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## The Lotus In Art And Faith: A Cross-Cultural Study Of Indian And Sri Lankan Symbolism

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**Abstract:** The lotus, a flower known for its beauty and serenity, has a deep cultural and spiritual significance that is very unique in the art and symbolism of India and Sri Lanka. This research explores the historical evolution and symbolic meanings of the lotus within these two cultures, where the flower is intricately tied to religious, artistic, and philosophical traditions. In Hinduism and Buddhism, the lotus flower is associated with divinity and spiritual purity, and is often depicted meaningfully in religious texts and iconography. Its influence extends to temple-related architecture, sculptures, and paintings, which not only have an aesthetic meaning but also represent deep spiritual beliefs. The lotus serves as a bridge connecting the material and spiritual worlds and symbolizes enlightenment and the journey to transcendence. By examining religious scriptures, temple structures, and artistic expressions, this paper traces the lotus's enduring presence in the cultural fabric of India and Sri Lanka. Through an analysis of its symbolic representation, the study underscores the lotus's central role in shaping the spiritual and aesthetic values of these civilizations. The research highlights the interconnectedness of art, religion, and philosophy in understanding the lotus's significance, offering new insights into how a simple flower became a potent symbol of spiritual and artistic expression in these regions.

**Keywords:** Lotus symbolism, Hinduism and lotus, Buddhism and lotus, religious iconography, Spiritual symbolism, Aesthetic ideals, Cultural significance of lotus, Indian and Sri Lankan culture

### I. INTRODUCTION

The lotus flower has long been a powerful symbol across many cultures, representing purity, spirituality, and the essence of life. Nowhere is this symbolism more powerful than in the artistic and religious traditions of India and Sri Lanka, where the lotus is a sacred emblem and artistic motif. In India, studies of the lotus flower are associated with the gods and sacred rituals of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. The use of the lotus

flower in Sri Lanka is deeply associated with Theravada Buddhism, symbolizing the journey towards spiritual enlightenment and nirvana. This article will examine the significance of the lotus flower in Indian and Sri Lankan history and its uses, i.e., its role in art, architecture, and religious symbolism.

The use of the lotus in art is not merely decorative but is rooted in deep spiritual symbolism. From ancient Indian temples to Sri Lanka's Maha Dagab, the lotus is a constant feature of the architectural language of these two regions. This paper will examine the religious texts, historical evidence, and artistic expressions that have shaped the symbolic status of the lotus flower in both countries. A comparative analysis will also explore the similarities and differences in the way the lotus was perceived and depicted in Indian and Sri Lankan art traditions.

## II. Uses of Lotus Flower in Indian Culture

- The use of the lotus as a religious symbol in Hinduism

The lotus flower, or "Padma" in Sanskrit, has been used as a symbol of reverence in Indian culture, particularly Hinduism. Its earliest mention can be traced back to the Vedic texts, where the lotus flower is associated with the myth of creation. Sometimes, according to a certain opinion, the lotus flower grows from the nabi of Lord Vishnu, and many scholars have stated that it emerged from Brahma, the creator of the universe. The association with divine birth and purity is central to Hindu cosmology.

Accordingly, the lotus flower can be identified as having deep religious and spiritual meanings in Indian culture, particularly Hinduism. The lotus flower is closely associated with gods and goddesses, many of whom are depicted sitting or standing on a lotus flower. The lotus flower is most prominently associated with Goddess Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, prosperity, and purity. In Hinduism, Lakshmi is always depicted on a lotus flower in full bloom to represent spiritual enlightenment and material well-being. Also, according to scholarly opinion, Saraswati, the goddess of knowledge and art, is associated with the lotus flower, emphasizing the purity of wisdom and art. These representations symbolically emphasize that the lotus is a powerful factor as a spiritual and material ideal.



Figure 1. Saraswathi



Figure 2. Laxmi devi

The lotus flower is deeply associated with the concept of "spiritual flowering". Although it grows in mud, its petals remain clean and unblemished, so it represents the ability to overcome worldly trials and attain

enlightenment. This parable is central to the Bhagavad Gita, where it is said to live like a lotus leaf, untainted by the impurities of life.

*“brahmanyadhaya karmani sangam tyaktva karoti yah  
lipyate na sa papena padma-patram ivambhasa”  
(Bhagavad Gita: Chapter 5, Verse 10)*

- The use of the lotus as a religious symbol in Buddhism

In Buddhism, the lotus flower represents deep spiritual meanings does, it symbolizes the journey to enlightenment. As interpreted in Hinduism, the lotus grows in muddy water and represents ignorance and suffering, but it blooms clean and untouched on the surface, symbolizing spiritual awakening and purity. As the lotus flower is a symbol that reflects the stages of spiritual growth and enlightenment, it is a representation of the Noble Eightfold Path.

Lotuses are prominent in early Buddhist art and iconography, particularly depictions of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. For example, in famous sculptures found at Sanchi and Ajanta, the lotus flower is often shown as the Buddha's seat in statues representing the Buddha's divine nature and enlightenment. Lotuses became an important element in the construction of stupas and other religious monuments, and lotus petals were often carved into the bases and pillars of these structures.



Figure 3. Buddha seated on a Lotus Flower: Sanchi, Temple no.45 , Madhya Pradesh



Figure 4. Standing Figures of Buddha : Ajantha Caves Monument , Cave 6, Upper



Figure 5. Buddha with Sujatha : Ajantha Caves Monument , Cave 11

### III. Lotus in Indian Art

- Ancient Indian Art and Architecture

The lotus was not only a religious symbol but also an artistic one and was integrated into Indian architecture and visual arts. From the earliest structures of ancient India, lotus motifs were common in temples, stupas, and other monumental constructions. The use of the lotus in Indian architecture is particularly evident in the temple complexes of Khajuraho, where intricate lotus motifs adorn stone carvings of deities and mythological scenes.



Figure 6. Lotus Ceiling: Vamana temple, Khajuraho Chhatarpur Madhya Pradesh

In sacred geometry, the lotus is a key element in the design of mandalas and yantras used in meditation and ritual. Representing the essential balance and harmony of the universe, the lotus shape often forms the focal point of these illustrations.

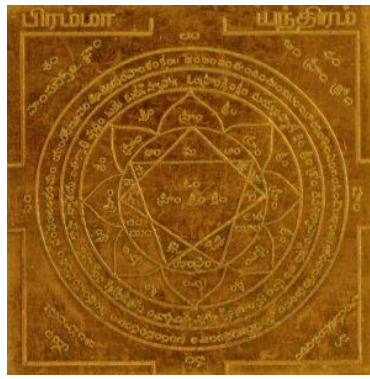


Figure 7. Yantra mandalas

- Lotus motif in painting and sculpture

Indian paintings often depicted the lotus as a central theme, especially during the Mughal and Rajput eras. In Mughal miniatures, the lotus was used as a decorative motif and symbol of royalty and divinity. Deeply influenced by Hindu symbolism, Rajput art frequently depicts the lotus in religious contexts, particularly in scenes involving Krishna and Radha, where the flower symbolizes divine love and purity.



Figure 8. Lady with lotus: Mughal Painting



Figure 9. Krishna: Rajasthani Painting

Sculptures in ancient India also used lotus flowers extensively. From the rock-cut temples of Ajanta to the intricately detailed carvings of South Indian temples, the lotus motif is constantly seen. Delhi's famous Lotus Temple, though modern, is a testament to the enduring importance of the lotus flower in Indian architectural tradition.

#### IV. Lotus in Sri Lankan culture

- Buddhist influence in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka's religious and cultural history is deeply intertwined with Buddhism, and lotuses play a central role in its artistic and spiritual traditions. BC The arrival of Buddhism in Sri Lanka under the patronage of the Indian Emperor Ashoka in the 3rd century marked the beginning of a shared cultural symbolism between the two countries. A fundamental symbol of Buddhism, the lotus became a significant part of Sri Lankan religious art and architecture.

In Sri Lanka, Buddhism has had a strong influence on the cultural and artistic expressions of the people, and the lotus occupies a central place in Buddhist iconography. Lotus is considered a symbol of purity, spiritual awakening, and enlightenment. This is deeply related to the life of the Buddha, often seated on a lotus flower or holding a lotus in one hand. According to Buddhist legend, when Prince Sidhu (Buddha) took his first steps after his birth, lotus flowers bloomed in his footprints. This story emphasizes the connection between the lotus and the attainment of spiritual understanding in Buddhist thought.

In Sri Lankan art, the lotus is closely associated with the teachings of the Buddha, the “Dharma”. Just as the lotus flower grows in the mud and rises above the muddy water, the human soul is freed from ignorance and suffering and attains enlightenment. The lotus flower is often found in Sri Lankan temple murals and sculptures, symbolizing both the Buddha's teachings and the path to nirvana.

Ancient cities in Sri Lanka such as Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa have some of the most impressive Buddhist monuments where the lotus is a recurring motif. Dagabs or stupas, which serve as reliquaries for Buddhist relics, often feature lotus motifs in both their construction and decoration. For example, the Ruwanvelisaya Stupa in Anuradhapura is decorated with lotus petals symbolizing the purity of the Buddha's teachings.

- Lotus in Sri Lankan folklore and traditions

Beyond its religious significance, the lotus also plays an important role in Sri Lankan folklore and traditions. In many stories, the lotus symbolizes beauty, prosperity, and power and strength rather than evil. The flower is often associated with Sri Lankan kings, who were considered divinely ordained rulers, and the lotus became a symbol of their legitimacy and moral purity.



Figure 10. Lotus flower: Sri Lankan traditional mask

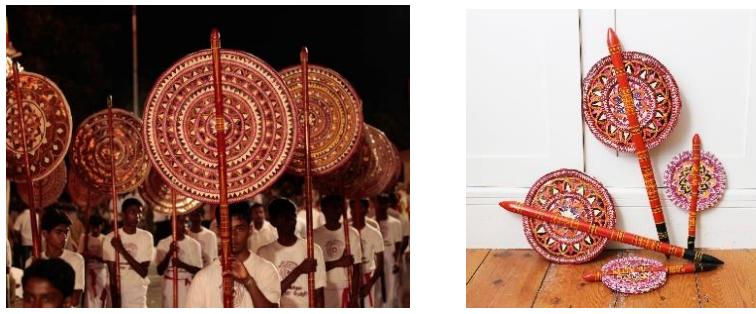


Figure 11. Lotus flower design 'Sesath' : Traditional ceremonial sunshade

## V. The Lotus of Sri Lankan Art and Architecture

Artistic representation of the lotus in Sri Lanka is particularly evident in temple architecture and decorative arts. Lotus motifs are frequently found in temple carvings, murals, and stupas (Buddhist shrines). One of the most sacred Buddhist sites in Sri Lanka, the "Ruwanvelisaya" Stupa in Anuradhapura features intricate lotus carvings at its base, signifying purity and divinity.

When studying the history of Sri Lankan art, many artistic elements are found. Among these artistic elements, the artistic called "Sandakadapahana" (moonstone) can be identified as an artistic element that uses the lotus flower. The artistic element called sandakadapahana can be seen near the entrance gate of the palace and several very excellent moonstones can be identified during the Anuradhapura period.

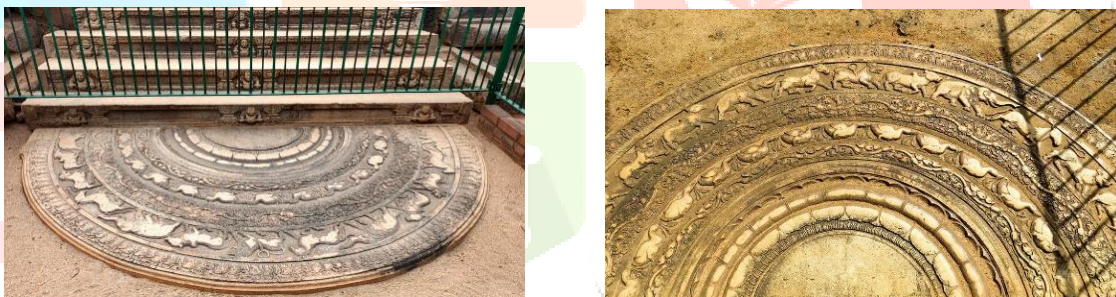


Figure 12. Sandakadapahana (moonstone) : Mahasena Temple , Anuradhapura era

In Sri Lankan sculpture, the lotus serves as a decorative element as well as a spiritual symbol. The Samadhi Buddha statue in Anuradhapura shows the Buddha in deep meditation sitting on a lotus flower, which symbolizes the purity of mind and the Buddha's transcendence of worldly attachments. Also, in the murals at the Dambulla Cave Temple, lotuses are used to enhance the spiritual message of the artwork, symbolizing the Buddha's journey to enlightenment.



Figure 13. Fragment of wall painting, Cave of the Golden temple, Dabulla



Figure 14. Lotus Flower: Cave 05 , Cave of the Golden temple, Dabulla

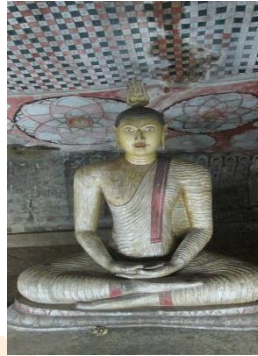


Figure 15. Buddha : Cave 05 , Cave of the Golden temple, Dabulla

The use of lotus imagery in Buddhist stupas such as the famous "Lotus Pond" at Polonnaruwa reflects the deep integration of religious symbolism and architecture in Sri Lanka's cultural heritage.



Figure 15. Nelum Pokuna (Lotus Pond) Polonnaruwa era

## VI. Comparative Analysis of Indian and Sri Lankan Lotus Symbols

The lotus has a central place in both Indian and Sri Lankan religious traditions, although its significance varies slightly between the two cultures. In India, the lotus is associated with a wide range of deities across various religions, including Hinduism and Jainism, while in Sri Lanka it is primarily associated with Buddhism. This difference reflects the broad religious landscapes of the two countries, with India being a land of diverse religious traditions and Sri Lanka being predominantly Buddhist. In Sri Lanka, the lotus is primarily associated with Buddhism and the Buddha's teachings, emphasizing spiritual purity and enlightenment. In Indian art, the lotus is often used in conjunction with other symbols of cosmic order and divine power, while in Sri Lankan art, it is more closely tied to the individual's personal spiritual journey, reflecting the country's strong Buddhist heritage. Artistically, both India and Sri Lanka have used the lotus as a symbol of purity, divinity, and spiritual growth. However, the stylistic representation of the lotus flower differs greatly between

the two regions. Indian art, especially during the Mughal period, often depicted the lotus in a highly stylized and elegant manner, while Sri Lankan art tended to focus on the symbolic and religious aspects of the flower. Architectural representations of lotuses also vary. In India, lotuses are widely used in temple architecture as a decorative and symbolic element, especially in Hindu temples. In Sri Lanka, the lotus is found primarily in Buddhist stupas and shrines, serving as a symbol of the Buddha's teachings and the path to enlightenment.

## VII. Conclusion

As a very special symbol of art and spirituality, the lotus occupies a unique and deep place in the cultural history of India and Sri Lanka. Its significance goes beyond mere aesthetics and reflects deep philosophical and spiritual beliefs about purity, creation, and enlightenment. In Hinduism and Buddhism, the lotus serves as a powerful metaphor for the human soul's journey to spiritual awakening and transcendence, untainted by the impurities of the material world. The use of the lotus flower in Indian and Sri Lankan art and architecture reveals the central role of this symbol in shaping the religious, and cultural identities of these civilizations. From the lotus feet of Hindu deities to the lotus ponds of Buddhist stupas, this enduring symbol continues to inspire and influence the artistic and spiritual landscapes of both nations.

The enduring appeal of the lotus flower as a symbol of both Indian and Sri Lankan traditions highlights the interconnectedness of art, religion, and philosophy in shaping the cultural heritage of these countries. As a symbol of purity, beauty, and transcendence, the lotus remains a powerful and timeless motif in artistic expression in India and Sri Lanka, bridging the gap between the earthly and the divine.

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