
New Insights into Symbols in the Buddhist Caves at Ellora

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Received: 03 July 2023; Revised: 17 October 2023; Accepted: 02 December 2023

Heritage: Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Archaeology 11.2 (2023-24): 1101-1110

Abstract: *The Buddhist caves at Ellora, built between the 5th and 8th centuries CE, showcase a remarkable collection of symbolic representations reflecting the cultural, religious, and philosophical ethos of ancient India. Spanning two phases, these caves (1–5 and 6–12) illustrate the evolution of Buddhist art, enriched by symbols that convey profound cultural messages. Key symbols like Padma (lotus), Chaitya, Kalasha, Vajra, and Pustaka are examined for their religious and socio-cultural significance. The Padma, symbolizing self-creation and purity, serves as a case study to highlight the integration of symbolism in Buddhist art and iconography, revealing connections with Hindu and Jain traditions. These symbols not only reflect the philosophical underpinnings of Buddhism but also signify social harmony and cultural exchanges during the Chalukya-Rashtrakuta period. Through critical analysis, the paper explores how these symbols transcended mere decorative elements to become vehicles of cultural and religious communication, fostering social cohesion and continuity. The study underscores the interrelationship between art, religion, and symbolism, emphasizing the role of Buddhist art in narrating India's cultural heritage. By unraveling the language of symbols, the research contributes to understanding the unity and diversity inherent in Indian art traditions, as epitomized in the Ellora Buddhist caves.*

Keywords: Ellora, Symbols, Lotus, Chakra, Pustaka, Chaitya, Buddhism

Introduction

Symbols convey cultural messages from ancient times. In the Ellora Buddhist caves, symbols are prominently reflected, with caves 1–5 representing the first phase (400–600 CE) and caves 6–12 belonging to the later phase (mid-7th to mid-8th centuries CE). Symbols play a significant role in cultural communication within Indian art across both phases. These caves were constructed during the 5th to 7th centuries CE. Initially, it was believed that the Buddhist caves were among the earliest structures, created between the 5th and 8th centuries CE.

“Indian art, representing life through the ages, speaks an eloquent language of vast and varied symbolism. Art in India is not a factual record of life in its various forms

but, from the outset, was intended to serve as a vehicle for thoughts that enriched culture, religion, philosophy, and literature” (Agrawal 2003, p. 2). Symbolic language reflects both mental ideas and cultural concepts of bygone eras, and Ellora Buddhist art is no exception.

Scholars offer diverse perspectives on the interpretation of symbols. “Symbols sometimes manifest chronology. Chronological solutions based on art objects being assigned to their proper sequence in time are valuable, but that is not all. We should correlate art forms to the ideas they express in each period” (Agrawal 2003, p. 8). Hence, the study of symbols is essential for uncovering historical facts. “The language of art symbols sheds light on the history of thought, an important purpose of art studies, provided the work is undertaken scientifically, adhering to objective facts as we do for chronological problems” (Agrawal 2003, p. 8). This approach has been adopted as the research strategy for this paper.

Symbols in Buddhist Caves at Ellora

“Symbols in the Buddhist caves at Ellora are closely connected to religious cults and pantheon (Figures 1-4). The development of a pantheon is accompanied by an increase in the number of symbols, as well as their permutations and combinations” (Gupte 1964, p. 116). “Buddhism, through its various sects such as Hinayana, Mahayana, and Vajrayana, has developed its own distinctive symbols and motifs. Each god and goddess has specific symbolic attributes that help distinguish them from other deities within the pantheon” (Gupte 1972, p. 1).

“At Ellora, 17 significant symbols are depicted, including the Chaitya, Campa, Cintamani, Danda, Dhvaja, Ghanta, Jambhara, Kalasa, Khadga, Mala, Mayurapiccha, Naga, Padma, Patra, Pustaka, Utpala, and Vajra” (Gupte 1964, p. 116). Among these symbols, the *Padma* (lotus) holds particular importance. A detailed study of the *Padma* or lotus is essential as a case study to highlight its role, relevance, and significance in the art and iconography of Ellora's Buddhist art.

New Light on *Padma* as a Symbol

“From the very birth of Buddhism, the *Padma* or lotus has held great significance. It is an important symbol in the Buddhist pantheon, representing self-creation” (Gupte 1964, p. 116). To further understand the meaning of the *Padma*: “The Adi Buddha manifested himself in the form of a flame rising from a *Padma*. The lotus flower symbolizes the female principle. In one text, it is written, ‘the lotus leaf is the womb,’ and in the mantra ‘Om Mani Padme Hum!’ the *Padma* represents the material, while the *Mani* symbolizes the spiritual elements” (Gupte 1964, p. 116).

The *Padma* generally symbolizes the Eightfold Path of Buddha, also known as *Ashtangamarga*, but it has various meanings within Buddhist tradition. “The *Padma* in the hand of Padmapani denotes creative power. In Nepalese and Tibetan iconography, it is often depicted as a fully bloomed lotus. If the *Padma* appears in a vase, it

represents the union of the spiritual and the material. The lotus in the hands of Manjushri symbolizes the teachings of Buddha, replacing the usual book (*Prajnaparamita*), while in the hands of Taras, it represents perfect purity. Despite arising from impure water, the *Padma* remains untainted" (Getty 1928, p. 192).

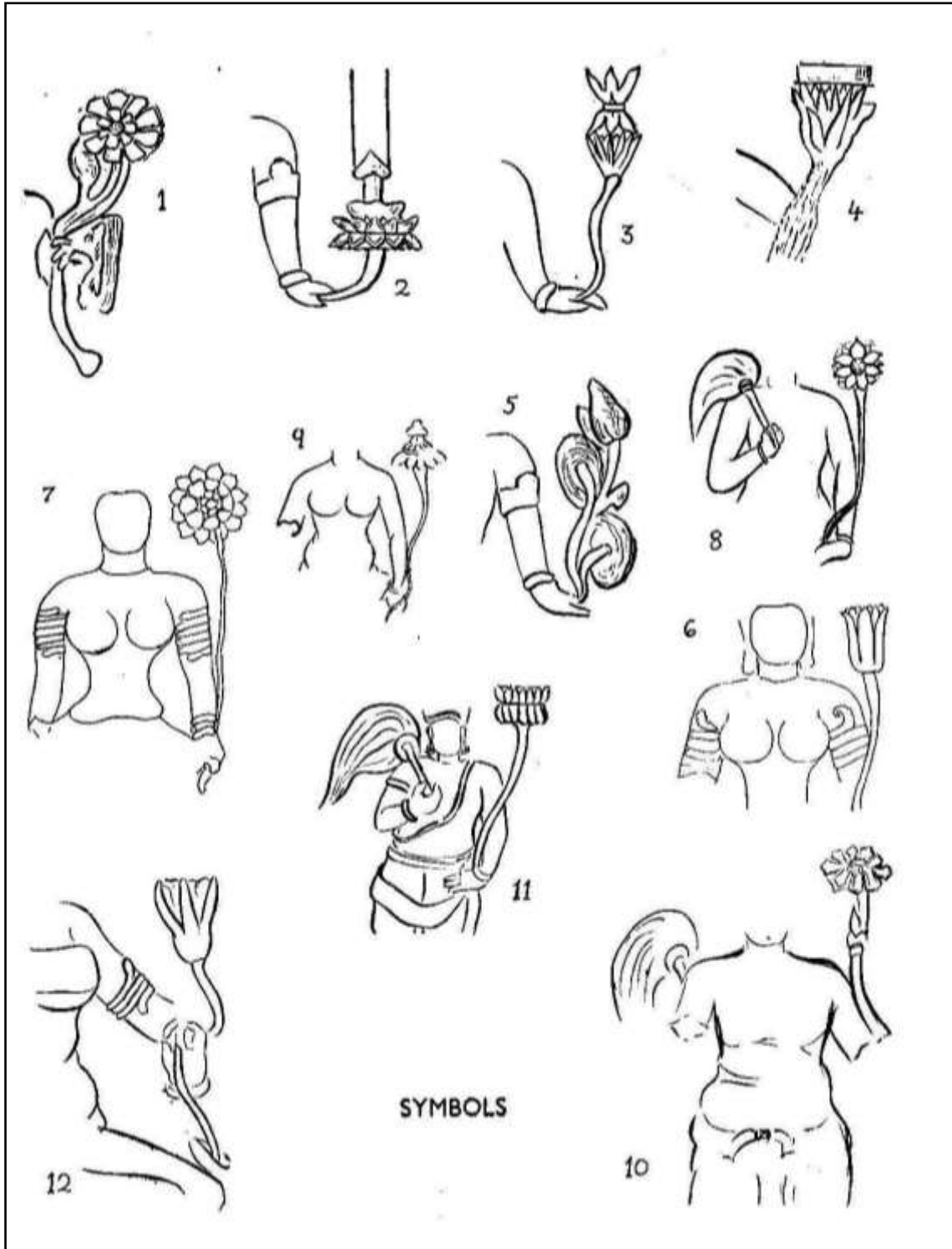


Figure 1: Symbols in Ellora Buddhist Caves

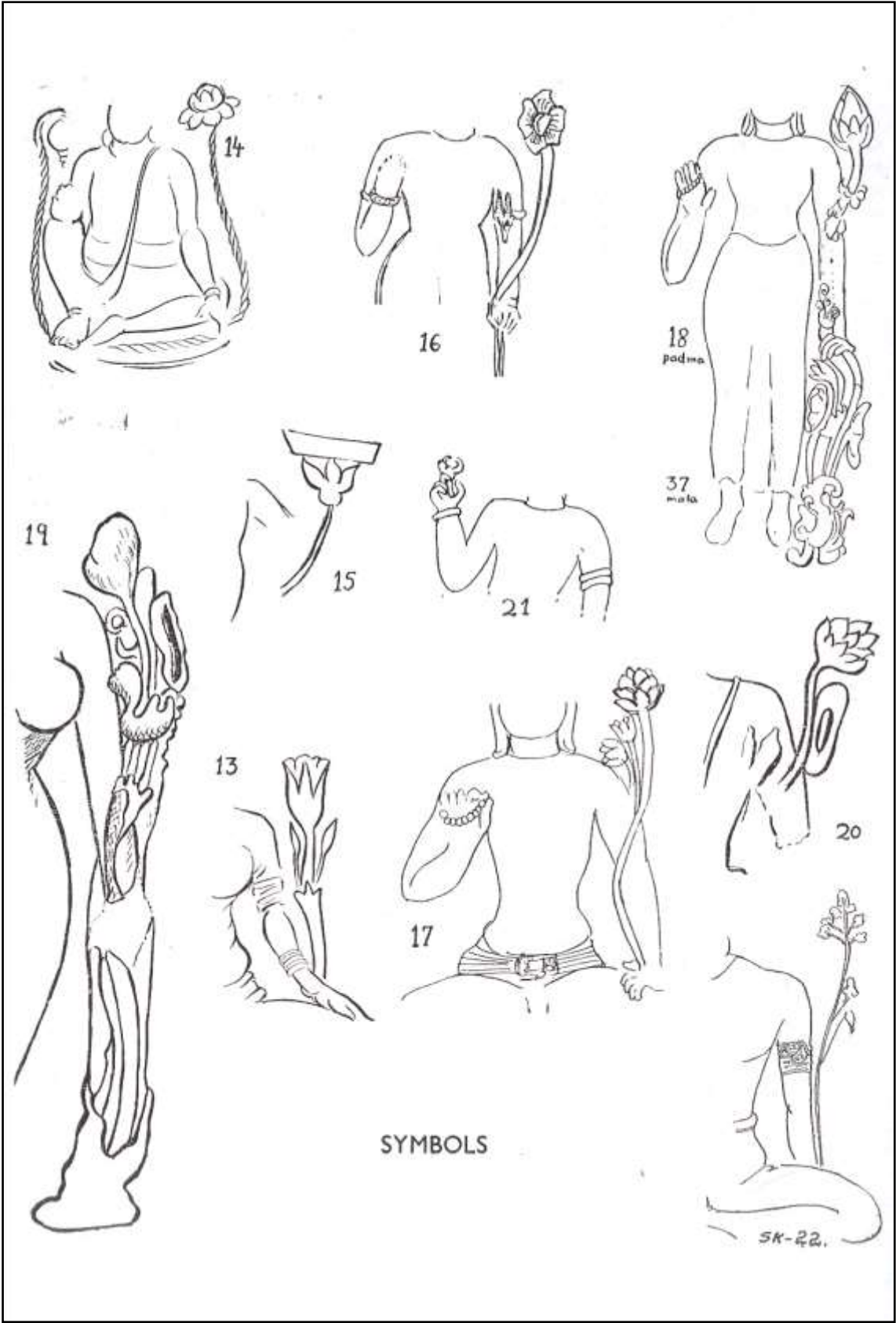


Figure 2: Symbols in Ellora Buddhist Caves

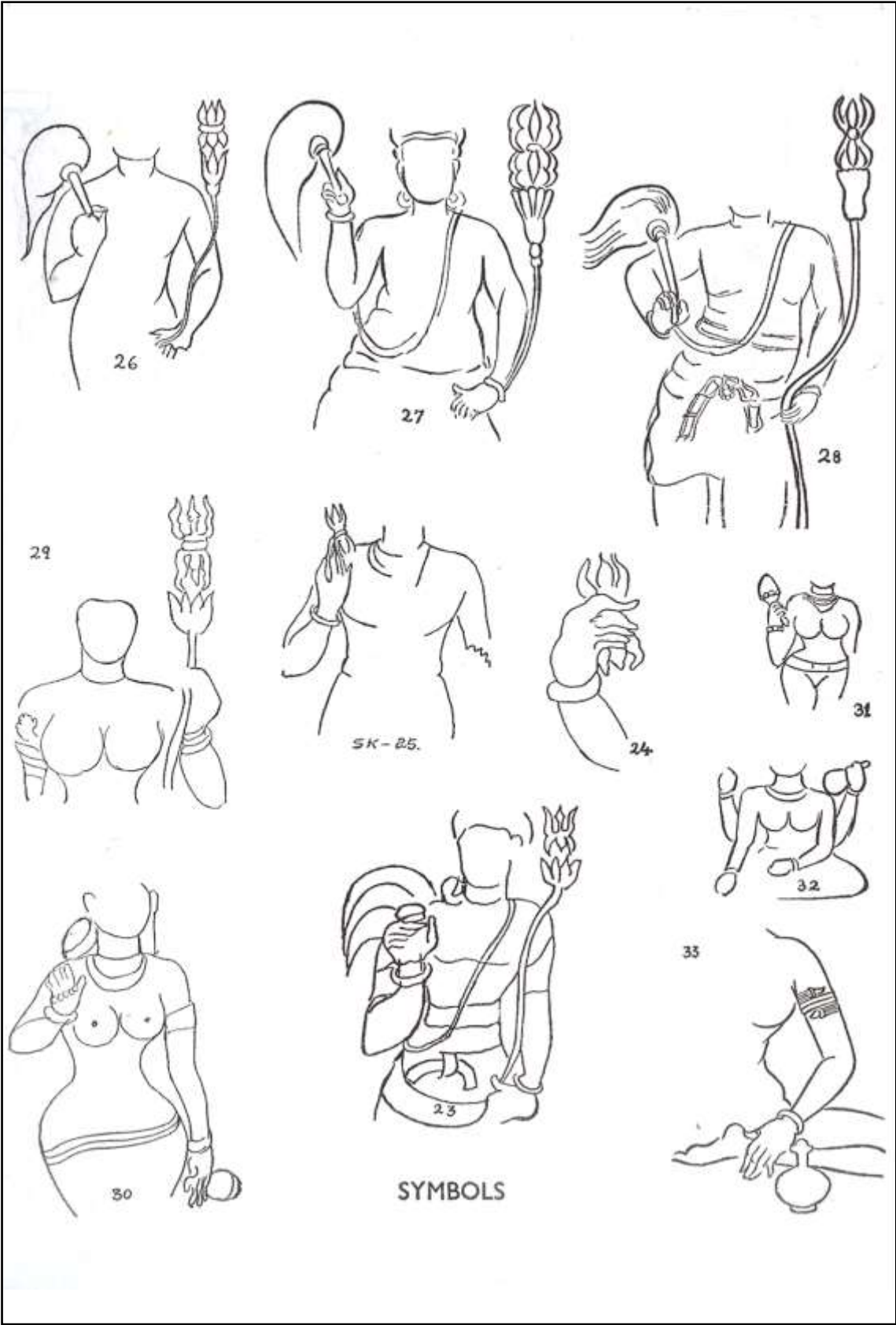


Figure 3: Symbols in Ellora Buddhist Caves

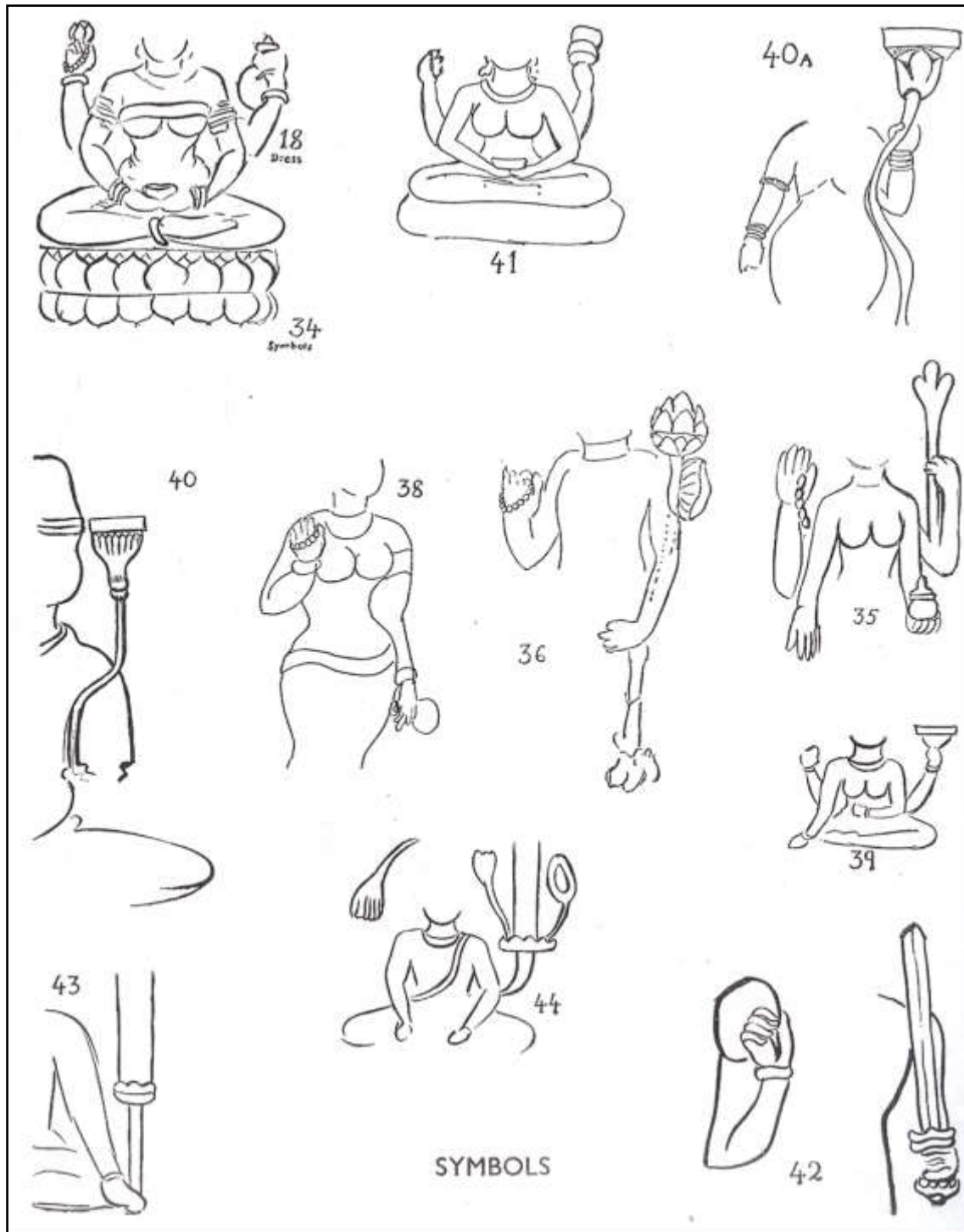


Figure 4: Symbols in Ellora Buddhist Caves

Regarding its depiction in the Ellora caves: “Given the importance of the *Padma*, it is unsurprising that it is one of the most frequently depicted symbols held by various Buddhist deities. The Buddha mandala in Cave 12 shows several deities holding their attributes above *Padmas*. Avalokitesvara in sculpture no. 1 holds a fully bloomed *Padma* with its center clearly visible. Sthirachakra holds a sword above a fully bloomed *Padma*

with its center evident (sculpture no. 2). In sculptures no. 3 and 4, Vajrapani and Manjushri hold a *Vajra* and a *Pustaka* (book) respectively above lotuses" (Gupte 1964, p. 117). "There are numerous other examples of the *Padma* in Cave 5, Cave 6, Cave 7, and Cave 12. The *Padma* supporting the *Pustaka* of Manjushri is depicted with three delicate petals upright. The *Padma* held by Avalokitesvara in Cave 2 appears both attractive and impressive. Another important symbol is the *Kalasha*, also prominently illustrated in Ellora art from the Chalukya period" (Gupte 1964, p. 117).

On the aesthetic depiction of the *Padma* as a symbol, it is noted: "The *Padma* is never held directly in the hand. Instead, the stalk of the *Padma* is held, while the flower itself is positioned at the shoulder or head level. It is depicted either as a bud in an upright position or as a fully bloomed flower with its center visible" (Gupte 1964, p. 117). The *Padma* symbol also finds appreciation during the Chalukya-Rashtrakuta period. "The reflection of the *Padma* began during the Maurya period and developed further during the Gupta-Vakataka classical age. It was later reshaped during the Chalukya-Rashtrakuta and Chola periods" (Ganguly 1958, p. 1). The *Padma* as a symbol transcends religious boundaries and is reflected in Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain traditions. This widespread usage within Ellora art exemplifies the social harmony of the period.

Some Other Symbols

Buddhism has also developed other symbols that carry profound cultural meanings. "Maitreya holds a *Campa* flower in his right or left hand. In sculpture, it resembles a *Padma* with upright petals. The *Campa* is the emblem of Maitreya and is also the Tibetan name for Maitreya" (Gordon 1959, p. 32). Another significant symbol is the *Vajra*. "*Vajra* means 'diamond' and represents indestructibility. Vajrayanists compare their *yana* (vehicle) to a *Vajra*. It is the special symbol of Akshobhya and Vajrapani. It is also held by Vajradhara and Vajrasattva" (Gupte 1964, p. 118). The *Kalasha* is another notable symbol. "The *Kalasha* held by Padmapani contains *amrita*, the elixir of life. He holds it by the neck, either in the right or the left hand" (Gupte 1964, p. 118). Furthermore, "The *Kalasha* symbolizes prosperity" (Shrivastava 2002, p. 56). *mPustaka* and *Mala* are two other popular symbols found in the Ellora caves. "The *Pustaka* represents the *Prajnaparamita* scripture of transcendental wisdom. This book is said to have been entrusted by the Buddha to the Nagas for safekeeping" (Gupte 1964, p. 119). "The *Mala* is a distinctive symbol associated with Avalokitesvara, Prajnaparamita, Cunda, Bhurkuti, Vasudhara, and others. Padmapani in Cave 8 (sculpture no. 36) holds a *Mala* in his right hand" (Gupte 1964, p. 119). Regarding the symbol *Patra*, "The *Patra* is semicircular in shape and is held in the hands, which typically rest on the lap in the *dhyana* position. At Ellora, the *Patra* is held exclusively by Cunda, who is depicted holding it in Cave 12" (Gupte 1964, p. 119). *Khadga*, or sword, is another significant symbol. "The *Khadga* is the special symbol of Manjushri. He uses the sword to cleave mountains and create a path for the waters of Lake Kalihrada in Nepal, as well as to make way for the *Padma*. The *Khadga* is balanced vertically above the *Padma*" (Gupte 1964, p. 120).

Meaning and Explanation of Symbols

Some Important Buddhist Symbols in the Ellora Caves are:

Chaitya: The Buddhist stupa is a symbol of Maitreya, the future Buddha, and others. In the Ellora Buddhist caves, the symbol of the *Chaitya* is reflected in two places.

Kalasha: The *Kalasha* (vase) symbolizes the earth emerging from the primeval waters. In the Buddhist pantheon, it contains *amrita*, the elixir of life. It is a special symbol associated with the Bodhisattva Padmapani, the Buddhist creator-god, as well as with Maitreya, Bhrikuti, and others.

Padma: The lotus holds great significance in the Buddhist pantheon, symbolizing self-creation. According to tradition, when the Buddha was born, he took seven steps, and a lotus flower sprang up beneath his feet at each step. Every Buddha is considered a *Svayambhu* (self-existent). The lotus also represents the active female principle or, in Vajrayana, the female sex organ.

Vajra: *Vajrapani*, the Buddhist Bodhisattva, uses the *Vajra* (thunderbolt) to destroy enemies of Buddhism. Northern Buddhists believe that the Buddha wrested the thunderbolt and transformed it into a Buddhist symbol by closing the points of the darts. In Vajrayana Buddhism, the *Vajra* becomes a symbol of the *linga* (male sex organ).

Pustaka: “The *Pustaka* is a book made of long, narrow palm leaves or a manuscript resembling one. In Buddhist tradition, it represents the *Prajnaparamita* scripture, symbolizing transcendental wisdom and knowledge” (Gupte 1964, p. 120).

These symbols illustrate the subtle differences between Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions. The social and cultural meanings of these symbols reflect how Buddhism evolved from the ethical and philosophical Hinayana tradition to the tantric Vajrayana tradition, which incorporated concepts of male-female unity and transformation.

Critical Analysis

In the science of iconography, symbols enrich the meaningful reflections encoded by artists, effectively communicating the essence of culture. Indian art is replete with hundreds of motifs of auspicious or symbolic significance” (Gupte 1972, pp. 2–3). Many of these symbols were adopted into Buddhist art. In sculptures and various art forms, symbols reveal profound and auspicious meanings. “They truly serve as vehicles of culture. Originating in the pre-Mauryan period, these symbols continued to dominate during the Chalukya-Rashtrakuta and Chola periods in South India. Auspicious symbols exhibit continuity, carrying intricate meanings in Indian art” (Agrawal 2003, p. 4).

A critical and comparative study of these symbols is necessary. In this study, various symbols reflected in the Ellora Buddhist caves (Cave Nos. 1 to 12) were systematically

analyzed to understand their cultural significance. These symbols offer insights into the cultural relationships of the period and highlight the social and cultural exchanges that prevailed at the time.

Conclusion

The Ellora Buddhist caves have used different symbols such as Chaitya, Campa, Cintamani, Danda, Dhvaja, Ghanta, Jambhara, Kalasa, Khadga, Mala, Mayurapiccha, Naga, Padma, Patra, Pustaka, Utpala, and Vajra. These symbols are culturally rich and reflect the exchange of peaceful life and cooperation in society. The development of a pantheon is followed by a rise in the number of symbols and cognizance, their permutations and combinations. These symbols are also used in Hindu and Jain caves. They symbolize peaceful life and reflect the exchange of ideas and values.

Communication is the interaction of symbols. Those who create meaningful symbols can rule for a long time. Indian rulers, understanding this fact, evolved cultural symbols with significant content, which they reflected through sculptures as well as architecture. The study of Ellora Buddhist symbols reveals the social and cultural exchanges of the period. Art, religion, and symbolism are all interrelated processes. Each serves the needs of the other, justifying its own purpose by enriching life and fostering creative activity in various fields. The true history of Indian art is deeply rooted in a sympathetic approach to the language of its symbolism. Ellora Buddhist art amply testifies to this phenomenon.

All these symbols are equally found in other religious traditions, revealing the harmonious social relationships prevailing in India during the Chalukya-Rashtrakuta period. Caves 1 to 12 in Ellora depict these symbols, which are relevant to unfolding the story of Indian culture. The study of symbols should be approached with sympathy and understanding. Each symbol should be studied in its proper context, in relation to earlier motifs of thought and those that followed it. Ellora Buddhist art also amply testifies to this phenomenon. The study of symbols in Ellora Buddhist art thus enriches the study of Indian culture and reveals the unique principle of unity and continuity deeply rooted in Indian art.

Acknowledgements

The author of this paper is especially thankful to Professor V.L. Dharurkar, former Vice-Chancellor of Tripura University, Agartala, for his valuable suggestions, comments, guidance, and encouragement during the research work.

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