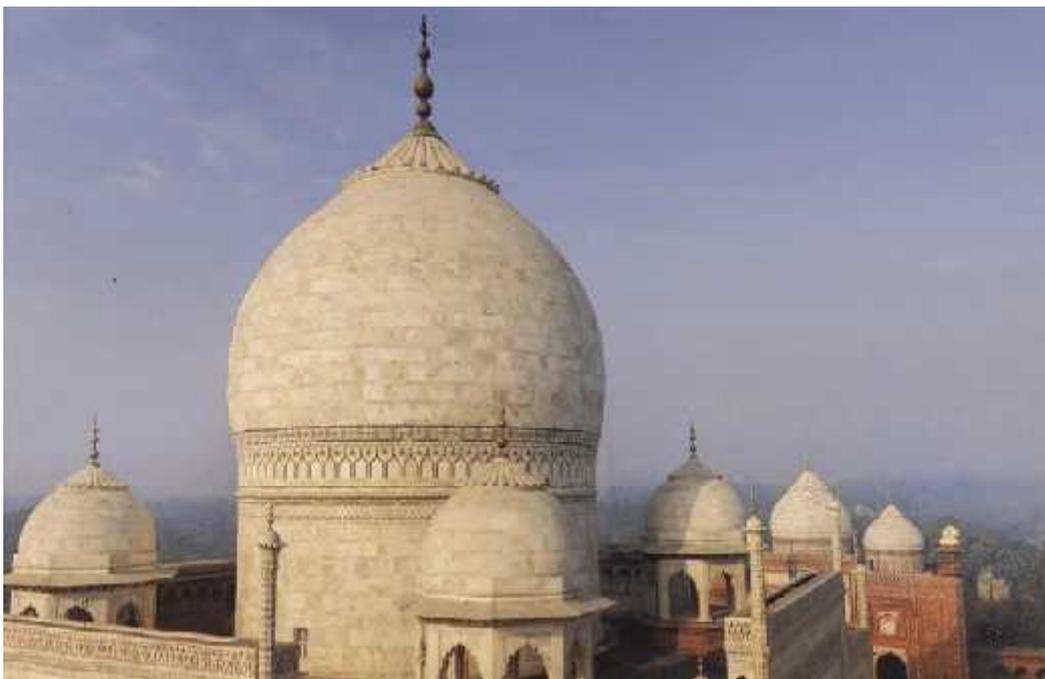


Figure 12. Inverted lotus on the Dome of Taj Mahal, India



Figure 13. Lotus as decorative motif in pietra dura, Taj Mahal, India

The appearance of the lotus motif in Mughal monuments of the Subcontinent is more related to the Central Asian tradition instead of the local one. The Delhi court was modelled after the Persian court and therefore both the artistic and administrative aspects can be traced back to Safavid period. The artisans deployed by Mughals came from both background, the Central Asian and the indigenous. This however did not affect the decorative connotation since it was not a material aspect in the modelling of the motif but a spiritual connotation that was a part of subjective realm. Whether the artists used Indian design vocabulary or the Persian one becomes irrelevant when the connotation is the main focus. Due to the fact that artisans were trained according to Persian and Central Asian traditions, one is not surprised that the lotus motif used in Wazir Khan Mosque of Lahore (Figure 20) is similar in design profile to Persian motif. Even in the examples we find in Sindh seem to come from the same breed of artisans (Figure 21). The indigenous design profile is noticeable in the case of lotus representation at the mausoleum of Shah Surkh Bukhari at Uchh, where naturalistic buds of the flower meet with stylized depiction of petals (Figure 22). Some historians are of the view that the naturalistic representation of the buds can also be an influence of European sources on the Mughal design repertoire.



Figure 14. Depiction of lotus as decorative element in Wazir Khan Mosque, Lahore, Pakistan



Figure 15. Stylized petals of lotus motif, Sindh, Pakistan



Figure 16. Representation of lotus at the mausoleum of Shah Surkh Bukhari, Pakistan

A quite frequent used of the lotus motif as a decorative element can be witnessed in the Jamia Masjid at Chiniot which is a Mughal period construction. Here, we find lotus being carved in marble visible at the parapet of the mosque (Figure 23) and also at the base of pillars. The indigenous influence becomes more profound in the depictions of lotus in Bhera and Chiniot. Lotus appears in full profile and can be identified with Padma motif of the Hindu architecture particularly in relation to the arrangement of petals (Figure 24).



Figure 17. Depiction of lotus at the parapet of Jamia Mosque, Chiniot, Pakistan



Figure 18. Lotus in medallion form at Bhera, Pakistan

The Padma motif in Buddhist architecture frequently appears as a medallion and it seems as an inspiration that the artists used in Bhera and Chiniot. This becomes clear if one looks at the shapes of the petals and the medallion form. The Persian influence is also visible in the lotus representations found in Bhera and Chiniot (Figures 25,26,27). The mix of foreign and local influence in Bhera and Chiniot is due to the centrality of the region for incoming influences. The cities absorbed influences at various times and it becomes visible if the examples of lotus representation are compared to Persian and Buddhist sources. However, it is certain that the representations of lotus in these cities are for decorative purposes and never for representation of the divine.



Figure 19. Lotus formation found at Bhera, Pakistan



Figure 20. Lotus used as decorative element used as base of column at Chiniot, Pakistan



Figure 21. Lotus used as transition element used in column, Chiniot, Pakistan

Conclusion

There is a common emphasis on symbols in Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist culture that represent the major populations in the Subcontinent both geographically and historically. However, unlike Hindu and Buddhist, the Muslim

aesthetic is different in terms of connoting a symbol. This paper explored this difference by focusing on the lotus symbol in Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim architectural representations. It is argued that the Divine association of the lotus symbol in Hindu and Buddhist art was replaced by a decorative connotation with the arrival of Muslims. The transition cannot be pinpointed in the visual form of representation but in terms of positioning of symbol there is a clear difference. The Divine attributes of the symbol are exemplified by positioning the symbol at the feet of a god or a spiritual figure, while in decorative use which also indirectly associates the beauty of the symbol with Divine attributes the positioning is varied depending upon the decorative scheme. The lotus symbol therefore appears in architecture of the Subcontinent showing a historical transition of connotation. The ancient and recent examples show the marked contrast while the intermediary phase which begins with Babar and ends with Akbar, show a transition in the symbolic significance of the symbol.

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