Option 3 (MRP)

Decolonizing UI Icons and Symbols in the Indian Context

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Abstract

This Major Research Project explores the decolonization of user interface (UI) icons and symbols within the Indian context. While contemporary digital interfaces are often presented as universal, they largely reflect Western cultural metaphors, resulting in the exclusion of indigenous visual languages, design and culture. This research investigates how Indian cultural symbols, philosophies, and visual systems can inform more inclusive and culturally resonant UI design.

Using a mixed-methods approach, the study integrates literature review, semi-structured interviews, and participatory co-design sessions with five Indian participants across diverse cultural and professional backgrounds. The research draws from Indian iconology, cultural design, and values.

Findings reveal a rich, visual vocabulary emerginig from Indian culture - including symbols such as the Om, lotus, diya, rangoli, and everyday objects like the kundi and gullak, which remain largely absent in digital interfaces. Participants also identified the psychological and cultural impacts of colonization, including the dominance of Western metaphors in UI design.

The project culminates in the creation of a co-designed Indian UI icon bank, proposing culturally grounded alternatives to existing interface symbols. Rather than replacing Western icons, the research advocates for expanding digital visual language to include indigenous perspectives, fostering inclusivity, cultural representation, and more meaningful user experiences.

Acknowledgements

This research began with an observation. Being born and brought up in India and having travelled extensively throughout the country, a vast, rich, diverse visual culture was evident. But the world I navigate on screen is nothing like it. Why do digital spaces not hold more cultural concepts, metaphors or icons?

It took a Master's program in Inclusive Design at OCAD University to give this question a scholarly home, and it took many people to help it grow into this work.

First and deepest, my gratitude goes to my advisor, Dr. Michelle Wyndham-West, Ph.D., Associate Dean of the Faculty of Design at OCAD University. Michelle is a critically applied medical anthropologist whose own scholarship in co-design methodologies, health equity, and critical research practice has shaped this project. Her supervision was never merely corrective, it was expansive - pushing me toward rigour without ever letting me lose sight of the purpose of the work. She understood, from the very beginning, why this research mattered. For that understanding, and for the care with which she guided this project, I am deeply grateful.

To the five co-designers who gave their time, their stories, their cultural memory, and their creative energy to this research - Eek, Doh, Teen, Chaar, and Paanch, this work is yours as much as it is mine. You are not research subjects. You are co-authors of everything that matters in these pages. When you described the gullak, the kundi on doors, diyas being lit before a puja or festivals, the Bahi Khata opened fresh on Diwali, you were not giving me data. You gave me Bharat. I receive it with reverence and I carry it forward with pride.

To the Faculty of Design and the Graduate Studies programme at OCAD University, for creating a space for decolonisation. Where the question of whose knowledge counts is taken seriously.

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Introduction

We are living in a time when the world is considered a global village. The term ‘global village’ was coined by Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan in the 1960s and refers to the production and consumption of various forms of digital media - images and other contents - by global audiences on a daily basis. The rapid technological advancements - the internet and telecommunication technologies - have brought the whole world together. It has created this virtual world where people seem to have created their digital homes and now it is difficult to visualise our lives without it. People can communicate, work and share experiences in real time. Technology has made it reasonably simple and easy to be adopted by almost everyone, everywhere. User interface (UI), as we call it now, has made this absorption and exploitation of the technology possible, without most of the users even realising it.

Progress in technology coupled with changes in human computer interactions, has resulted in developments in UI design. Initially, the UI was only text based and people were writing commands. Graphic user interface (GUI) started appearing in the 1980s making the interaction more intuitive through some basic icons. There has been no looking back thereafter, with the interface evolving from a functional design to user-oriented practice, thus making the UI more usable and inclusive (Mandava 134).

When the world was shrinking as a result of advancement in technology to a global village, with better, simpler and user-friendly ‘*User Interface*’, we were also witnessing the process of globalisation. The idea or concept of the world becoming a global village focuses on human interaction and social connection. On the other hand, the concept of globalisation lays emphasis on economic systems and infrastructural connectivity. Globalisation has significantly contributed towards the world economy but it also has a flip side. Globalisation has not strengthened diversity. Deepak, in his book *India that is Bharat* writes, “Simply put, globalisation, contrary to popular perception, is not a friend of diversity, nor is it a melting pot of cultures. On the contrary, it denotes the gradual and unconscious eradication of heterogeneity, more particularly, the diversity of indigeneity.” He also highlighted the relationship between colonisation and globalisation that resulted in Western hegemony over all aspects of human experience (Deepak 70).

The impact of globalisation on dilution of heterogeneity seems to be much less as compared to that of colonisation. In the process of colonisation, the colonisers not only took over the control of land and resources but also colonised the minds of the people in their colonies. In other words, colonisation resulted in gradual but systematic suppression of indigenous ideas, beliefs, knowledge and culture.

There have been many studies to show the impact culture has on the way people interact with the world and with digital interfaces (Soderberg and Heno 1). These studies focused primarily on how the cultures impacted the economic or e-commerce aspects and provided insights on including culturally relevant interfaces to increase the revenues. While the financial or the economic angle is very important, I feel that when the interfaces are designed from the cultural sensibilities of the natives, with a view to restore their cultural identity, the acceptability and proliferation will be much faster. The increase in revenue will be an inherent outcome. So, decolonisation of UI icons is about restoring something as fundamental as dignity to the native perspective so that the indigenous society can rebuild itself using its own ideals and tools.

This research project aims to bring out the impact of colonisation on User Interface (UI) design and to suggest measures to decolonise the UI Icons and Symbols to make them more inclusive, specially in the Indian context. Here, I would like to bring out an important aspect regarding decolonisation of UI Icons and Symbols. This paper does not intend to abandon or exclude the UI icons presently being used, but to propose more icons in the digital space so as to include what is native to a society/ a community/ an indigenous culture, specifically India.

Research Questions

Primary Research Question:

- How to decolonise UI icons and symbols from the Indian perspective to revive traditional concepts, aesthetics and possibly inspire digital inclusivity and cultural representation by incorporating them in modern user interfaces?

Secondary Research Questions:

1. What were the visual languages, symbols, and motifs used in pre-colonial India, and how can these be adapted to today's digital design systems?
2. What studies have been done in this field so far?
3. How can we decolonise design?
4. What is the history of current user interface icons and symbols?

Literature Review

In order to understand decolonisation, let us first understand what colonisation is. In simple words, colonisation is a process by which people belonging to one nation (coloniser) establish colonies in other societies/ nations. In doing so, they maintain their bonds with their parent nation and exploit the colonised society/ nation as a resource to further the economies of their parent nation. The next phase, though very subtle, but more damaging, is the colonisation of the mind through complete domination of almost all aspects of lives of the colonised societies including their traditions and culture. So, the colonisers gradually take control of all aspects of the colonised nations and finally reduce the natives to a secondary status (Deepak 49).

With time, colonisation got entrenched in the colonised societies through the political infrastructure, legal framework and the education system of the colonisers. And, the education system introduced by the colonisers shaped the thinking of the natives/ indigenous people. The colonial education system replaced the indigenous knowledge system, altered the thinking of the colonised natives and ensured that it shaped their (natives') idea of future and diluted/ blurred their past (Deepak 60). In other words, colonisation resulted in systematic and extensive suppression of indigenous ideas, beliefs, images and knowledge. This deprived the colonised society of its ability to respond culturally.

Deepak further brings out that after a couple of centuries of colonisation, natives from these colonies began to assert themselves and began to demand freedom. However, by then, their worldview had changed and they could not see beyond political independence. In other words, their vision of independence was confined to the politico-economic sphere. The colonies started getting their independence in the twentieth century, post WW II. But independence did not translate into decolonisation as they missed the opportunity to reclaim their roots and culture. So, while the era of colonisation was getting over, it was being replaced with Western imperialism - extending the legacy of colonialism (Deepak 62). Here, let me distinguish between colonisation and colonialism. Colonisation is the process and colonialism is the policy. Sai Deepak writes "While colonialism was more visible and direct because it required the subjugation of a population, the subterranean nature of Western imperialism has ensured that the dominated society aspires to become part of the erstwhile coloniser's social fabric after decolonisation. As a consequence, scholars agree that

coloniality remains the most prevalent and powerful form of domination in the world. This could not have become possible without sufficient investment by the coloniser in the political, religious, knowledge and legal systems of colonised societies, which were carried forward by decolonised societies." (63).

According to Sinha colonialism was not just a historical phase but was/is an ideology that has continuously dominated minds without physical domination, even after the colonies gained independence politically. The impact is still prevalent to an extent that many people in the former colonies describe themselves through the Western prism (20.1). One of the tools that was employed by the colonisers to achieve this was to impose English language on people in their colonies. The colonial education system, slowly but surely, succeeded in alienating people from their own language, customs, traditions, culture and history.

People often, and unknowingly, consider language just a means of communication. What they don't seem to realise and understand is that a language is also a carrier of culture. "Language, any language has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture. Take English. It is spoken in Britain and in Sweden and Denmark. But for Swedish and Danish people English is only a means of communication with non-Scandinavians. It is not a carrier of their culture. For the British, particularly for the English, it is additionally and inseparably from its use as a tool of communication, a carrier of their culture and history" (Thiong'o 13).

Colonialism also altered the relationship between human beings and nature as colonisers had different approach towards nature. Prior to colonisation, every aspect of natives' culture was inextricably linked to and revolved around nature, including their faith, sense of community and economy. This relationship with nature was based on the belief that there was a spiritual dimension to the earth, of which humans were also only a part, and it was meant to be lived in harmony (Deepak 91). Here, I would like to bring out that in India we believe not only earth but even water, air, space and fire (five elements) have spiritual dimensions.

The natives' respect for nature gave rise to their faith, and the symbols or icons used were inspired by animals and landforms, thereby putting nature at the centre of their lives (A. Versluis, Native American Traditions, Dorset: Element Books, 1995). Sai Deepak writes that colonisation adversely affected not only nature but also the native knowledge traditions.

Native knowledge traditions were largely passed on through the generations orally, employing storytelling as a means of transmitting knowledge. However, this absence of written records was treated by the colonisers as ‘Mythical’ (Deepak 93).

Colonisers did not just occupy the colonies physically for their political gains, rather their real strength and its deeper impact was that they were able to colonise the minds. Colonisation has often been studied from the political and economic point of view. The same needs to be studied and analysed from the cultural, civilisational and ideological points of view as well. Varma in the introduction of his book *Becoming Indian* says, “It is not often recognized how culturally disruptive the colonial experience is. Those who have never been colonized can never really know what it does to the psyche of a people” (Varma x). For the people who were ruled, the consequence of colonisation on their mind was slow. They were becoming complicit and moving away from their culture. Decolonising, therefore, would mean that the people shed the colonial legacy and to reclaim their ability of original and independent thinking.

A conference was held on "Decolonising Our Universities" in June 2022 in Penang, Malaysia. Ramani has covered this conference in his paper. He has brought out that scholars and academicians from the colonised world had gathered and discussed ways to decolonise their universities, their education/ knowledge systems from the influence of Eurocentrism. It was highlighted by various participants of the conference how Eurocentrism prevented the people of colonised/ global South from preserving or structuring their own system of knowledge based on their rich histories. The participants were also of the view that the process of decolonising and moving away from Eurocentrism should not lead towards some other centrism or nativism (17-19). Therefore, the knowledge system should be inclusive, leading to decolonisation of the mind and thus becoming more constructive and productive.

In human-computer interaction, emotions serve as mediators between how individuals perceive and behave toward any interface. Positive emotions lead to better engagement and negative emotions to boredom and disengagement. The scientific studies indicate that the users prefer interfaces that respond empathetically to emotions and enhance satisfaction and trust (Mandava 137). Therefore, a user interface having icons from the user’s own culture, nature or history will definitely enhance the positive emotions in him/ her and would lead towards better engagement.

Jagne et al have called the present-day world as ‘small world’ with a global marketplace. Rapid technological advancements, especially computers and the internet, have facilitated easy spread and adaptation of foreign ideas and culture by indigenous people all across the world. Keeping the economic factors in mind, companies thought that translation of language, currency, date and time format etc would be adequate to get an edge in the world market. However, this approach had a drawback as the companies had done little research to address the issue of culture (2). According to Herman and Arora, technology has largely been designed for Western audiences by the West (Global North). In such scenarios, when designs are made and implemented as per Western norms, an enormous segment of the global audience is left out. Scholars have equated this with ‘data colonialism’ (2-3).

User Interfaces today are filled with icons, many without labels to indicate their function. Icons are assumed to be universal and easier to understand than text, but can be comprehended differently across various cultures. For example, health and food icons vary culturally. For designers understanding the perception from users point of view is very important for ensuring that iconography is legible to end users (Pozos et al 1-2).

In this study, I will focus on Indian symbols and icons to further inspire adoption into culturally inclusive UI design elements and digital spaces. “Cultural symbols represent the fundamental values specific to a culture, intertwined with its philosophical underpinnings, prevalent thought processes, collectively shared values, distinctive national character, and historical and economic context” (Kumar and Murlidhar 2). This will be done through a transparent co-design process with indigenous (Indian) participants.

Hindu Iconology & Symbolism

A meaningful understanding of Indian icons requires an engagement with Hindu iconology. It is also important to understand the difference between Iconology and Iconography - both of which are important to this study. India being a visual culture has always considered iconology important, and it is only natural to study these icons deeply in order to create substantial icons.

Sri Rama Ramanuja Achari in his paper 'Hindu Iconology' throws light on how "*Everything connected with the Hindu icon has a symbolic meaning; the posture, gestures, ornaments, number of arms, weapons, vehicle, consorts and associate deities (parivāra devatā).*" (Achari 3) And goes on to define iconology as the study of symbolism behind sacred images. Hindus have worshiped these icons in different forms, often made of wood, stone, metal and is one of the most prominent tools in devotion.

However, Christian missionaries who perceived Hinduism in an extremely negative way - used the term IDOL to describe Hindu Icons, but they are essentially icons, not idols. "*An icon can be defined as a sacred symbol which embodies a spiritual truth and is worthy of veneration and contemplation.*" (Achari 3) Ramanuja Achari further explains, all Hindu icons represent transcendent Divine and spiritual forces and "*the art and symbology of Icons has been developed to an extremely sophisticated degree by the Hindu mind. Each and every feature of an icon has a profound truth behind it*". (Achari 3)

In Hindu cosmology, Achari explains, the expression of reality is symbolism. Symbols are developed as an attempt to represent something that is beyond the capacity of the human mind to understand. Which is why we use numbers to represent quantity, letters of the alphabet to construct words, and words to communicate ideas. And so by using symbology of quantity, words etc, "*All of human interaction is carried out through the use of symbols*'.
Similarly in Hindu cosmology, symbolism is used to express a point where two realms meet, namely ***niṣkala*** (the transcendental) and ***sakala*** (the material realm). Which is why everything connected with a Hindu icon has a symbolic meaning.

The The Āgamas (foundational scriptural texts in Hinduism), mention two main tenets. First, Sakala (the material realm) being the reflection of Niṣkala (the transcendental realm). Second, the inner world is related with the outer world (yathā brahmāṇḍa tathā piṇḍāṇḍa). This solidifies the fact that Hindu Icon symbology arises from nature itself and not from speculation, thus by meditating upon outer symbols, one is able to reach the concepts behind these symbols. Indians have always used symbols to represent the abstract. "*The whole of Indian iconology is built up upon a code of symbols based on the assumption that there exists a natural affinity between ideas (nāma) and forms (rūpa)*" (Achari 4).

Table 1: Classification of Icons in Hindu Iconology (Achari)

Category	Types	Conceptual Meaning
Form	*citra* (sculpture), *citrārdha* (relief), *citrabhāsa*(painting)	Medium shapes perception and representation
Mobility	*cala*, *acala*, *calācala*	Icons exist across **fixed and dynamic states**
Temperament	*śanta*, *vīra*, *raudra*	Emotional and psychological expression encoded visually
Posture	*sthānaka*, *āsina*, *śayana*	States of being: action, contemplation, transcendence

Further, Achari describes the Hindu temple as a symbolic structure that reflects both the human body as well as the universe. The body is understood as a vessel for the divine spirit, and similarly, the temple houses and represents this divine presence in physical form. Its architectural components correspond to parts of the human body, while the temple as a whole mirrors the cosmos. In this relationship, the icon represents the manifested deity, and the temple becomes its physical body, connecting individual and cosmic scales of existence (Achari 6).

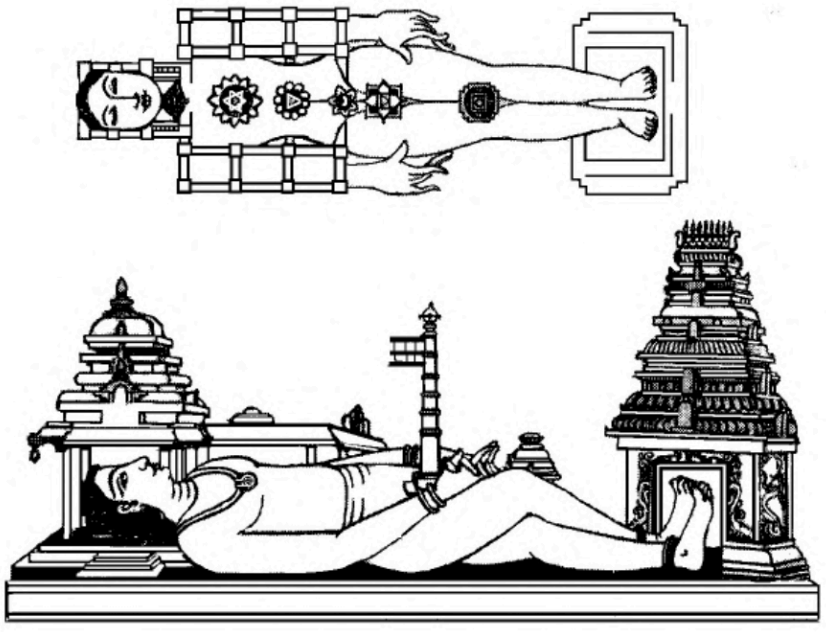


Figure. 1. Diagram illustrating the symbolic correspondence between the human body and temple architecture. Source: Achari 6.

This relational understanding of symbolism stands in contrast to contemporary, modern-day UI icon systems which tend to isolate meaning into single, static visual icons.

Classification and Terminology in Hindu Iconology

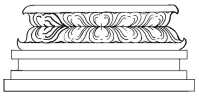
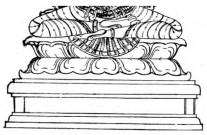
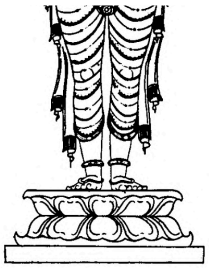
Achari's framework of Hindu iconology reveals that icons are not isolated visual forms but are part of a highly structured and systematic visual language. He classifies icons based on material form (sculptural, relief, and painted), mobility (movable, immovable, or hybrid), temperament (peaceful, heroic, or fierce), and posture (standing, seated, or reclining), demonstrating that meaning is encoded through multiple, intersecting dimensions rather than singular visual representation (Achari 3,4). This layered classification system suggests that icons function not merely as images but as organized carriers of philosophical, emotional, and cosmological states.

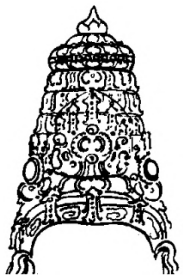
In addition to classification, Achari emphasizes the importance of terminology in understanding symbolic systems. Sanskrit terms such as mūrti, bimba, vigraha, and pratīka distinguish between embodiment, reflection, expansion, and symbolic representation, revealing a nuanced vocabulary that differentiates modes of meaning-making. He argues that without nāma (name), rūpa (form) cannot be understood or communicated, positioning icons as a form of visual language that enables individuals to interpret and share experiences of the divine (Achari 4). This relationship between naming and form highlights that meaning is not inherent in the visual alone but emerges through culturally embedded systems of knowledge and interpretation.

The following table synthesizes key symbolic elements from Achari's Hindu Iconology, illustrating the layered, relational, and multi-dimensional nature of meaning within Indian visual systems.

As demonstrated in Table 2, Hindu symbolic systems operate through layered, relational, and context-dependent meanings, where a single visual form can simultaneously represent philosophical, cosmic, psychological, and ethical dimensions. This stands in contrast to contemporary user interface iconography, which often reduces meaning to single, fixed icons, limiting the depth and plurality of interpretation.

Table 2: Symbolic Structures in Hindu Iconology and Their Conceptual Implications

Symbol / Element	Meaning	Symbolic Layer	Conceptual Insight	Relevance to UI Design
Lotus Throne 	Purity, enlightenment, transcendence beyond material world	Spiritual + philosophical	Meaning emerges through **process (growth, transformation)**	Icons can represent **states/transformations**, not just actions
Postures				
Seated (Padmasana) 	Potential for manifestation	Transitional	Meaning exists in **latent states**	UI can represent **potential / inactive states**
One Leg Down	Compassion, engagement with world	Ethical + relational	Symbolism encodes **intent and action**	Icons can reflect **user intention**, not just function
Both Legs Down	Full action, readiness to help	Functional + ethical	Meaning tied to **immediacy and interaction**	Interaction states can be symbolically expressed
Standing Posture 	Full manifestation in the world	Immanence	Symbolism reflects **presence and accessibility**	UI icons = visible layer of deeper systems
Four Arms	Multiple frameworks: cosmic states, psychology, society, consciousness	Multi-layered	One form holds **multiple simultaneous meanings**	Move beyond “one icon = one meaning”
Crown	Sovereignty, ultimate	Abstract +	Symbol points to the	UI should allow

	reality	metaphysical	**unknowable**	**abstraction, not just literalism**
Earrings (Makara)	Dual paths of knowledge: intellect & intuition	Epistemological	Knowledge is **plural, not singular**	Design should support **multiple ways of understanding**
Kirti-Mukha (Face of Glory)	Time, impermanence, destruction	Cosmic + temporal	All forms are **temporary and changing**	UI systems should consider **temporality and change**
Mudras (Gestures)	Communication through embodied action	Embodied + performative	Meaning is **expressed through interaction**	Strong parallel to **gesture-based interfaces**
Abhaya Mudra	Fearlessness, protection	Ethical	Symbol conveys **emotional assurance**	Icons can communicate **feeling, not just function**
Varada Mudra	Generosity, giving	Ethical	Symbol encodes **values and behavior**	UI can reflect **values (trust, safety, care)**
Chin Mudra	Teaching, knowledge transfer	Cognitive	Knowledge is **relational and shared**	UI as a **learning interface**
Dhyana Mudra	Meditation, inward focus	Experiential	Symbol represents **internal states**	UI can reflect **mental/emotional states**

Tarjani Mudra	Vigilance, discipline, ego awareness	Psychological	Symbol reflects **self-regulation**	UI can guide **attention and awareness**

This reveals a fundamental mismatch between Indian symbolic systems and contemporary interface design, where the former operates through multiplicity and relationality, while the latter prioritizes simplification and standardisation. And while individual symbols carry specific meanings, a broader analysis reveals conceptual patterns across symbolic objects.

As illustrated in Table 2, symbolic objects in Hindu iconology do not function as isolated signs but as part of a larger conceptual system, where each symbol encodes multiple layers of philosophical, psychological, and cosmic meaning. These symbols often represent processes such as transformation, discipline, perception, and liberation, rather than fixed, singular ideas. This systemic and relational approach to meaning stands in contrast to contemporary user interface iconography, which often reduces meaning to single, fixed icons, limiting interpretive depth and cultural specificity.

A comprehensive catalogue of symbolic elements is provided in Appendix A (adapted from Achari 11–19).

Table 3: Symbolic Objects and Their Conceptual Functions in Hindu Iconology

Symbol Type	Examples	Core Meaning	Symbolic Function	Design Insight for UI
Bondage & Liberation Tools	Pāśa (noose), Paraśu (axe), Khaḍga (sword)	Ignorance, attachment, release	Represent **constraints and transformation**	UI can represent **states of restriction,**

				release, progress
Control & Discipline	Aṅkuśha (goad), Tarjani (gesture), Kunta (spear)	Guidance, vigilance, focus	Symbolize **direction and control of self**	Interfaces can guide **attention, behavior, and intention**
Knowledge & Consciousness	Pustaka (book), Chin Mudra, Śuka (parrot)	Learning, transmission of truth	Meaning is **relational and shared**	UI as a **knowledge system**, not just tool
Cosmic Order & Power	Gadā (mace), Vajra (thunderbolt), Cakra (wheel)	Dharma, universal law, power	Symbols encode **cosmic structure and order**	UI systems reflect **invisible structures (systems thinking)**
Sound & Creation	Ḍamaru (drum), Śaṅkha (conch)	Creation through vibration/sound	Meaning emerges through **process and rhythm**	Interaction design = **temporal + dynamic**
Purity & Transformation	Padma (lotus), Kamaṇḍalu (water pot), Kalaśa (vase)	Purification, growth, life force	Symbols show **evolution and becoming**	UI can reflect **user journeys, not just endpoints**
Protection & Defence	Kheṭaka (shield), Dhvaja (flag)	Safety, identity, assertion	Symbolize **boundaries and presence**	UI should communicate **trust, security, identity**
Mind & Perception	Ādarśa (mirror), Sarpa (snake), Mrga (deer)	Illusion, awareness, instinct	Meaning tied to **internal states**	UI can reflect **cognition and emotion**
Time & Impermanence	Ghaṇṭa (bell), Khatvāṅga (skull staff), munda-mala	Transience, cycles, death	All forms are **temporary**	UI should consider **change, states, transitions**
Spiritual Practice & Discipline	Japa-Mālā (rosary), Dhyana Mudra	Repetition, meditation	Meaning through **practice and interaction**	Strong link to **habit-forming interfaces**

Unlike Hindu iconological systems, which operate through layers and rich semantic vocabulary, current contemporary user interface design icons prioritise standardisation and

universality, often overlooking the deep cultural and philosophical dimensions of meaning-making.

Methodology

This section shows the mixed methods approach through which this Major Research Project was conducted. The aim of this research was not just to decolonise the UI icons, but also the process of conducting research. As mentioned earlier, this research employs a mixed methods approach, integrating three types of inquiry viz. secondary research and literature review, qualitative semi-structured interviews, and participatory co-design sessions.

The secondary research and literature review establish the background and historical landscape, the effects of colonisation on Indian cultural identity, the Western origins of graphical user interface conventions, and the richness of India's pre-colonial visual traditions. The qualitative interviews show data that is personal and lived, cultural knowledge within people rather than in texts, passed down through experience rather than books. And finally, the co-design sessions generate visual data, icons, concepts that embody cultural knowledge in visual form rather than just language. Together, the three contribute toward the research.

The icons produced through this research are not conclusions, they are findings, embodying lived experience about what Indian visual culture contains and what digital design could be.

Research Design Overview

The research unfolded across three primary phases, each building on the last:

Table 4. Research Design Overview

Phase	Component	Description
1	**Secondary Research & Literature Review**	In-depth review of literature on postcolonial theory, decolonising design, HCI and cultural bias, Indian iconography, Vedic philosophy, and cultural appropriation. Ongoing throughout the project.
2	**Qualitative Interviews**	Semi-structured interviews with five Indian participants across a range of professional backgrounds, cultural knowledge, and geographic contexts. Interview guide developed from the secondary research. Transcripts analysed using Braun & Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis.
3	**Co-Design Sessions**	Participatory creative sessions with the same five

		participants, structured in two parts: a meditative creative visualisation (Part A) and a structured icon co-design exercise (Part B). Visual and verbal outputs analysed through visual affinity mapping and thematic coding.

Participant Recruitment and Selection

Participants were recruited via email. An initial email described the research project, its scope and limitations, and the nature. Those who expressed interest were sent the informed consent form for review prior to any research activity beginning. Only upon receipt of a signed consent form did the interview process commence. The consent form was not a formality but an act of the research relationship.

Participants Profile:
Five participants representing a range of relationships to Indian cultural life and to digital design too. The selection was a mix that would make the research accessible and relatable to audiences who might know nothing about UX but could still engage meaningfully with the cultural questions, as well as those with professional design knowledge. The resulting group has knowledge of software development, creative industries, traditional arts, and cultural knowledge, with participants from urban India, rural India, and the Indian diaspora in Canada. Further mentioned in the findings participant profile section.

The diversity of this group reflects the research's foundation that India's visual culture cannot be represented by any single regional, age, or generational perspective.

After conducting thorough **literature review in Phase One**, the **qualitative interviews of Phase Two** followed.

Before each interview, the researcher shared a presentation with the participant. This presentation oriented participants to the scope, rationale, and limitations of the research. It introduced key concepts (decolonisation, UI icons, the desktop metaphor) in simple terms. It made the participant's role as co-designer rather than passive subjects clear and it provided an opportunity for questions, clarifications, and the addressing of any concerns (technical, ethical, etc). The presentation also reiterated the terms of the consent form that participants

had already signed, reinforcing the ethical transparency that this research treats as a foundation.

This approach of beginning the research relationship with a shared orientation rather than jumping directly into data collection reflects the inclusive design principle that participants should be full co-designers in the research rather than sources of data to be extracted. The presentation was not a lecture, it was an invitation and welcome.

Interviews were semi-structured, lasting between sixty and ninety minutes per participant. Each followed a guide organised into four thematic sections, 1. cultural symbols and identity (participants' visual associations with Indian culture); 2. colonisation and decolonisation (exploring participants' understanding of the same); 3. digital interfaces and representation (to see participants' digital experience and sense of cultural inclusion or absence in current UI design); and lastly 4. a rapid-fire elemental and functional exercise (generating direct Indian icon candidates).

Interviews were conducted in English, with participants invited to use Hindi or other Indian languages wherever it felt more natural. Several participants code-switched freely, and Sanskrit or Hindi terms were noted, as these often marked concepts that resist adequate translation into English, and that are therefore candidates of the high cultural interest for the icon design process.

All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed.

Qualitative Coding and Thematic Analysis

Interview transcripts were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis viz. familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report.

Initial codes were generated across five broad themes. 1. Cultural visual memory (specific visual forms, motifs, and objects named by participants), 2. Conceptual vocabulary (untranslatable Indian concepts and Sanskrit terms), 3. colonial experience, 4. digital experience (feelings of inclusion or exclusion in digital spaces), and 5. icon candidates (moments where participants described visual forms with direct UI potential).

These codes were starting points. Unexpected themes such as the rural-urban divide as a specifically colonial geography, or the transmission of cultural knowledge through embodied experience rather than formal education were among some of the most significant findings.

Phase Three: Co-Design Sessions

Co-design was not merely a method preference in this research. It is an ethical and political necessity. A project that claims to decolonise Indian UI icons but produces its visual outputs through the decisions of a single researcher, even an Indian researcher, would only replicate rather than resist the colonial logic it seeks to challenge. The icons must emerge from the community, or they are simply another set of forms imposed (from authority).
This focuses on the source of knowledge. The visual knowledge needed to design culturally grounded Indian icons is within people, not in texts. As the interview findings confirm, participants learned their cultural visual vocabulary through observation, participation, lived experience and oral transmission rather than from books.

Co-design sessions were conducted with the same five participants who completed the interviews, ensuring continuity and allowing the creative sessions to build on the cultural material or thoughts that surfaced in the interviews. Sessions were held individually or in pairs, based on participant preference and availability. Some sessions were conducted in person in Toronto; others were held online via video call, accommodating participants based in India. Participants were given creative materials (paper, pens, and drawing tools) and were invited to work at their own pace in their own visual language and comfort level. It was emphasised that these icons are not meant to be perfect, they are a visualisation of ideas.

Part A: Creative Visualisation: Meditative and Generative

The first part of each co-design session was structured as a meditative creative visualisation, a practice rooted in the ancient Indian tradition of dhyana (meditation) as a means of accessing inner creativity. Participants were invited to still their minds, set aside the current visual conventions of the digital world we live in, and travel in imagination to a pre-colonial India: a Bharat untouched by Mughal or British imposition, surrounded by her own visual richness.

This meditative framing was not decorative, it was a methodological choice. To create the conditions in which participants could bypass current western digital design and access something older and more personal.

The researcher noted at the beginning of each session that drawing ability was not a criteria. Ideas, associations, impulses, and fragments were all equally welcome. The creative space was deliberately made low-pressure.

In this first part, participants were given creative freedom, paper and drawing materials, to engage in what might be called *vichaaron ki varsha* or a rain of ideas or thought. They were invited to translate their inner visualisations onto paper in any form (drawings, text, diagrams, storyboards, abstract marks). The emphasis was on generation rather than completion, on exploration rather than execution.

The outputs of this phase were seen not as finished icon designs but as a first draft of the cultural vocabulary participants carried within them.

The focus of Part A extended beyond UI icons. Participants were encouraged to surface any Indian concept, value, ritual, or visual form that they felt was absent or not represented in today's digital landscape. The research's aim is not merely to replace Western icons with Indian ones, but to begin the larger conversation of what a digitally expressed Indian visual culture might look and feel like.

Part B: Icon Co-Design: Structured and Responsive

The second part of each co-design session moved from open exploration to structured design response. Participants were invited to engage with a set of specific UI functions (like home, search, share, save, delete, settings, connect, welcome, notifications, time, like, profile) and to propose Indian visual alternatives for each, drawing on the cultural knowledge and visual associations they had surfaced in Part A and in the preceding interview.

Participants were reminded of their consent and of the scope of the project.

Participants worked at their own pace and comfort level. Those with design or visual arts backgrounds produced more; those whose expertise lay in cultural knowledge rather than visual practice annotated their drawings extensively with explanatory text, cultural context, and personal associations. Both types of output are equally important and valid.

Interviews were conducted between January 14 and February 13, 2026, following approval from the OCAD University Research Ethics Board, and were followed by co-design sessions conducted between February 16 and March 12, 2026.

Ethical Considerations

This research was conducted in accordance with the requirements of OCAD University's Research Ethics Board (REB). Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to any research activity. Participants were clearly informed of the voluntary nature of their participation, their right to withdraw at any time, and the terms of data storage, use etc. All participants are identified by pseudonym throughout this research: Eek, Doh, Teen, Chaar, and Paanch.

Particular attention was given to the question of ownership of co-design outputs. Participants were informed that the icon forms and cultural proposals they generated remain their intellectual and creative property, and that the researcher does not claim authorship of these forms. Participants are credited as co-creators of the icon bank in all research outputs. Any commercial use of the icon forms would require explicit further consent from their creators, which lies beyond the scope of this research.

The researcher also acknowledges the ethical complexity of working with sacred cultural material. Several of the visual forms generated in the co-design sessions: mudras, deity attributes, sacred geometry, carry spiritual significance that exceeds their visual form.

The researcher is aware of her own position and potential bias. As a diasporic Indian designer with training in Western design, she brings both a strong personal connection to Indian culture and design perspectives shaped by Western education. Throughout the research, she has worked to balance these influences by reflecting critically on her assumptions and ensuring that participants' voices remain central.

Findings

This chapter presents the findings from the five semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted with Indian participants as part of this Major Research Project. The interviews were conducted between 14th January 2026 till 13th February 2026, following approval from the OCAD University Research Ethics Board. Followed by Co-design sessions starting from 16th February 2026 till 12th March 2026.

Participants were recruited from the Indian diaspora in Canada and from India, and represent a range of professional backgrounds and age. Each interview lasted between sixty and ninety minutes. All participants consented to transcription; their names are replaced with pseudonyms.

This analysis follows Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis methodology. The transcripts were read multiple times, initial codes were generated from the data, and these were then organised into overarching themes. The findings are presented thematically rather than participant by participant, with participant voices woven throughout each section as direct evidence.

Participant Profiles

Five participants were interviewed for this study. The table below shows an overview of each participant's background and areas of culture they've engaged in. In accordance with the consent process, as mentioned earlier, each participant is identified by a pseudonym throughout. The pseudonyms ek, doh, teen, chaar, paanch are Hindi for numbers 1 to 5.

Table 5. Participant Profiles

Pseudonym	Profession	Region	Key Cultural Expertise
Eek	IT Professional	Urban India	Language identity, everyday digital use, colonial mindset in urban life
Doh	Tech Sector	Urban India	Rangoli, Lotus, Diya, Om, Ashoka Chakra; yoga appropriation; emoji inclusion
Teen	AI Engineer	Urban India / diaspora	UI/UX design awareness, digital cultural absence, childhood material memory
Chaar	Unspecified,	Rural & pan-India	Phool Dei, Sanjhi, Gullak, Bahi Khata, joint

	Widely travelled		family, inter-religious coexistence
Paanch	Home Stylist, Hindustani vocalist, Antiques collector	Urban India (Rural roots)	Embroidery, Carving, paisley, joint family, Rural visual culture, Raja Ravi Verma paintings

Collectively, the five participants offer a spectrum of perspectives in relation to Indian culture: from rich rural roots (Chaar, Paanch) to urban professionals (Eek, Doh, Teen). They brought out how the colonial legacy operates differently across class, geography, and generations, and how Indian visual culture is accessed, maintained, and lost across these different contexts.

Theme One: The Living Visual Vocabulary of Indian Culture

The first and most immediate finding of the interviews is the extraordinary richness and specificity of the visual vocabulary that participants carry within them — symbols, forms, gestures, and objects that are deeply familiar, personally resonant, and largely absent from the digital interfaces we use daily. This finding emerges unprompted across all five interviews, and its convergence is a strong signal in this data.

Symbols of immediate cultural recognition

When asked what visual elements come to mind when they hear the phrase "Indian culture," all five participants generated a rich and largely convergent set of symbols without hesitation. These were not academic or theoretical answers; they were immediate, embodied, and personally weighted responses:

Table 6. Symbols of Immediate Cultural Recognition

Participant	Direct evidence	Analytical note
Eek	*"The Om symbol. The Swastik. Pictures of gods and goddesses. And at house entrances, the Shubh Labh tassels, the masks to ward off evil, chillies and lemon."*	Eek's symbols are all threshold objects: things that mark the entry to a protected space. This has direct icon potential for concepts of access, protection, and welcome.

Doh	*"Rangoli. The lotus flower. The Aum symbol. The Ashoka Chakra. And diyas — the clay lamps."*	Doh's five symbols are also national or ceremonial symbols - suggesting a deeply civic as well as spiritual visual identity.
Teen	*"The OM symbol. The swastika. The lotus — I see it on so many idols."*	Teen connects the swastika explicitly to balance and the goddess of fortune Lakshmi, reclaiming its Indian meaning against its Western colonial association.
Chaar	*"Temples. Rivers. Sun. Trees. Cow. These represent peaceful coexistence — of every being on earth."*	Chaar's symbols are natural and ecological rather than religious objects — reflecting his rural upbringing and philosophy of co-existence.
Paanch	*"The Swastik. Om. The paisley motif — I call it the mango design. Peacocks. Lotus. The embroidery and tattoo motifs from rural women."*	Paanch's repertoire is the widest and most materially specific, drawing on craft traditions, body art, and decorative arts rather than religious iconography.

Convergence: Om/Aum, Lotus, Swastika: three symbols named independently by all five participants. These represent strong candidates for culturally grounded icon design.

The Om symbol and the lotus emerged as the two strongest points of convergence across all the five participants. Both carry layered meanings that extend well beyond their immediate visual form. Doh articulates the significance of Om really well: "*For me, Om symbolises a fresh beginning, a new beginning, a positive beginning. So whenever I start writing about something or working on something, the first thing I do is write Om in the first few pages. Even before exams, I used to do that as a kid*." - Doh. This testimony shows that Om is not merely a symbol of Hinduism in Doh's experience; it is an act of intentional beginning. In UI terms, this aligns powerfully with concepts of launching an application, beginning a new document, or initiating any new process. The design implication is not simply just to replace an existing icon with the Om symbol, but to understand what cultural logic the symbol embodies - the act of consecrating a beginning, and to consider how that logic might inform a new visual vocabulary for initiation and start-up.

The lotus carries its own beauty in complex layering. Doh speaks of it as a symbol of hope - it represents light in darkness. Paanch identifies it with the bounty and abundance of nature. Chaar connects it to the national flower and the ecological richness of India. And Teen observes it on the hands and pedestals of divine figures across Hindu iconology. This merging

of ecological, spiritual, aesthetic, and national meaning in a single visual form represents the kind of richness that Indian visual culture offers to UI design meaning that is dynamic rather than static, capable of evolving with the culture that uses it.

The diya: light, hope, and the act of invocation

The diya, a small clay oil lamp, is associated most famously with the popular and holy Indian festival Diwali. Diya emerged as a symbol of particular emotional depth. Doh's description is illuminating. "*The diya represents light in darkness, it represents hope. We have diyas for our pujas, for a lot of different things. It's an invocation to God. You're invited to our place — be it inside a temple, inside a mandir, it's an invocation*." Doh.
Teen, who closed the interview with the diya as her phrase for Indian pride, offered a very philosophically rich meaning too *"I really like the concept of Diwali - one of its interpretations is that when you light a diya, the darkness in your soul and around you gets burnt away by the fire."* Teen.

So, the diya thus carries at least three distinct but related meanings which are 1. illumination and the dispelling of darkness, 2. invitation and hospitality and 3. invocation, the act of calling the divine into a space. All three of these meanings resonate as UI metaphors. A diya icon for a search function would encode not merely the action of looking but the cultural logic of seeking light, of dispelling ignorance. A diya icon for a new chat or meeting invitation would carry the hospitality aspect, invoking hospitality, you are being called into a space, welcomed as a guest. These are not simple cultural decorations; they are semantically richer alternatives to the magnifying glass and the meet icon/ video camera icon that currently perform these functions.

The Rangoli: welcome, geometry, and the daily act of making/ creating

Rangoli are the geometric floor patterns made with coloured powder (gulaal), rice flour, or flower petals at the entrances to homes and public spaces. Geometric patterns have a huge significance in India and spirituality. And this was named by three of the five participants and described with detail that shows how deeply it is embedded in daily life. Doh's account connects Rangoli to the concept of welcome and to the broader principle of atithi devo bhava - "*Rangoli is a welcoming gesture — be it houses or even our school's annual function. It's*

not just a decorative design outside the house. It's a welcoming gesture. It's like an invocation — you're welcoming your guests." - Doh

Chaar adds a dimension that is particularly relevant for icon design, the mathematical and geometric precision of Rangoli "*Rangolis are geometric patterns, and vibrations also form geometric patterns.*" Chaar. This observation connects Rangoli to a deeper principle of Indian visual culture i.e. the understanding that visual form is not merely aesthetic but also vibrational, energetic, and structurally meaningful.

Sacred geometry in Indian tradition, from the Sri Yantra to the Vastupurusha Mandala to the ground plans of temples - operates on the principle that certain geometric patterns have specific effects on the consciousness of those who perceive them. Rangoli, practiced daily at doorways, is a popular manifestation of this, a geometric form that signifies welcome, auspiciousness in any space it marks.

For UI design, this suggests that Indian-rooted icons needn't be limited to literal or figurative representations of cultural objects. And this geometric abstraction and the visual language of Rangoli, Kolam, and sacred geometry is itself a deeply Indian visual tradition.

Theme Two: Colonial Effects - Identity Lost and Partially Recovered

All of the five participants spoke at length and with evident feelings about the effects of colonisation on Indian cultural identity. This theme was not prompted by leading questions; it emerged organically in every interview and in some cases dominated the conversation. The consistency and intensity of the responses across five participants who differ significantly in age, profession, and cultural background constitutes one of the most striking findings of this study.

The loss of cultural self-assurance

A fundamental effect of colonisation identified by participants is not material but psychological: erosion of the sense that Indian culture is valuable, sophisticated, and worthy of pride. This finding aligns closely with Gopal's (2021) account of the "depriving of self-assurance" produced by British colonial education. Eek articulates this erosion really

well: "*Our identity as Indians has sort of waned away. Whenever I drive around, I'll see all hoardings, all traffic signs, all put up in English. I default to reading it in the English script and not being as quick at reading it in Hindi — and I'm guilty of that myself.*" - Eek.
Paanch also gives an example of the way English fluency has become a marker of social status and modernity in India, "We have a common friend — convent-educated — who was telling us about the kind of grades she used to get in school. She was taking pride that she flunked in Hindi. She spoke about it very proudly: "Hindi was the one where I used to fail, I would barely pass."" - Paanch.

This shows the dynamic that Macaulay's Minute set in motion:- an Indian who has achieved such a thorough internalisation of the colonial value hierarchy that she regards her own linguistic incompetence in her native language as a social credential. The fact that this dynamic remains observable in contemporary India, nearly eighty years after independence, testifies to the depth of the colonial imprint on minds.

English as colonial residue and reluctant unifier

The role of English in post-colonial India was a recurring topic across the interviews, revealing a complex and a contradictory relationship. Participants identified English as colonial imposition, ongoing status marker, and in one case a pragmatic unifier of India's extraordinary linguistic diversity. Doh captures the contradiction "The way we talk in India nowadays - Hindi plus English - this is just an everyday occurrence. And this is something I'm also complicit in. This all stems from colonisation, wherein a lot of our practices were lost, a lot of our identity was dismissed.". Eek makes the same observation from the perspective of a north Indian whose education was entirely English-medium "current education makes us learn every subject in English, math, physics, biology - in English. And of course picking up jobs, corporate. There's a very heavy influence of Western culture. And most people living in cities.".

Chaar offers another nuanced position, acknowledging both the violence and the pragmatic value of English as a colonial legacy: "There is one language that connects the Indians to the entire world — English. That is a gift of colonisation. We have been very good at absorbing things for positive uptake. Not everything should be taken in a bad form. The problem is when the mother tongue is forgotten or considered less than English" Chaar.

So, Chaar distinguishes between the utility of English as a tool and its operation as a hierarchy: he notes that the prestige associated with English, the sense that speaking it makes one superior, is the colonial stigma, and that this prestige is, in his view, beginning to erode as younger Indians recover pride in their own languages.

The rural-urban divide as colonial geography

One of the most consistent observations across the interviews is that of the geographic distribution of colonial effects, which is the identification of urban India as the primary site of cultural erosion and conversely rural India as the primary site of cultural roots and continuity. This pattern was named independently by four of the five participants.

Table 7. The Rural–Urban Divide as Colonial Geography

Participant	Direct evidence	Analytical note
Eek	*"Visual traditions are fading. Definitely the cities — rural India is where these things are being kept alive, at a much faster rate."*	Identifies urbanisation as a primary driver of cultural loss, due to Western education and corporate culture.
Doh	*"I do see a big rift. People from rural areas who move to cities will feel out of place — they see people conversing in English, which they may not use as an everyday fashion."*	The internal migrant experience as a form of internal colonisation, cultural displacement within one's own country.
Chaar	*"Visual traditions are maintained with more intensity in rural areas. In cities, people are running from minute to minute — they do not pause to celebrate traditions."*	Frames urban pace and productivity culture as the main cause of lack of maintenance of traditional practice.
Paanch	*"In rural India, people are the ones who are actually keeping all the traditions and cultures alive. Everything used to be eco-friendly, organic. The day used to start with the sunrise and end with the sundown."*	Shows rural India not merely as a repository of tradition but as a holistic, alternative way of life, one that modern science is now validating.

This finding certainly has significant methodological implications for this research. The icon bank generated through this study will reflect the cultural knowledge of its participants, who are predominantly urban or diaspora-based. The icon bank should be understood as a starting

point (specifically, an urban and diaspora starting point) that explicitly invites future research conducted with rural Indian participants.

The decolonised mindset: a conscious choice rather than a rejection

When asked what decolonisation means to them, participants consistently defined it not as a rejection of Western culture but as a recovery to make conscious, autonomous cultural choices - a restoration of what might be called cultural pride. Doh mentions "*Decolonisation is more about the fact that you accept your own culture, you start integrating that into your own everyday life. It's not that anything Western you end up rejecting. It's the fact that you make a conscious choice rather than having a preconceived notion that the Western counterpart is always the better one.*".

Chaar extends this definition through a beautiful metaphor "*Decolonisation is not removing something — you are actually filling something so that the other things get away automatically. If we put the heroes of our culture — the invention of zero by Aryabhata, yoga, our medicine, our education — the moment we get those back, we are not trying to remove anything. We are just trying to reclaim our basics, our strengths, our values, our identity."*.

This "filling, not removing" is philosophically crucial for the design agenda of this research. The goal of decolonising UI icons is not to delete Western icons and replace them with Indian ones, but to fill the digital space with Indian cultural richness so richly that it naturally expands the available visual vocabulary. The icon bank this research creates is not an alternative to existing icons; it is an addition, a supply of visual forms that have previously been absent.

Paanch names a phrase for Indian pride that encapsulates this orientation beautifully: Namaste. Not a political slogan, not a nationalist rallying cry, but a gesture of greeting that embodies the Indian value of recognising the divine in every person one meets and that has, ironically, already achieved global recognition even as its Indian origin goes largely unacknowledged.

Theme Three: Cultural Appropriation and the Politics of Attribution

Cultural appropriation emerged as a significant theme in three of the five interviews, with participants independently identifying the pattern of the West taking Indian cultural forms, stripping them of their Indian identity and philosophical context, rebranding them with Western or neutral names, and profiting off of them. While the Indian originators remain invisible and often impoverished. This pattern was described across domains including spiritual practices, fashion, design, and language.

Yoga as the paradigm case

Yoga was a prominent and frequently cited example of cultural appropriation, named by three participants with varying degrees of critical analysis. They arrived independently at the example, suggesting that yoga which is particularly important in Indian culture as an example of Western extraction. "*Yoga is a practice which is meant to be very spiritual, uplifting, which has been rebranded into gym-wear in the West. The main purpose of yoga is not being met. And if anyone wants to learn more about it, they probably don't even know it originates from India*." Doh.

"*A hot yoga class has recently opened in my locality. I feel very conflicted about this because yoga is an Indian practice of breathing techniques and asanas, practiced through centuries. Non-indigenous people tend to take these cultural values and twist them into a form that makes it more palatable to them. If they associated it with Indian values, people might not be open to it. But if you colonialise it and make it very Anglo-specific, people think it's the hot new thing."* Teen explains.

Teen's analysis here is really sharp as she identifies the workings or mechanism of appropriation precisely - the stripping of Indian identity makes a practice more commercially likable or accessible to Western consumers. The cultural origin is not just overlooked, it is actively removed because its presence would make the product less attractive to the target market. Doh extends the appropriation analysis beyond yoga to broader Indian philosophical vocabulary "We also see it with karma. But if you really go and ask them, what is the meaning of karma and do you know where it originated from? No one would know that. The concepts of karma, dharma, ahimsa — they are all being used without attribution."

Fashion appropriation: from dupatta to Scandinavian scarf

Fashion was the second domain of appropriation identified by participants, with specific examples that illuminate renaming and rebranding as a form of cultural erasure. Doh says: "*Ralph Lauren is taking jhumkas. Another brand is taking the kolhapuri chappals. The dupatta is being called the Scandinavian scarf. And Western designers use quite a lot of traditional Indian techniques, sewing techniques, designs — but for it to be popularised, if they associated it with an Indian origin, it would make it look bad."* This testimony confirms a pattern, the paisley (buta), the jhumka, the kolhapuri chappal, and now the dupatta are all Indian design forms that have been adopted by Western fashion houses, renamed to obscure their origins, and sold at premium prices in Western markets. Paanch observes "*People need to be a little more honest — be it corporations or individuals — and give the due respect. And not just respect, but if you copied it from someone, acknowledge that. In academic research, not mentioning a source is plagiarism — looked down upon. But then why is it okay to have cultural theft because of white supremacy?*". This parallel between academic citation norms and cultural attribution is analytically incisive and powerful because it exposes the double standard by which intellectual property norms rigorously enforced in academic and corporate contexts are suspended when the property in question belongs to a colonised culture.

Attribution in the digital context

Participants extended the appropriation analysis to the digital context, noting specific cases wherein Indian cultural forms have entered digital design without attribution. Doh's observation about the Namaste/Hi-Five emoji is quite illuminating "*The namaste originated from India, but cultures around the world use it now. When emoticons came, the hi-five symbol — the one which looks like namaste — is actually a hi-five. If you look at the symbol properly, you'll see some lines on top of the two hands — like a clap sound. WhatsApp noticed this feedback. Now you have two different emoticons — one is a hi-five and one is a namaste. That is a beautiful inclusion*."

This case is instructive in multiple ways. First, it documents a moment where an Indian gesture - the anjali mudra was incorporated into the global emoji vocabulary but misattributed as a Western gesture (the hi-five), and subsequently corrected after community feedback. Second, it shows that digital cultural inclusion is not merely possible but has happened in specific documented cases, suggesting that the broader agenda of decolonising

digital design is achievable, not utopian. Third, the correction required external pressure from users who recognised the misattribution - evidence that the Indian community has both the cultural knowledge and the advocacy capacity to drive this kind of change.

Doh also notes the continued absence of Indian cultural forms in Apple's ecosystem specifically "*During Diwali I was hoping I could find an emoticon of Rangoli or a GIF of Rangoli. The iPhone did not have it in the GIF library. Android does. I realised why Android has it — someone shared it with me — and when I wanted to revert back, the iPhone did not have that. These kinds of gaps, in today's day and age, make no sense*." The iPhone/Android comparison is a minor yet telling data point, it suggests that the inclusion of Indian cultural content in digital design is not a technical impossibility but a design priority decision - one that different companies have made differently. The gap is not a limitation of technology; it is a limitation of whose culture is considered worth representing.

Theme Four: The Felt Absence — Digital Spaces as Culturally Foreign

All five participants, when invited to reflect on the digital interfaces they use daily, expressed a version of the same observation on culturally digital space. Participants are all competent and frequent digital users, but not quite home. The metaphors participants reach for to describe this experience are revealing as they speak of things being "westernised," of "missing" cultural representations, of wanting to "see more" of India in digital spaces. The tone is a sense of hope to see potential fulfilled.

The Western metaphor problem: things that do not exist in Indian life

Several participants spontaneously identified the cultural specificity of existing UI icons — the way they embed Western material culture as if it were universal. Doh's analysis of the trash can icon *"The trash icon — that's typically the trash bin we see here in the West. But that's not the case for every country. Go to Africa — they have smaller bins. For a five-year-old looking at an app, how they learn what the recycle bin icon does is by trial and error. We could consider being more inclusive. The way a house is the home icon — you don't see those kinds of houses anywhere outside the West.*"

Eek identifies the lock icon as similarly culturally specific and offers an immediate Indian alternative - *"The lock icon seems very Western to me. If I were to think of an equivalent from an Indian culture standpoint, I think that would be the latch — the kundi, as we call it —*

instead of a lock, to close things off." This is a clear, actionable finding - a participant, without being prompted to think about icon design, naturally generates an Indian equivalent for an existing UI icon (lock -> kundi). The kundi, the traditional iron door latch found on wooden doors across India carries exactly the semantic content of the lock icon (securing, preventing access, closing) while drawing on Indian material culture rather than Western.

Teen share a personal childhood memory showing cultural absence in digital design, through a childhood memory *"The save icon, which is an image of a floppy disc — that is very irrelevant in today's times. And the trash can symbol looks exactly like the trash can you would find in any Western society. But in India, when I was a kid, I remember we used to have penguin-shaped trash cans. That's a childhood memory for me. And that's definitely not something you see in icons*." The gap between Teen's lived memory and the icon she is given is a small but precise illustration of the cultural displacement this research seeks to address.

Recognition versus recall as the design standard

Eek articulates a design principle that has direct implications for the research's icon design agenda i.e. the distinction between recognition and recall in user interface navigation. "*When we're looking at things from recognition rather than recall, that's when we know we've actually made great UI versus just recalling what this does. Maybe we cannot have ten different models of houses as the home icon, but we can at least attempt to see what house means in different cultures. The aim is not just to come up with an icon, but another way of thinking — that a house doesn't just have to be a typical Western pitched roof. It could be a place where you feel safe in your heart. The more metaphors we go into, the more creativity we can explore.*"

This formulation - home as a place where you feel safe in your heart rather than a building with a specific architectural form - shows a metaphorical dimension of Indian visual culture that distinguishes it from the more literal, object-based metaphors of Western GUI design. Indian visual culture, as the literature review documents, tends toward layered symbolic meaning rather than literal depiction. The lotus does not merely depict a flower; it embodies spiritual flowering, emergence from difficulty, purity amid impurity. A UI icon designed within this tradition would carry similar depth.

The Bahi Khata, the Gullak, and the Indian Save

Chaar provides a set of icons that are culturally specific, analytically rich in the data - objects drawn from pre-colonial Indian (commercial and domestic) life that have exact functional similarities to standard UI icons but are entirely absent from current digital design. The Bahi Khata is quite interesting. *"The Bahi Khata was a two-or-three-fold booklet with a string around so you could wrap it and close it and carry it. People used to do trading — accounts could relate to Bahi Khata. That would be the Indian equivalent for Excel, or for accounts."* - Chaar.

The Bahi Khata, the traditional Indian merchant's ledger book, typically covered in red cloth, folded and tied with a string, used across centuries of Indian commerce is not merely a culturally interesting alternative to the spreadsheet icon. It is an object that carries enormous cultural weight, it is associated with Diwali (when new Bahi Khatas are traditionally opened, their accounts blessed), with the Lakshmi puja that consecrates the year's financial work. A Bahi Khata icon for a spreadsheet application would not merely look different from the current Excel grid but it would also carry a different philosophy of what financial record-keeping even means.

Similarly, the Gullak, the Indian clay piggy bank, typically round like a lota, with a slot for coins, broken when full, emerges across two interviews as an icon candidate for save/preserve:

Table 8. Participant Quotes and Analytical Notes

Participant	Direct evidence	Analytical note
Teen	*"The first thing that came to my mind was my grandma's purse — those ones that open just like that, and then you close it. That is save to me."*	A personal childhood memory of domestic preservation — emotionally warm, gendered, generational.
Chaar	*"A gullak — what you would call a piggy bank. Round like a lota, made of clay. A small horizontal slot to push a coin inside. Once it is full, you just break it."*	A pre-colonial Indian form with exact semantic content (save/accumulate) and a ritual dimension (the breaking is also a moment of use/harvest).

The convergence of two participants on the save/preservation concept reaching independently toward domestic Indian containers (grandma's purse, gullak) rather than digital storage metaphors is quite significant. Both forms carry the semantic content required (something is put in, kept safe, accessible later) while drawing on cultural memory rather than abstract digital convention. The gullak in particular has an additional layer of meaning: its clay construction means it is broken to be used, suggesting a different relationship to preservation, one of accumulation toward a purpose rather than indefinite storage.

Theme Five: Spirituality as the Foundation of Indian Aesthetics

A theme that emerged powerfully, unprompted across all five interviews is the inseparability of spirituality and aesthetics in Indian visual culture. Participants described Indian visual forms not as decorative elements applied to functional objects, but as the visible expression of a spiritual or philosophical logic that lies behind every object, gesture, and arrangement in traditional Indian life. This finding has great implications for the designing of traditional, Indian-rooted UI icons.

Aesthetics as byproduct of spiritual logic

Many participants articulated the principle that Indian visual culture's aesthetic richness is a byproduct of deeper philosophical or spiritual purpose, not an end in itself. This principle, if applied to icon design, would suggest that Indian icons should be grounded in cultural logic rather than simply visual aesthetics.

"Whenever I go into the rituals and any practice - art, architecture, textiles — it is not done from the point of aesthetics, that this should look aesthetic. There is a spiritual, uplifting logic behind it. And aesthetics is a byproduct of it. Our textiles tell a story. The temple carvings tell stories. The way they are placed is supposed to increase the gravitational pull — to uplift one's vibration. So everything had a very logical reasoning behind it." - Chaar.

Chaar further extends this with specific examples from rural India "*Before they used to make food, the first chapati would be made for a cow, then for a dog, then for a bird — and then for the members of the family. There is a sense of giving back*."

And further describes the ecological logic embedded in the Sanjhi festival practice he witnessed as a child. *"We would take out clay from a pond and make shapes, let them dry, colour them, put them up as a figure of the goddess Sanjhi. After the festival was over, we would take them down and put them back in the pond. From nature's point of view — when you take out the clay, the pond's capacity, its volume to retain water, increases. And then after the festival, it would go back — biodegradable, merging with the same pond it came from*." - Chaar

This logic is circular and regenerative rather than extractive. This is the kind of layered, integrated meaning that the literature review of Hindu Iconology identifies as characteristic of Indian iconographic tradition and that is almost entirely absent from the flat, functional metaphors of Western GUI design.

Deities, attributes, and the grammar of iconographic difference

Chaar offers a philosophical take on the Indian iconographic system of deity differentiation through symbolic attributes - a system directly relevant to the design of a distinctive Indian icon vocabulary.

"If you look at the bigger picture, all the different attributes of deities convey the same thing: a beautiful coexistence of everything, whether it is a flower, a plant, an animal. We see a snake around the neck of Shivji and a little mouse next to Ganeshji. A snake can eat a rat — but in Shivji Parivaar, they coexist. Things with differing views, different tastes, differing perceptions, can coexist." — Chaar

This observation reveals the Indian iconographic system not as a set of visual codes for identifying deities, but as a philosophical argument made in visual form. An argument about co-existence, about the possibility of contradiction harmonising peacefully within a larger picture. Applied to UI icon design, this suggests that Indian icons needn’t aspire to be like the minimalist Western flat design. Rather they might instead embrace visual complexity, an embodiment of India's acceptance of multiplicity. And how “difference” is treated or welcomed and allowed to co-exist peacefully within systems.

Participant Analysis: Icon Candidates from Exercise

The rapid-fire exercise generated the most directly actionable findings of the interview phase. Across five participants, a rich and varied set of Indian visual forms were proposed as alternatives to or inspirations for the current existing UI icons. This section documents these proposals systematically.

The Pancha Bhuta - 5 elemental associations

When invited to respond to the five Vedic elements, participants made visual associations that draw on their deep cultural knowledge, personal memory, revealing a distinct Indian way of imagining elemental concepts:

Table 9. The Pancha Bhuta: Five Elemental Associations

Element	Eek	Doh	Teen	Chaar	Paanch
FIRE (Agni)	bonfire / Holi bonfire (Holika Dahan		Kalima (the divine feminine fire)	the chula (clay wood-fired stove used in village cooking)	fiery goddess, Holika Dahan
WATER (Jal)	rivers and people filling water in matkas (clay pots)	Divine	Vishnu (deity reclining on cosmic waters)	free-flowing river	rain, rivers, oceans
EARTH (Prithvi)	grazing fields for cattle	Mother nature	Saraswati (goddess of knowledge, associated with earth and learning)	the Sanjhi festival (clay goddess made from pond mud and returned to the pond)	
SKY / SPACE (Akasha)	kites in the sky	Infinity	Jatayu (the eagle of the Ramayana)	moon and stars	hopes, dreams, faith

AIR (Vayu)	a breeze across a small village	life		kites	"air is life"
TIME (Kaal)	the sun setting in the mountains		Brahma (the four-faced creator god, associated with all of time and creation	sunrise and sunset (pre-clock Indian time-keeping)	discipline, regularity, routine

Several analytical observations emerge from this exercise. First, there is a notable tendency to represent abstract concepts through divine or mythological figures rather than physical phenomena namely Vishnu for water, Saraswati for earth, Brahma for time, Jatayu for sky. This reflects the iconographic tradition of the Indian visual system, in which natural forces are personified as deities who embody their qualities.

For icon design, this opens the possibility of using gesture (mudra), attribute (ayudha), or symbolic animal (vahana) associated with these deities as abstract representations of elemental concepts.

Second, the time concept generated the most varied and culturally rich responses across participants from Brahma as the god of creation and time, to the sunrise and sunset as India's pre-colonial time-keeping system, to Paanch's concept of time as discipline and routine, the cyclical nature of time rather than linear. The kaal/time icon is therefore a particularly rich candidate for co-design exploration, with multiple valid Indian visual traditions to draw from.

Third, the kite or *patang* - named independently by two participants for sky/space represents a genuinely Indian visual form with strong cultural resonance (Makar Sankranti, Uttarayan, the urban rooftop culture of kite-flying at festival time) that has no equivalent in Western UI design and could function effectively as an icon for sharing, connection, or upward movement. Also, actions like cutting another kite or loosening the rope etc could be used as strong metaphors for tasks such as cutting or cut, manoeuvre etc.

Functional icon candidates table

The following table documents all functional icon candidates generated across the five interviews, organised by UI function:

Table 10. Functional Icon Candidates Derived from Co-design

	UI Icon	Decolonised Candidate	Origin/ Type	Participant
1.	**SAVE / PRESERVE**	Grandmother's purse (clasp-top)	Domestic feminine memory	Teen: personal childhood memory of how things were kept safe
2.	**SAVE / PRESERVE**	Potli / bundled cloth bag	Pre-colonial carrying/storage tradition	Multiple: bundled cloth was universal Indian storage form
3.	**DELETE / REMOVE**	Lightning bolt	Natural force; immediate removal	Teen: "Like removal — immediate" — natural rather than refuse-based
4.	**DELETE / REMOVE**	Visarjan (immersion of a deity)	Festival ritual; sacred release	Doh - cyclical rather than permanent deletion
5.	**DELETE / REMOVE**	Eraser	Tool-based; learned	Chaar: "eraser" — conceptually universal, tool-based rather than object-based
6.	**HOME / BELONGING**	Toran (mango-leaf doorway garland)	Threshold marker; welcome	Eek mentioned threshold objects; toran is universal Indian home-entry symbol
7.	**HOME / BELONGING**	Heart (feeling of home)	Affective metaphor	Eek: "home is a heart" — aligns with Doh's "safe in your heart" formulation
8.	**HOME / BELONGING**	Hut / kaccha ghar	Pre-colonial vernacular architecture	Chaar: "a small home or hut — we did not have those sloped homes"
9.	**SEARCH / SEEK**	Diya (illumination, dispelling darkness)	Sacred object; light as knowledge	Multiple: seeking as illumination is a deep Indian trope (jijñāsā, guru's light)
10.	**SEARCH / SEEK**	Yogi meditating (seeking inward)	Yogic / contemplative tradition	Chaar: "a person meditating, seeking something — eyes

				closed, no hand-held glasses"
11.	**SEARCH / SEEK**	Map / journey symbol	Navigation metaphor	Teen: "Map" - practical navigation but culturally neutral
12.	**SHARE / CONNECT**	Holding hands / joining hands	Gesture; human connection	Eek: "holding hands" — the Indian convention of physical connection between people
13.	**SHARE / CONNECT**	Prasad / open palm offering	Ritual giving; sacred generosity	Multiple: the offering of prasad is the Indian form of giving to all without discrimination
14.	**SHARE / CONNECT**	Joint family / group around a meal	Social structure; shared living	Paanch and Chaar both evoked the joint family as the Indian paradigm of connection and sharing
15.	**LOCK / SECURITY**	Kundi (iron door latch)	Pre-colonial domestic hardware	Eek (unprompted): "The kundi instead of a lock — to close things off"
16.	**ACCOUNTS / DATA**	Bahi Khata (merchant's ledger book)	Pre-colonial commercial tradition	Chaar: red cloth booklet, string-tied, Diwali-associated - sacred commercial record
17.	**NOTIFICATIONS**	Ghanta (temple bell)	Sacred sound; call to attention	Not named directly but implied by multiple references to temple sounds and the bell's function
18.	**NOTIFICATIONS**	Shankha (conch shell)	Sacred instrument; auspicious call	Not named directly; but strongly implied by cultural context of ceremonial sound
19.	**WELCOME / MEETING**	Anjali mudra with bangles	Gesture; atithi devo bhava	Researcher's original concept, confirmed as resonant across all participants
20.	**WELCOME / MEETING**	Tilak / bindi on forehead	Mark of welcome; auspicious greeting	Paanch: forehead mark as the Indian act of receiving someone with honour
21.	**TIME / CALENDAR**	Brahma (four-faced god of creation)	Vedic time deity	Teen (unprompted, immediate): "The four-faced God - Brahma" for time

22.	**TIME / CALENDAR**	Sunrise / sunset	Pre-clock natural time-keeping	Chaar: "sunrise and sunset" as the original Indian time system
23.	**SPIRITUAL START**	Om / Aum symbol	Universal Hindu sacred sound	Teen: writes Om before beginning any new work - a beginning

Several patterns emerge from this:

First, culturally specific candidates gullak, kundi, Bahi Khata, Brahma for time, diya for search came from participants with the deepest rural or traditional cultural knowledge (Chaar, Paanch, Teen).

Second, holding hands for welcome, diya for search/illumination, heart or hut for home, gullak/grandmother's purse for save are forms that multiple participants reached for independently when given the same conceptual prompt. These convergent forms are the strong candidates for the co-design phase, because their cultural significance has been validated.

Third, several candidates have the specific quality of being both culturally rooted and formally elegant. The Kundi, the Gullak, the Bahi Khata, and the Brahma or the serpent touching its tail (cyclical nature of time) for time images all have clear, recognisable forms that could be rendered at small scale with clarity for icon use. These are also the original findings of this exercise. Forms that do not exist currently in UI icon design but that are immediately recognisable, legible to an Indian cultural eye.

Discussion: What the Findings Mean

The findings of this study are both broader and more specific than the research questions anticipated. They are broader in the sense that they reveal not just a set of potential icons but a whole alternative visual philosophy. An Indian visual philosophy grounded in the inseparability of aesthetics and spiritual logic, in the principle of co-existence rather than competition, and in the understanding that visual forms carry cultural memory, layers across generations through embodied experience. And they are more specific as they generate a concrete set of culturally grounded icon proposals, validated by participant knowledge, that can serve as the starting point for the co-design phase of this research.

The transmission finding

One of the most analytically significant findings across all five interviews is the mode of cultural transmission as none of the participants described learning their cultural visual knowledge through formal instruction. All of them learned through observation, lived experience, childhood memories, and oral transmission.

Teen: "*I definitely didn't learn about them through textbooks. If I'd relied on textual knowledge, I would have thought swastika was the symbol for the Nazi regime. But I learned it through my parents instilling these values, and growing up in India — everyone around me was familiar with these things."*

This finding has two implications. First, it confirms that the visual vocabulary documented in this study is genuinely cultural, it is living in people rather than in texts. And so it is resilient, even if threatened by urbanisation and westernisation. Second, it suggests that the design of Indian-rooted UI icons must draw on this living, embodied knowledge rather than on academic sources alone. The co-design methodology of this research is not just an ethical choice, but also a way of understanding where knowledge comes from. The knowledge needed to design these icons lies with the participants, and not with the researcher.

The colonial hangover as active presence

The effects of colonisation are not simply historical for the participants of this study, it’s a living dynamic, observable in daily social interactions, language choices, and aesthetic preferences. The personal examples of participants, Eek's self-observed default to reading English, Paanch's friend's English struggle at the social gathering, Teen's recollection of being considered unfashionable in traditional clothing, testifies to the ongoing psychological and social workings of colonialism in society and hierarchies. This is not nostalgia but rather it is a palpable lived experience.

The implications for this research are twofold. First, the project’s cultural goal of restoring pride in Indian visual traditions is important. Secondly, the project must recognise that simply creating Indian icons will not completely address the effects of colonial influence. The deeper process of decolonisation involves rebuilding the understanding that Indian culture is

beautiful, diverse, logical, rich and very globally significant. This research contributes to that larger shift in a meaningful but limited way.

Pluriversality

The wide range of UI icons created by the five participants supports the main idea of this research. That India's visual culture is too rich and too diverse to be reduced to a single universal Indian icon set. The Gullak (north Indian clay piggy bank), the Sanjhi goddess (Rajasthani/Uttarakhandi clay ritual object), the Bahi Khata (pan-Indian merchant ledger), the Kundi (pan-Indian door latch), the Toran (pan-Indian doorway garland). All these forms draw from different regions, traditions, and materials, cultures. They are all Indian. They are not all the same India. This diversity is the point. The icon bank produced by this research should celebrate and preserve this diversity rather than resolving it into a single style or visual language. As Chaar articulates that the goal is not to replace one universal (Western) with another universal (Indian), but to fill the digital space with the richness of India's specific, local, regionally embedded visual traditions, trusting that from this richness, a genuinely pluriversal digital culture can emerge. Decolonisation is not about replacing a Western universal with an Indian one, but about making space for multiple local and regional visual languages. It is from this diversity that a truly inclusive digital culture can grow.

Summary: Key findings across five themes

Theme 1: Living Visual Vocabulary: All participants carry a rich, personally weighted visual vocabulary drawn from Indian tradition. Om, Lotus, and Swastika converge across all five participants as primary cultural symbols. Diya, Rangoli, and gestures of welcome (namaste/anjali) are close behind.

Theme 2: Colonial Legacy: The psychological effects of colonisation are vivid, personal, and ongoing — most visibly in the prestige attached to English over Indian languages. Urban India is identified as the primary site of cultural erosion; rural India as the primary site of continuity. Decolonisation is understood as filling, not removing.

Theme 3: Cultural Appropriation: Yoga, Indian fashion forms (jhumka, kolhapuri, dupatta), and philosophical vocabulary (karma, dharma) are the most-cited examples of Western appropriation without attribution. The double standard between academic citation and cultural attribution is explicitly named.

Theme 4: Digital Absence: All participants describe digital space as culturally foreign. The lock, trash can, home, and save icons are identified as culturally specific Western forms. Indian alternatives are proposed unprompted: kundi for lock, gullak for save, diya for search, toran for home/welcome.

Theme 5: Spirituality and Aesthetics: Indian visual culture's richness is understood by all participants as a byproduct of spiritual or philosophical logic, not aesthetic decoration. This principle should ground the design of Indian UI icons.

Co-design Sessions: Bank of Indian UI Icons

The co-design sessions produced the primary visual output of this Major Research Project: a bank of hand-drawn Indian icon concepts, generated by five participants drawing on their own cultural memory, aesthetic sensibility, and creative imagination. What follows is a documentation of that output.

A note on how to view this section

These drawings are not polished design deliverables. They are the first draft of a visual language that has never been drawn before. The attempt, by five Indian co-designers, is to translate their culture into a digital form. The ideas are the finding. The drawings are their visual representation.

Starting from Ek to Panch in the following pages.

Ek Co-design Session Bank of Icons:

शेर मुखी

(lion mouthed)

गाऊ मुखी

(cow-mouthed)

A concept while describing house structure.

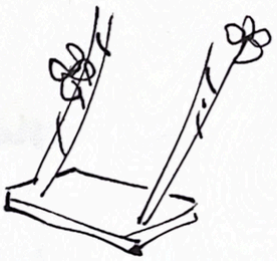
1. Lion mouth (शेर मुखी) signifies a house plan / नक्शा with the entrance bigger than or wider than the rest of the house

2. Cow-mouth (गाऊ मुखी) describes a house plan with a smaller entrance compared to the rest of the house width / area-wise.

The latter is considered ideal while purchasing property.

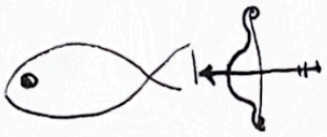
(masala)

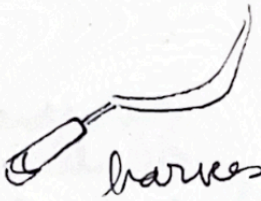
spice



(jhoola/swing)

Arjun's fish eye focus — "razor sharp" focus

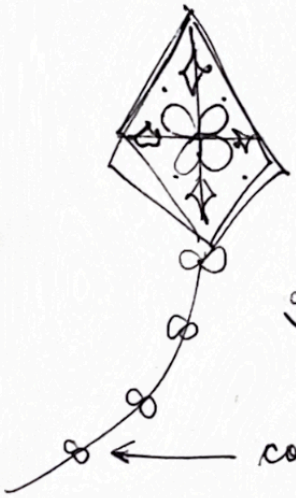




harvest, work

Banjara Tattoos

(can be seen as points of reference - literal points)



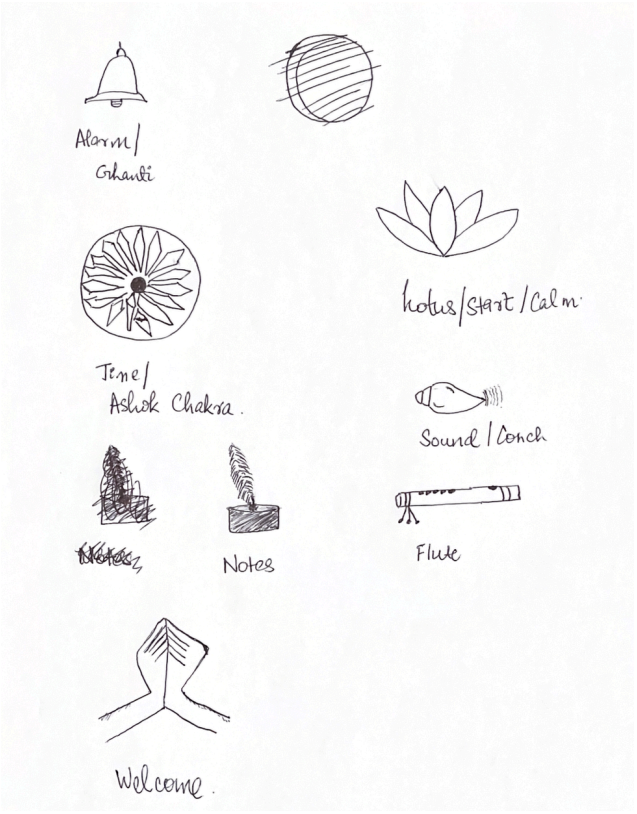
Indian Kites

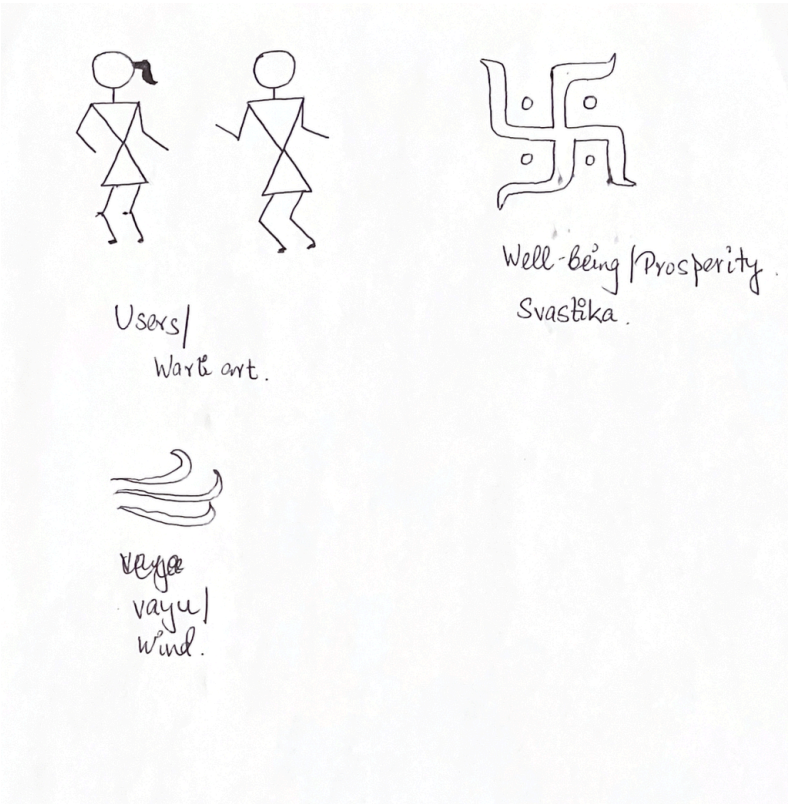
could signify a chain or structure & point of cuts

natural flower + spiritual sign

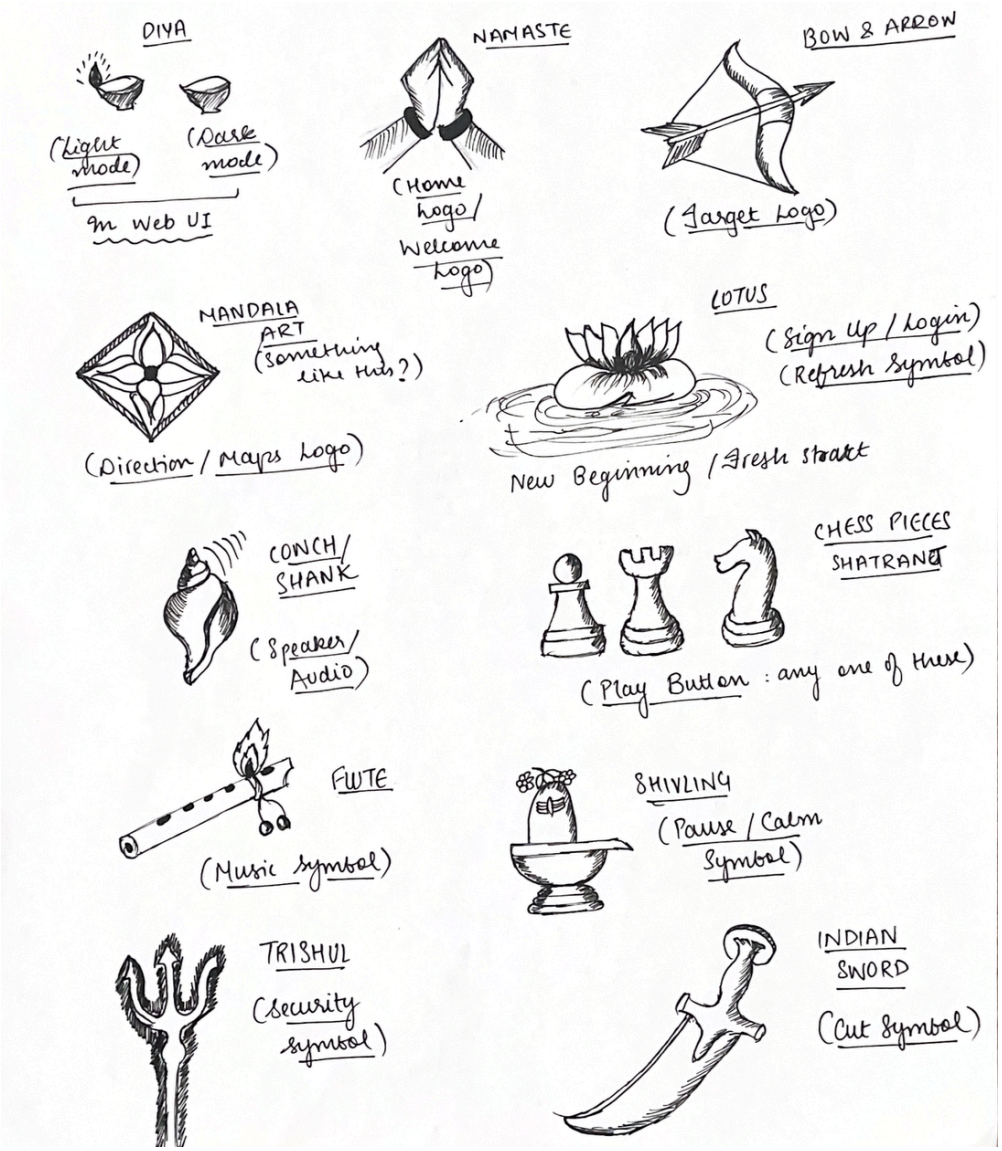
lotus design

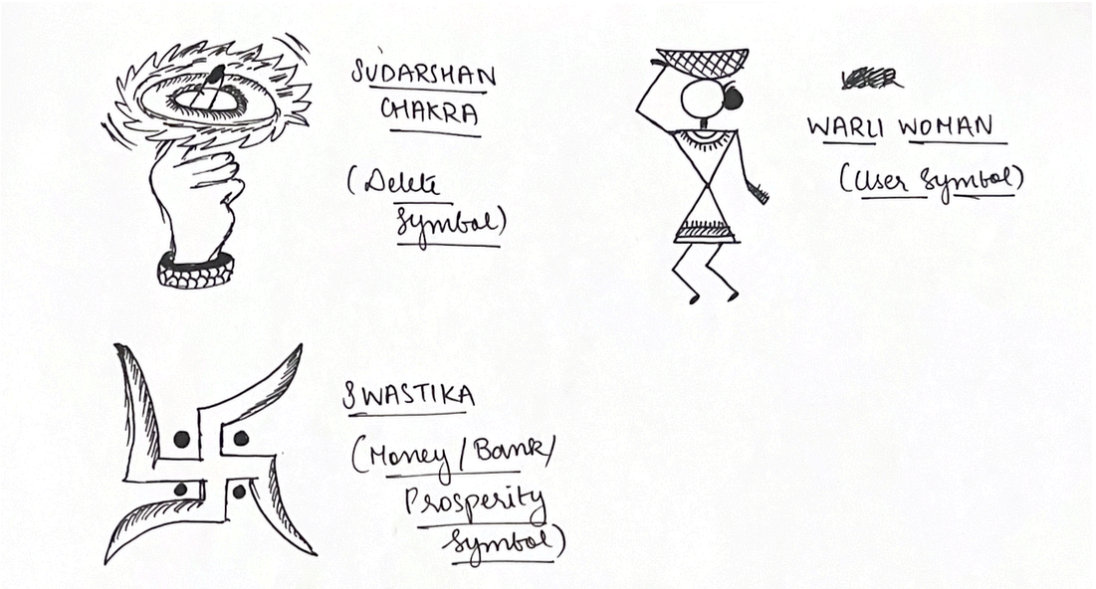
Doh Co-design Session Bank of Icons:





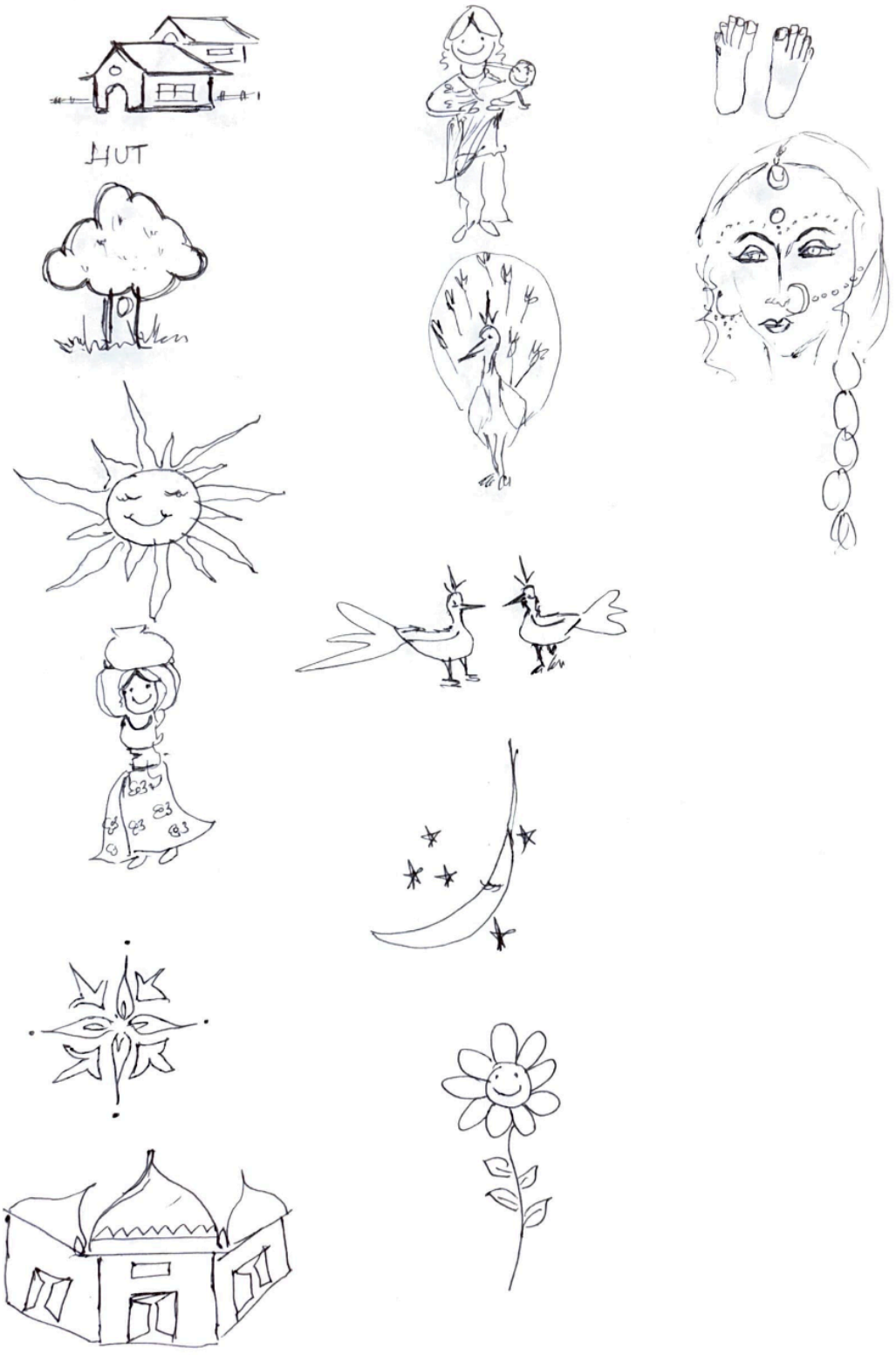
Teen Co-design Session Bank of Icons:





Chaar Co-design Session Bank of Icons:

Panch Co-design Session Bank of Icons:



Cross-Participant Convergences

DIYA: Home / Search / Light (Chaar, Eek, Teen)

The diya was proposed independently by three participants for related but distinct concepts, home (Eek), search/illumination (Chaar), and light mode/dark mode (Teen). The convergence across these three applications suggests that the diya's core meaning - light as presence, warmth, welcome, and the dispelling of darkness is culturally stable and generative enough to serve multiple UI functions.

LOTUS: New beginning / Refresh / Start / Favourites (Doh, Teen, Eek)

Three participants proposed the lotus for concepts related to beginning, renewal, and that which is held dear. Doh labelled it "start/calm." Teen labelled it "sign up / login / refresh, new beginning / fresh start." Eek labelled it "favourites." The convergence is remarkable: the lotus carries both the fresh start (emergence from mud) and the beloved (the national flower, the flower of the divine).

NAMASTE / ANJALI MUDRA: Welcome / Home (Doh, Teen)

Two participants independently proposed the namaste gesture for welcome and home, the gesture that is India's most globally recognised cultural export and its most embodied act of greeting. That it should emerge as a home/welcome icon is both obvious and profound.

CONCH / SHANKHA: Sound / Audio / Speak (Chaar, Doh, Teen)

Three participants proposed the shankha for sound-related functions. The conch is India's oldest instrument of sacred announcement, blown at the opening of rituals, the start of battles, the welcoming of guests. Its resonance as an audio or speaker icon is both culturally grounded and formally elegant.

FLUTE: Music (Chaar, Doh, Teen)

Three participants proposed the bansuri (flute) as the music icon. The flute is Krishna's instrument, the sound of divine play, of nature enchanted, of the call that draws all beings

toward the source. As a music icon it carries both cultural ownership and immediate recognisability.

WARLI FIGURE: User (Doh, Teen)

Two participants proposed the Warli stick figure, the triangular-body human form of Warli tribal art, as the user or profile icon. This is a direct and elegant solution: India's most abstract and iconic folk representation of the human form, repurposed for the most abstract UI need (representing a generic person).

PEACOCK FEATHER: Messages / Vibrance (Chaar, Eek)

Two participants proposed the peacock feather for messages, Chaar labelling it "vibrance" and Eek drawing it as the messages icon. The feather of Krishna, associated with communication, aesthetic beauty, and divine play, carries obvious resonance for messaging functions.

KITE: Messages / Navigation / Freedom (Chaar, Eek)

Two participants proposed the Indian kite, with its distinctive diamond shape and decorated surface, for related concepts. Chaar noted that its string could signify a chain or structure with a point of cuts, suggesting navigation or connectivity. Eek proposed it for messages, evoking the kite's movement as a form of reaching out across distance.

SWASTIKA: Well-being / Prosperity / Bank (Doh, Teen)

Two participants drew the Swastika in its original Indian form, square, auspicious, clockwise, and proposed it for prosperity, well-being, and financial functions. This represents a significant act of cultural reclamation: returning a sacred Indian symbol to its original meaning after its colonial misappropriation.

What the Icon Bank Represents:

The icon bank above contains over fifty proposals for suitable Indian UI icons generated by five participants in co-design sessions. This is not a mapping of what Indian visual culture can offer to digital design. Rather, it is the first draft of a conversation that has never taken place. Every form in this bank shows us what an Indian digital interface might look like if it were built from the inside of Indian culture rather than from the outside of the West.

No particular icon from this bank has been selected as the main Indian equivalent of any existing icon. Because this selection would be a contradiction as it would reproduce the colonial logic of a single standard, when the entire purpose of this research is to showcase diversity, uniqueness and plurality. The bank is offered as a resource available to designers, researchers, students, and communities across India and the diaspora to draw from, develop further.

The bank demonstrates that Indian visual culture has more than enough richness, diversity, and formal elegance to create a visual language for digital interfaces. The question has never been whether India has enough to offer. The question has been whether anyone was willing to ask or include.

Conclusion

This research set out to question a seemingly simple but deep assumption in the contemporary interface design space: that icons can be universal. Through the lens of decolonisation, this project has demonstrated that what is often presented as “universal” in UI iconography is, in fact, culturally situated, largely shaped by Western visual systems. In doing so, it unintentionally excludes other rich visual cultures, including that of India.

By engaging with Indian symbols, icons and designs, this research revealed that Indian visual traditions have layered and multi-dimensional meanings. Symbols are not simply static representations but dynamic carriers of culture, philosophy, values, and ideas. The relationship between *nāma* (name) and *rūpa* (form) demonstrates that meaning emerges through context and lived experience, rather than in isolated visual signs.

The co-design methodology became central to this research. It showed that cultural visual knowledge does not reside in texts alone, but is passed down by people through generations. Cultural visual knowledge resides in their memories, lived experience, practices, and everyday interactions (with objects, people, festivals, and the world). The diversity of icons generated through these co-design sessions gave a key insight: there exists a rich diversity of visual language shaped by culture, values, memories, spirituality and lived experience. And this diversity or plurality is not a limitation but a strength. Inclusive design shows the uniqueness in difference and how difference can pave waves for creativity, provide new perspectives and reveal new ways of thinking. Which is why difference and uniqueness are celebrated in designing inclusivity. Each icon, each option, each creation has potential, meaning, personal space and shouldn't be ruled out or flattened to “fit” a current mould of universal standard. Hence the bank of culturally rich, diverse icons generated are seeds. And within a seed lies the potential of a forest.

At the same time, this research acknowledges that simply introducing Indian-inspired icons into digital systems is not sufficient for decolonisation. The deeper challenge lies in overcoming the colonised mindset that advocates or prefers standardisation and universality over cultural diversity and plurality. Decolonising design therefore is not only a visual task but a cultural one.

What emerges from this study is not a fixed icon set, but a different way of thinking about icons altogether. It calls for interface design that embraces diversity, allows for layered meanings, and recognises users not just as global participants, but as culturally situated, unique individuals who carry rich lived experience within them. It suggests that icons can move beyond representing actions to expressing relationships, values, and states of being.

Also, across all co-designer conversations a strong and recurring theme was that of a renewed sense of pride in their cultural roots. Through reflection and participation in this research, Indian elements began to be seen differently, not as ordinary or outdated, but as deeply meaningful, thoughtful, and culturally rich. Co-designers expressed a growing awareness that what they once took for granted holds layers of rich history, philosophy, and lived experience. This shift reflects a broader change, where Indian cultural forms are no longer viewed through a lens shaped by colonial influence, but are being re-recognised as valuable systems of knowledge.

At the same time, co-designers highlighted that this return to cultural roots is not about nostalgia or rejection of modernity, but about integration of pride in one's culture. There is an increasing desire to bring these traditional visual and symbolic systems into contemporary contexts, including digital spaces. Participants showed a sense of excitement and ownership in reinterpreting cultural symbols in ways that feel relevant today. This points to an emerging movement where people are actively reclaiming and reshaping their cultural identities, acknowledging their diversity rather than reducing them to simplified or stereotypical forms. And in this context Indian visual culture is not static or historical, it is alive, evolving, and capable of informing future design practices in meaningful ways.

On a personal level, this project has been a process of unlearning and rediscovery. It has allowed me to see Indian visual culture not as something static, but as a rich, evolving system of knowledge with immense potential for contemporary design.

Like a butterfly effect, this research seeks to send out the ripples of change. Each act of questioning, each culturally inspired icon, and each shift in perspective has the potential to ripple outward. My hope is that this work encourages designers to look inward toward their own culture, to question inherited design norms, and to create systems that are not only functional, but meaningful, diverse, and deeply human, rooted in cultural joy and pride.

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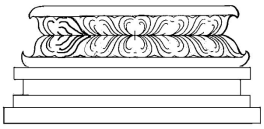
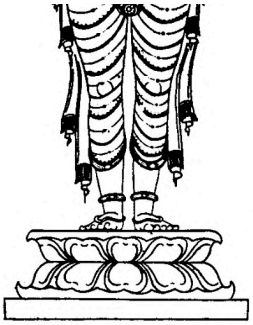
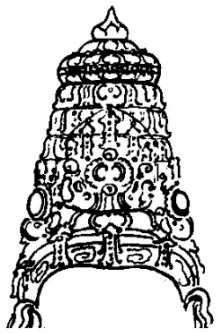
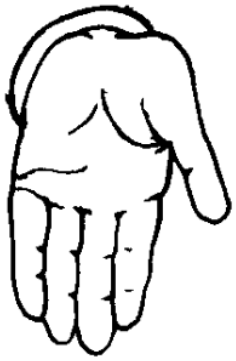
Appendix A- Hindu Iconology, Achari (11-19)

Understanding Iconography (Achari 11-19)

Symbol	Name	Esoteric Meaning
	Lotus throne	The pure and unsullied lotus arising from the depth of the waters and far from the banks of the lake is associated with the idea of purity which arises from The law-of-conduct (dharma) and wisdom (jñana). The Lotus is also symbolic of the enlightened mind.
The Postures		
	padmasana (lotus posture)	indicates a state of transcendence with a potential for manifestation.
	One leg lowered	indicates a concern for sentient beings, a desire to be pro-active and an intention to engage in acts of compassion and liberation.
	Both legs down	indicates a full intention to assist the devotee and an impending act of great compassion guiding others to enlightenment.
	Standing	Standing indicates full manifestation within our realm and capacity to comprehend — it indicates immanence being. It is the Divine in full action in which we live.

	The Four Arms	The poises or states of Reality:— Brahman — the Absolute all inclusive totality of being; Īśvara — the Personal Creative Deity, Hiraṇyagarbha — the conglomeration of individual Selves or Jīvas, and Virāṭ — the manifest universe. The cardinal directions; The four divisions of society; The four stages of life; **The four aspects of Hindu psychology** — the lower cogitative mind (manas) the intellect (buddhi), ego (ahamkara) and consciousness (cit). **The four levels of consciousness;** waking (jagrata), dream (svapna), sub-consciousness (sushupti) and transcendental consciousness (turiya). **The four essential components of dharma;** truth (satya), meditation (tapa), compassion (daya), and charity (Dana). **The four aims of human endeavor (purusharthas);** pleasure (kama), prosperity (artha), righteousness (dharma) and liberation (moksha). **The four "immeasurable" qualities** — friendliness (maitri), compassion (karuna), empathetic joy (mudita) and non-attachment (upeksha).

	The Crown	The crown is the quintessential symbol of sovereignty and is also said to be indicative of the Unknowable Reality which is trying to be presented through this deity.
	The Earrings	The earrings shaped like mythical sea-monsters (makara) represent the two methods of pursuing knowledge — intellectual knowledge (sankhya) and intuitive perception (yoga).
	The Face of Glory	**kirti-mukha** which literally means "the face-of-glory" and it represents the principle of all-consuming Time. Since Time is the great destroyer and takes from us all that is precious and separates us from our loved ones and objects it is shown as being wrathful and terrifying. Everything is impermanent and subject to constant change.
The Gestures		

	Abhaya Mudra	**the gesture of fearlessness** — the palm displayed with the fingers pointing to the sky. Indicates the practice of harmlessness to all beings in word, deed and thought (ahimsa) and granting to all beings the gift of freedom from fear.
	Varada Mudra	**the gesture of generosity** — the palm displayed, fingers pointing downwards. This indicates the benevolence of the deity as well as the teaching of the principle of generosity to all beings.
	Chin Mudra	**the gesture of teaching** — palm displayed, fingers upwards thumb and fore-finger joined at the tips. This indicates the imparting of knowledge, form the deity to the contemplator and having received the knowledge the aspirant is expected to pass it on to others. The thumb pressing on the index finger indicates suppression of egoism, the 3 upraised fingers indicate overcoming self-referent desire, anger

		and greed.
	Dhyana Mudra	the gesture of meditation, this takes two forms: palms placed one over the other in the lap or arms stretched out, hands on the knees with the palms outward displaying the chin mudra. The former indicates meditation using an abstract or formless focus, and the later expresses the idea of meditation upon a more tangible object.
	Tarjani Mudra	the gesture of vigilance — fist closed with the index finger raised. This mudra is usually found in images of protective or guardian deities and indicative of the need to be extremely mindful when approaching the spiritual path. The index finger is also representative of the ego which is the major obstacle to spiritual advancement. It also represents the principle of aggression and harm — aspects of personality which need to be overcome in the preparatory stages of spiritual life.

Table ?: Understanding Iconology (S. R. Ramanuja Achari, 2015)

Appendix B - The Eight Auspicious Symbols (With Five Plates, T. B. Karunaratne

PLATE 1

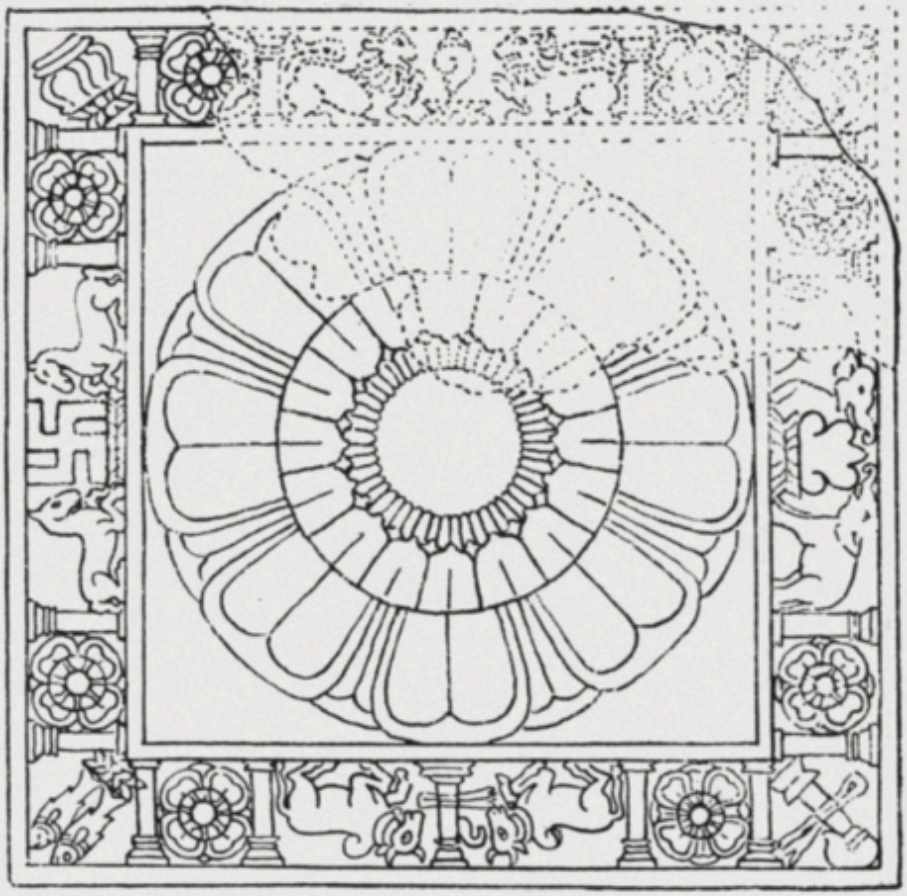


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PLATE II

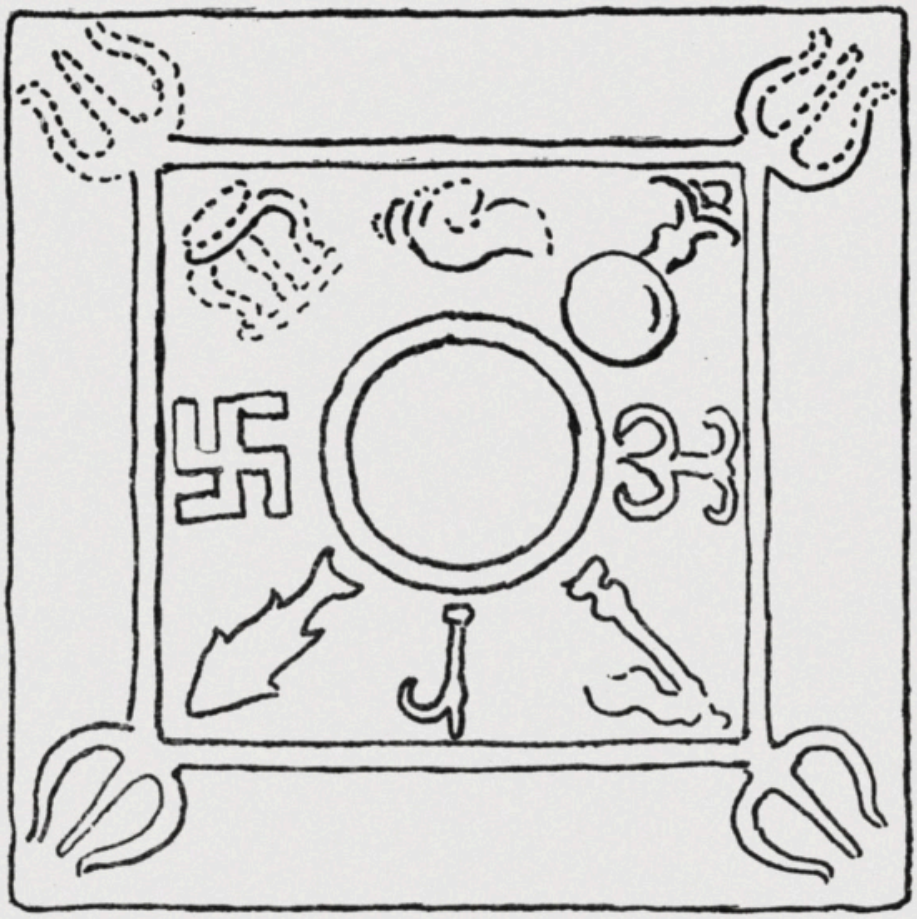

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PLATE III

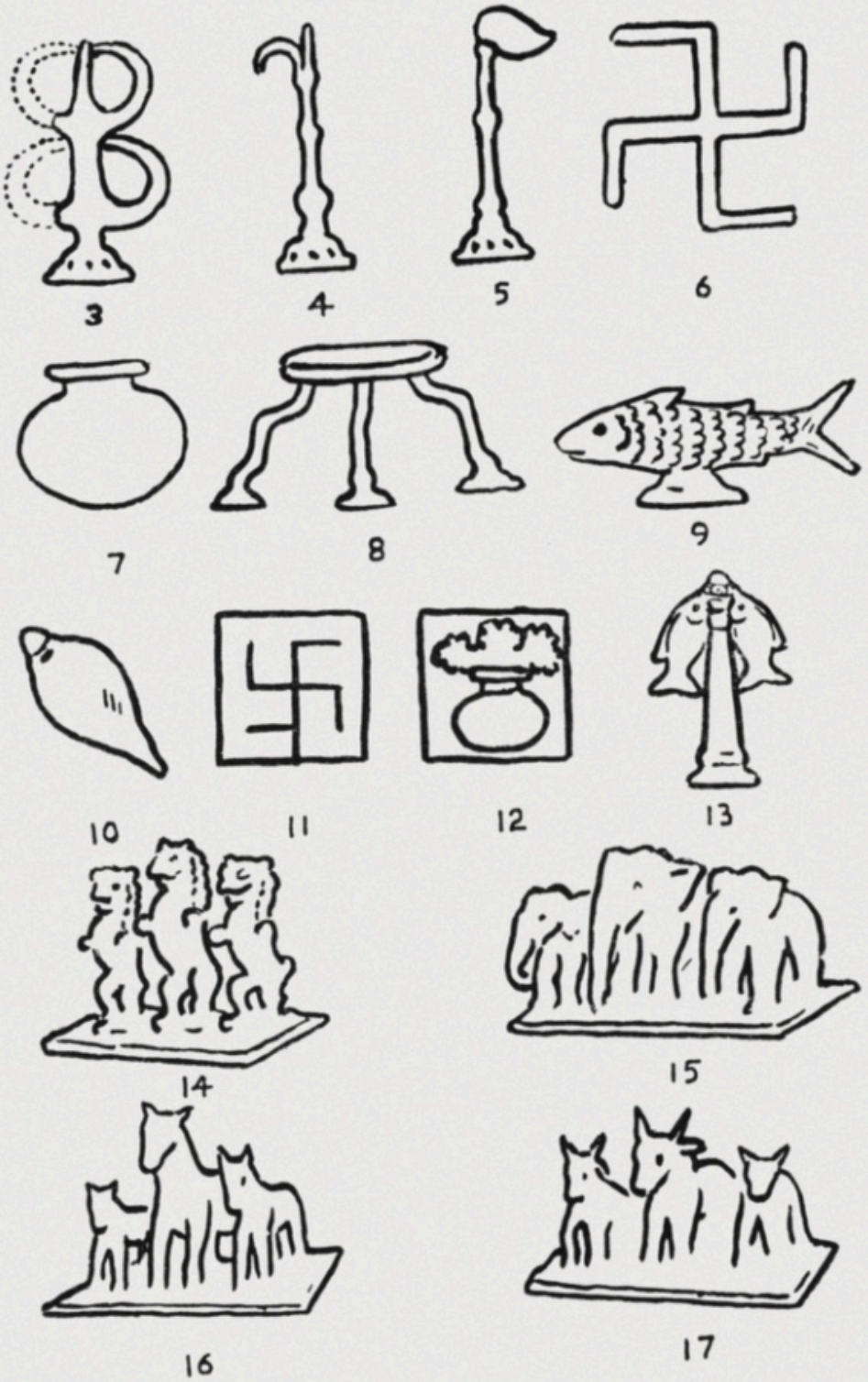


PLATE IV

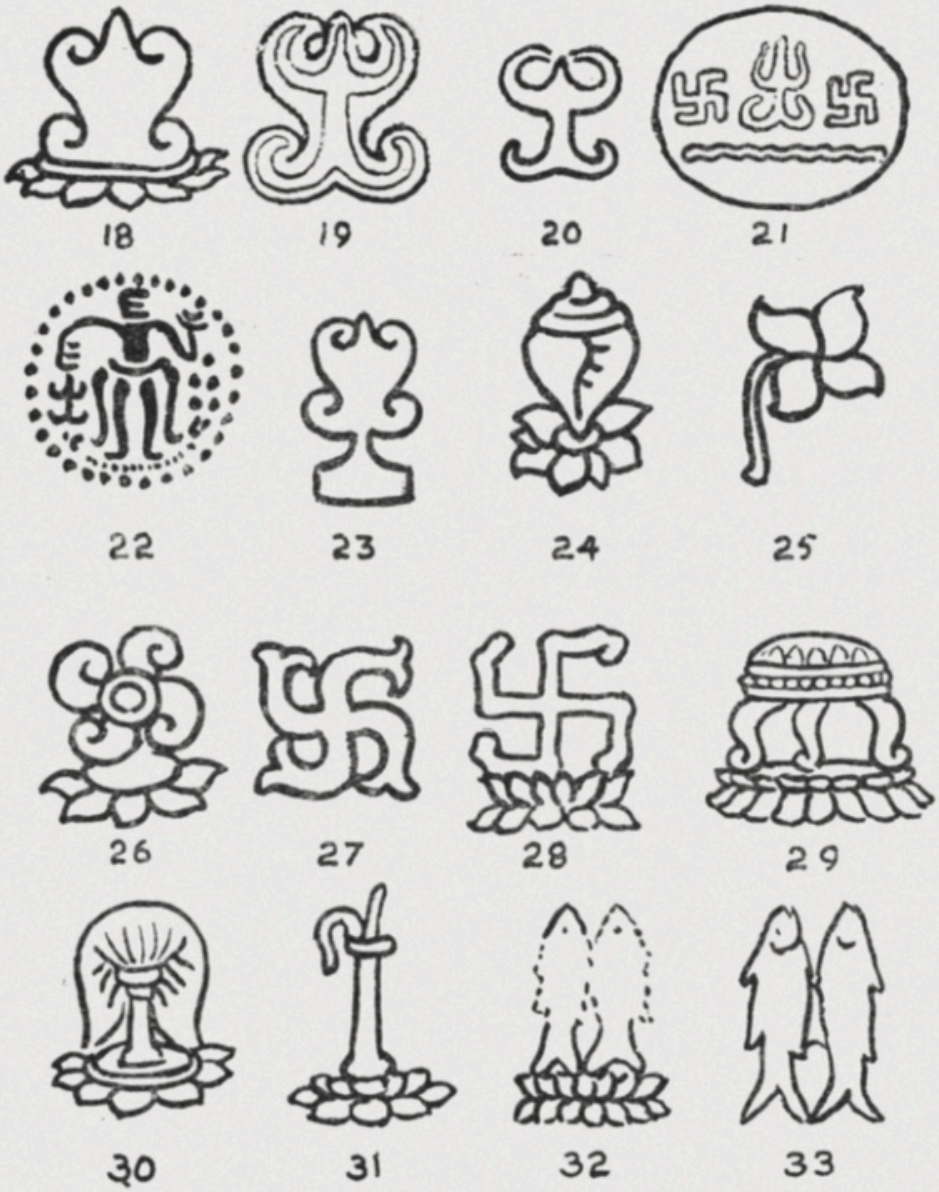
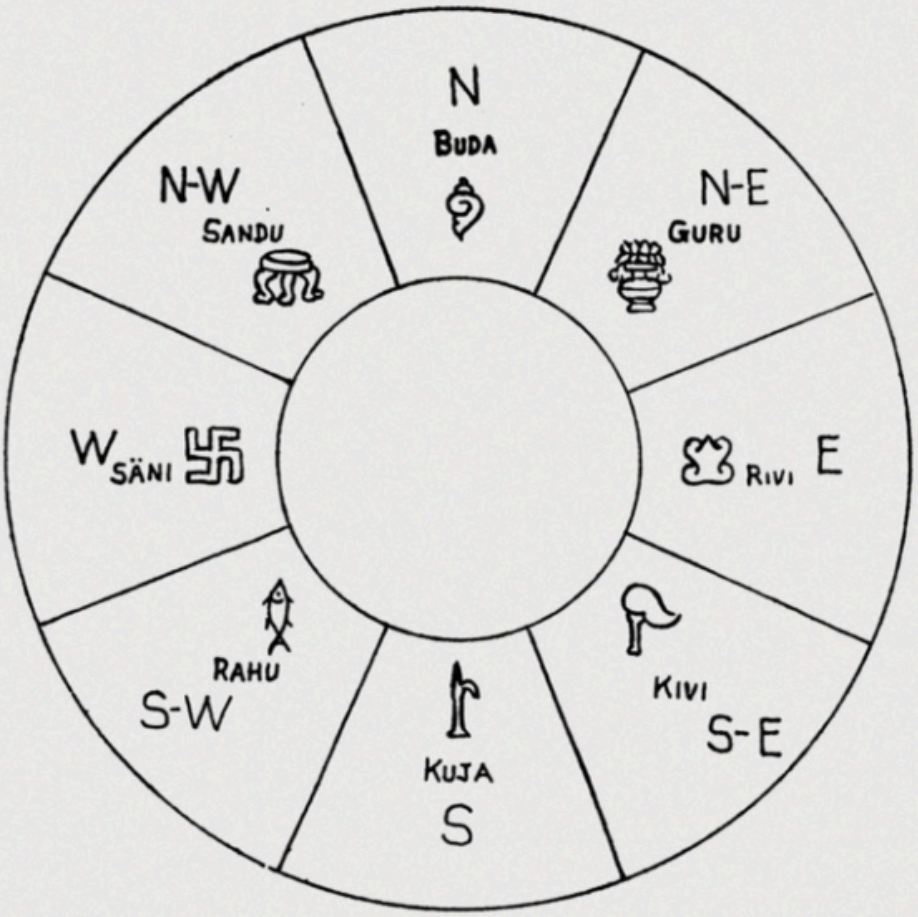


PLATE V



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Appendix C - The Srivatsa Symbol in Indian Art, A. L. Srivastava

Fig. 1.
1-6, 11. Sāñcī, Stūpa 2, *c.* 2nd century B.C. 7-10, 12. Sāñcī, Great Stūpa, *c.* 1st century B.C.

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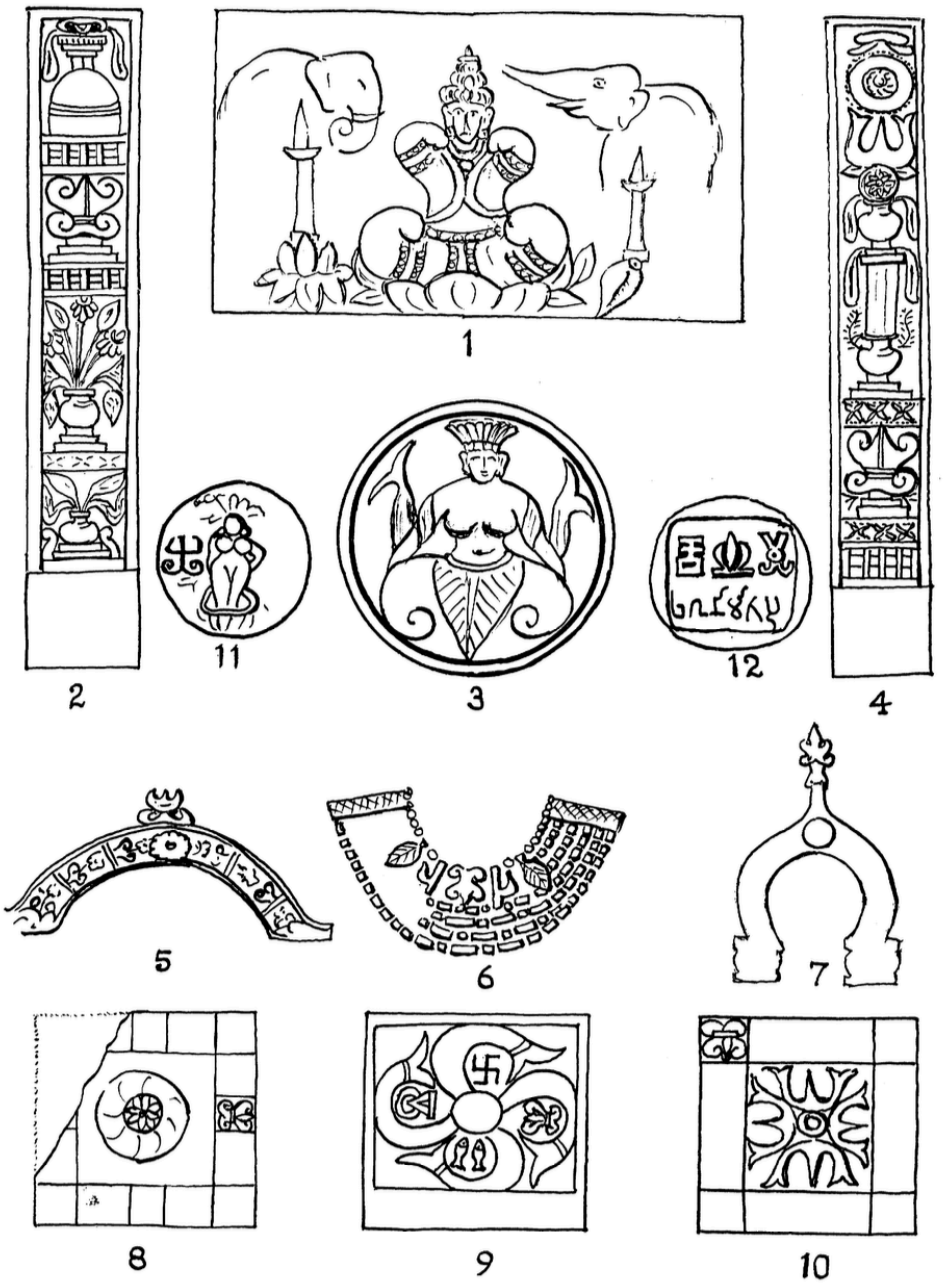

Fig. 2.

1. Kāverīpakkam, sculpture, *c.* 9th century A.D. *Government Museum, Madras.* 2, 4. Sārnāth, rail-pillars, 1st century B.C. 3. Sārnāth, medallion on a rail pillar, 1st century B.C. 5. Udayagiri (Orissā), Rānīgumphā cave, 1st century B.C. 6. Bhārhut, Yakṣī Candā, necklace, 2nd century B.C. 7. Amarāvatī, window-arch, 1st century A.D.

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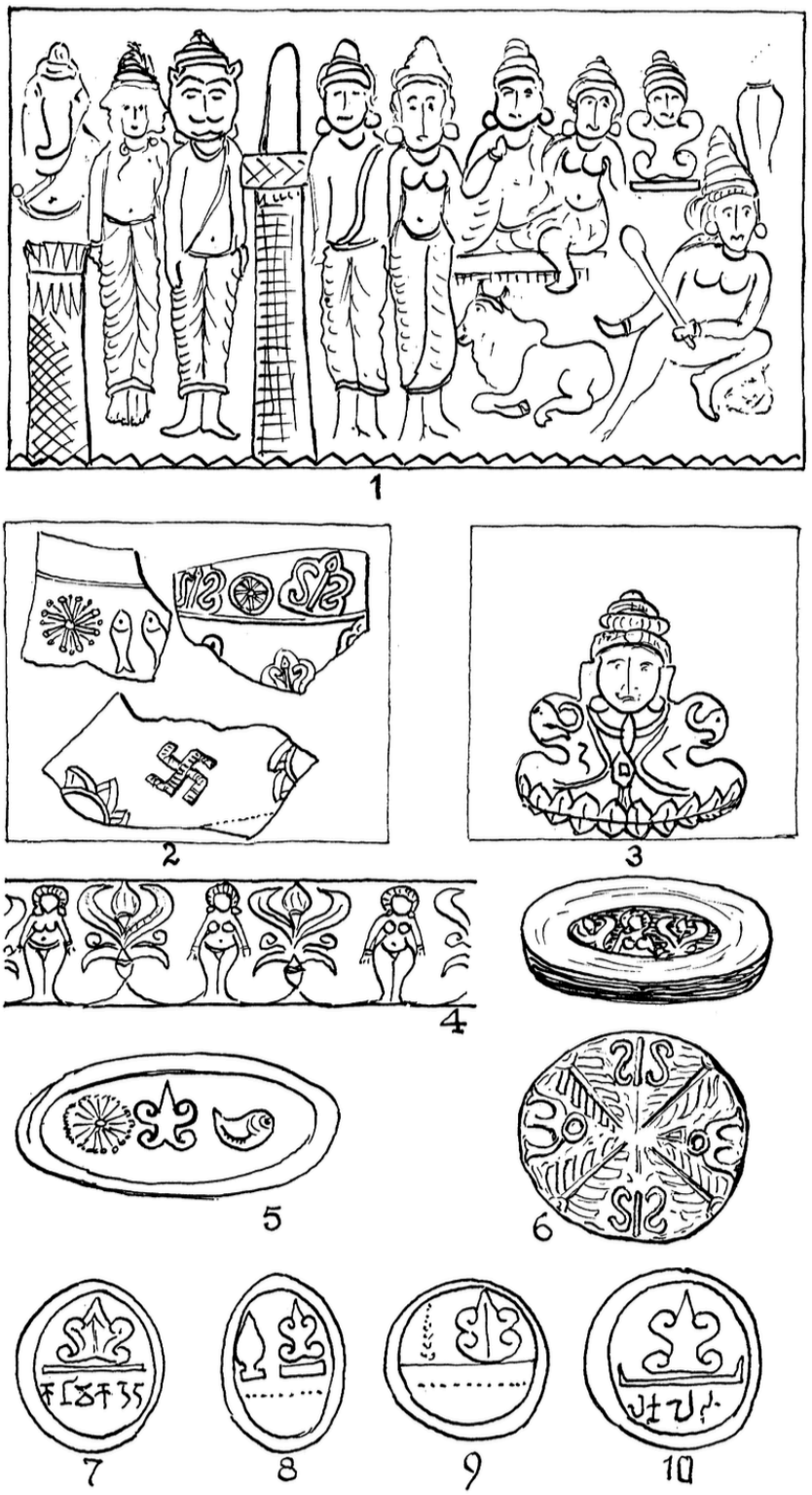

Fig. 3.
1. Peddamuḍiyam (Dist. Cuddapah), sculptured panel. 2. Ahicchatrā, potsherds, between 2nd and 4th century A.D. 3. Enadi (Dist. Tanjore), 9th century A.D. 4. Taxila, stone-ring, 3rd century B.C. 5. Bhīṭā (Allāhābād), terracotta sealing, 3rd-4th century A.D. 6. Shāhābād (Dist. Hardoi), terracotta medallion, 1st century B.C. 7. Rājghāṭ (Vārāṇasī), terracotta sealing, between 1st and 3rd century A.D. 8. Terracotta sealing, between 1st and 3rd century A.D. *State Museum, Lucknow*. 9. Basārh (Dist. Muzaffarpur), terracotta sealing, period as above. 10. Jhūsī (Allāhābād), terracotta sealing, period as above.

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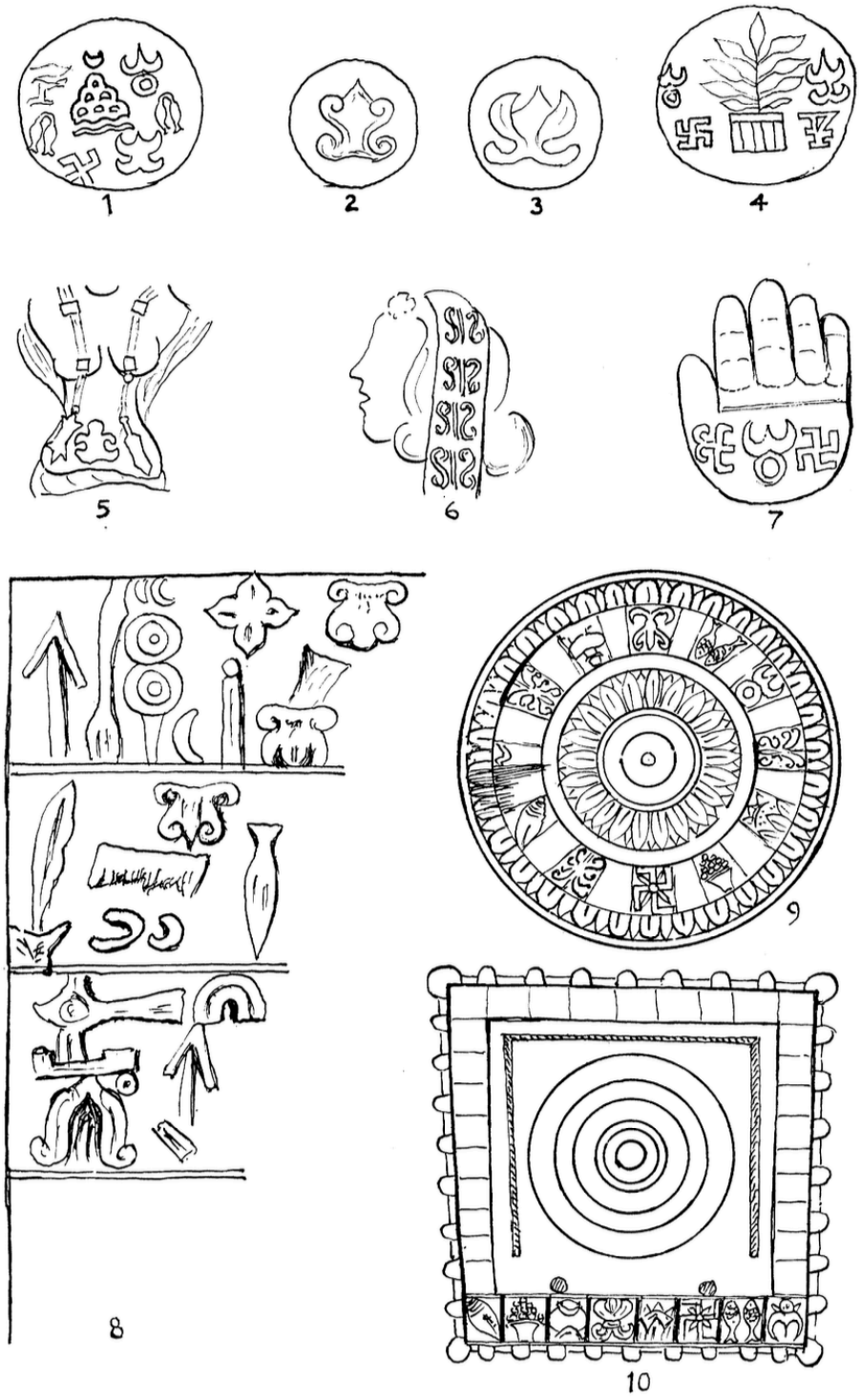

Fig. 4.
1-4. Candravallī (Mysore), Āndhra coins, *c.* 50 B.C. 5-6. Ahicchatrā terracotta *mithuna* figures, between 1st century B.C. and 1st century A.D. 7. Sonkh (Mathurā), terracotta hand, *c.* 1st century B.C. 8. Boghazköi, Hittite hieroglyphs, 14th century B.C. 9. Sārnāth, parasol on a Bodhisattva image, 1st century A.D. 10. Mathurā, parasol on Gandha-kuṭī, 1st century A.D.

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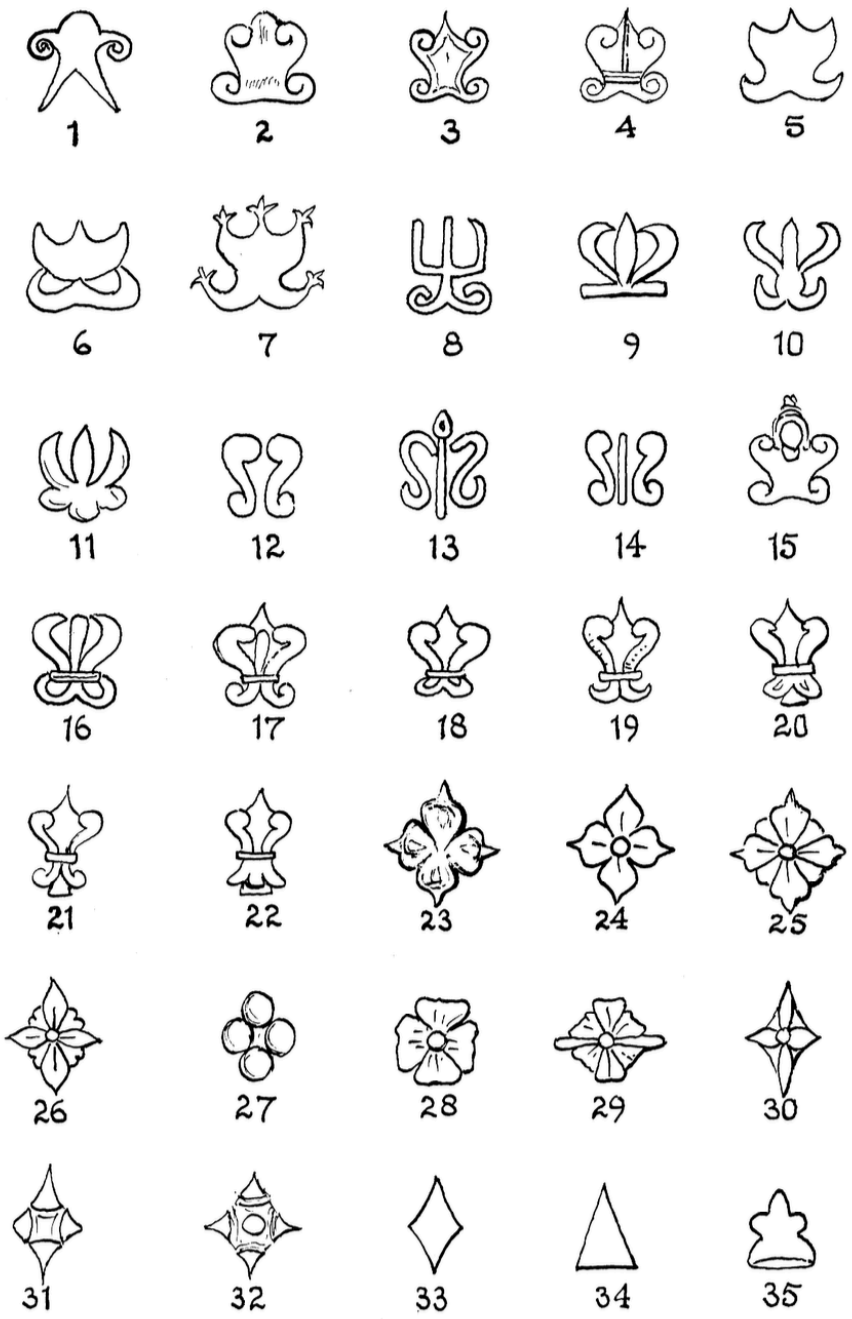

Fig. 5.

1. Ganges Valley, copper hoards, anthropomorphic figures, *c.* 1500 B.C. 2. Boghazköi, hieroglyph, 14th century B.C. 3. Sāñcī sculpture, 2nd-1st century B.C. 4. Sārnāth, rail-pillars, 1st century B.C. 5. Udayagiri (Orissā), Hāthīgumphā inscription, 1st century B.C. 6. Udayagiri (Orissā), Rānīgumphā cave, 1st century B.C. 7. Amarāvatī, window tops, 1st century A.D. 8, 9. Pañcāla coins, 1st century B.C. 10. Sārnāth, parasol on a Bodhisattva image, 1st century A.D. 11. Mathurā, necklace-pendant of a Jain Tīrthaṅkara. 12. Mathurā, medallion on a pillar, between 1st and 3rd century A.D. 13. Ahicchatrā, pottery design, between 2nd and 4th century A.D. 14. Udayagiri (M.P.), *vakṣa-lakṣaṇa* on Viṣṇu image, 3rd or 4th century A.D. 15. Peddamuḍiyam (Dist. Cuddapah). 16-22. Mathurā, *vakṣa-lakṣaṇa* on Jain Tīrthaṅkaras, between 1st and 3rd century A.D. 23. Śrāvastī *vakṣa-lakṣaṇa* on Ṛṣabhadeva, *c.* 11th century A.D. 24. Candraprabha, 6th century A.D. *Allāhābād Museum, Exhibit no. 295.* 25. Mathurā, Tīrthaṅkara image, 12th century A.D. 26. Mathurā, Tīrthaṅkara image, 11th century A.D. 27. Mathurā, Yoganārāyaṇa image. 28. Western India, Viṣṇu, 12th-13th century A.D. 29. Western India, Viṣṇu on Garuḍa, 14th-15th century A.D. 30. Pabhosā (U.P.), Śāntināth, 12th century A.D. 31. Khajurāho, Viṣṇu, 11th century A.D. 32. Garhwā (Allāhābād), Śiva, 12th century A.D. 33. Mathurā, Tīrthaṅkara image; Khajurāho, Ādivarāha and Nṛsiṁha, *c.* 11th or 12th century A.D. 34, 35. Southern Indian images, 14th-15th century A.D.

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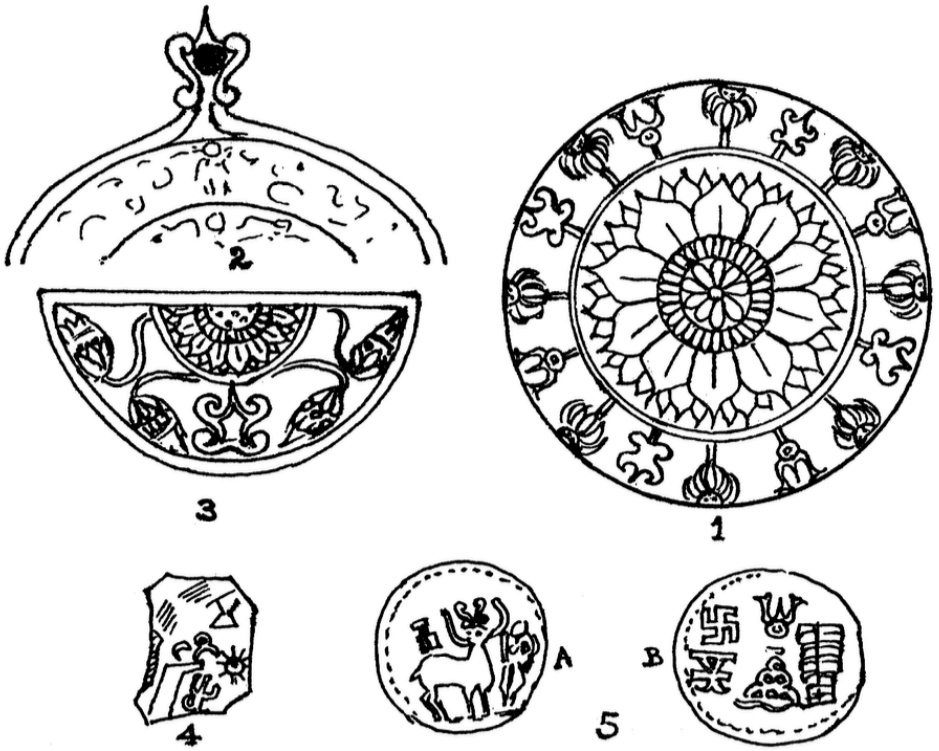

Fig. 6.
1. Bhārhut, medallion on a *sūcī*. *Indian Museum, Calcutta*. 2. Khaṇḍagiri, Ananta Gumphā. 3. Bhārhut, half medallion on a *stambha*. *Indian Museum, Calcutta*. 4. Candraketugaṛh, silver punch-marked coin. *Asutosh Museum, Calcutta*. A coin of Amoghabhūti.

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Appendix D - Cultural Semiotics and and Graphic Representation in Ancient Indian Flags

‘Historical Analysis of Symbols and Graphic Representation in Ancient Indian Flags’, Samel

PLATE 1 AND 2

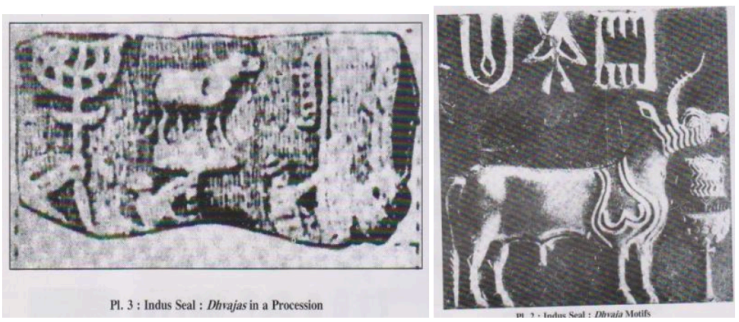


PLATE 3, 4 AND 5

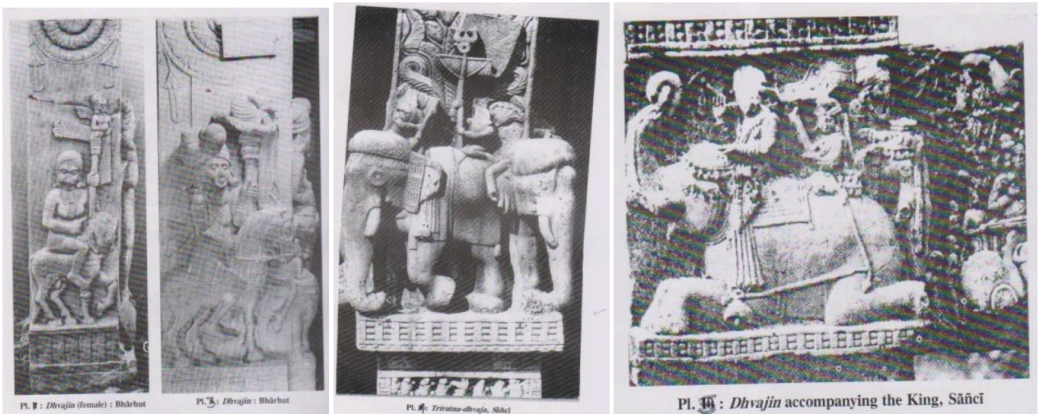
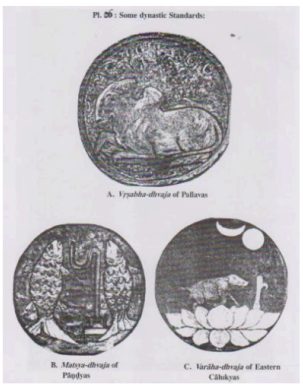


PLATE 06



Reference of plates from Military Flags of India, U. P. Thapliyal

Fig X. (Reference of plates from Military Flags of India, U.P.Thapliyal) taken from ‘Historical Analysis of Symbols and Graphic Representation in Ancient Indian Flags’, Samel, 2014, p.567.

Warrior	**Symbolism in Flag**
Arjun	Kapidhwaja - A flag with the figure of Hanuman (monkey) with a long tail, creating terror among enemies.
Asvatthama	Simhalangulum - A flag with the figure of a lion's tail, golden in color, providing delight to the Kurus.
Karna	*Hastikaksaya* - Golden flag adorned with festoons and garlands, flying aloft in the air.
Krpa	*Govrsa* - A representation of the bull, also a symbol of Siva.
Vrsasena	*Mayura* - The device of a peacock, emblem of god Subrahmanya.
Salya (King of Madras)	*Sitadhvaja* - Auspicious and radiant flag.
Jayadratha	*Varaha* - Boar emblem, white in color. Jayadratha shone like Pusan in the Devasura wars with this silvery flag in his chariot.
Bhurisravas	*Yupa flag* - Shone like the sun with the moon therein, resembling the yupa in the Rajasuya sacrifice
Sala	*Elephant standard* - White in color, resplendent like Indra's flag, the king of gods.
Duryadhana	*Serpent (Naga)* - flag set with gold or gems
Bhisma	*Taladhvaja* - Cognisance of a Palmyra tree
Ghatotkaca	*Cakradhvaja* - the chariot wheel, later changed to an eagle emblem.
Dronacarya	Representation of *Kamandalu* covered by deer skin.
Bhimsena	*Simhadhvaja* - Lion standard with eyes set with diamonds
Yudhisthira	*Soma Dhwaja* - Moon resplendent with all stars and planets.

Nakula	*Sarabhadhvaja* - Golden back but terrifying in appearance.
Sahadeva	*Hamsa or swan* emblem with bells and festoons.
Abhimanyu	*Sarangapakshi Dhvaja* - Golden in color.

Table 1: Flags associated with significant warriors in the Mahabharata, each characterised by unique symbols and features (Samel, 2014)

Strategies	**Description**
Cultural Sensitivity Education	Promote comprehensive education on the cultural, religious, and historical dimensions of Symbols. Encourage nuanced understanding to mitigate the risk of misinterpretation.
Cross-Cultural Dialogue	Facilitate structured dialogues among individuals from diverse academic backgrounds to exchange perspectives on symbols.
Awareness of Context	Emphasise the necessity of contextual analysis when interpreting symbols, considering situational and cultural nuances.
Critical Thinking Skills	Cultivate analytical skills to scrutinise assumptions and stereotypes linked to symbols within an academic framework.
Cultural Exchange Programs	Advocate for academic programs fostering international exposure, allowing scholars to gain firsthand insights into diverse symbolic interpretations.
Multilingual Communication	Acknowledge the linguistic diversity of symbols and promote multilingual academic discourse for a comprehensive understanding
Inclusive Symbol Creation	Encourage the development of symbols that are inclusive, considering diverse perspectives within academic contexts.
Interdisciplinary Education	Integrate the study of symbols into various academic disciplines, fostering

	interdisciplinary perspectives and insights.
Global Symbol Literacy	Develop resources elucidating the meanings and interpretations of symbols in different global contexts to enhance scholarly symbol literacy.
Empathy and Open-Mindedness	Promote an academic environment characterised by empathy and open-mindedness, acknowledging diverse scholarly perspectives.
Artistic Expression as Communication	Recognise the role of artistic expression as a powerful form of scholarly communication, conveying complex ideas through symbols.
Community Engagement	Encourage academic engagement with communities in the interpretation of symbols, fostering collaborative research and shared ownership

Table 4. Strategies to transcend indigenous cultural symbols to universal appeal (Kumar, Surendra. “Cultural Semiotics: Navigating Dimensions of Universality and Specificity.”)

Appendix E - Semi-Structured Interview Guide

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE

Research Project: Decolonising UI Icons in the Indian Context
Researcher: Aradhana Verma, OCAD University
Interview Duration: 60–90 minutes
Format: Remote via Zoom/Teams

PRE-INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Before Starting Recording:

- Welcome participant and build rapport
- Confirm they received and reviewed consent form
- Ask if they have any questions about the study
- Explain interview structure and approximate length
- Remind them they can skip questions, take breaks, or stop at any time
- Request permission to begin recording
- Start recording and verbally confirm consent on recording

Opening Statement (On Recording): "Thank you for participating in this research. Today we'll be discussing Indian cultural symbols, your experience with digital interfaces, and perspectives on decolonization in design. There are no right or wrong answers—I'm interested in your personal experiences and insights. This conversation will take approximately 60 to 90 minutes. Do I have your consent to proceed with this recorded interview?"

PART A: BACKGROUND & CONTEXT (10-15 minutes)

Personal and Cultural Background

For Indian Participants:

- Can you tell me a little about your background? Where are you from originally, and where do you live now?
- How connected do you feel to Indian culture in your daily life?
  - *Probe:* What aspects of Indian culture are most present for you?
- What is your professional or academic background?
  - *Probe:* How much do you work with digital tools, apps, or interfaces?

PART B: CULTURAL SYMBOLS & IDENTITY (15-20 minutes)

Immediate Cultural Associations

    - When I say "Indian culture," what are the first 3-5 visual elements or symbols that come to mind?
        - *Probe:* Where have you encountered these? What do they mean to you?
    - Are there specific symbols, patterns, or motifs from Indian traditions that feel particularly meaningful to you personally?
        - *Probe:* Why are these significant? Do they connect to family, region, religion, or philosophy?
- **Cultural Transmission**
    - How did you learn about these symbols and their meanings?
        - *Probe:* Through family, education, observation, practice?
    - Do you feel these visual traditions are still actively maintained in contemporary Indian life, or are they fading?
        - *Probe:* What factors contribute to their preservation or loss?
- **Spirituality and Symbolism**
    - What role does spirituality play in Indian visual culture—in art, architecture, symbols, daily objects?
    - How important is spiritual or philosophical meaning in the symbols and patterns used in traditional Indian design?
        - *Probe:* Can you give an example?

PART C: COLONISATION & DECOLONISATION (15-20 minutes)

[Transition statement]: "I'd like to shift to discussing the broader context of colonization and its ongoing impacts. These questions touch on sensitive topics—please feel free to share as much or as little as you're comfortable with."

Historical Impact

- **What impact do you think colonisation had on Indian culture, art, and design? mindset**
    - *Probe:* What was lost, changed, or suppressed?
- **Do you see ongoing effects of colonisation in contemporary Indian society or mindset?**
    - *Probe:* Can you give specific examples?

- **Cultural Identity**
    - **What does the term "decolonisation" mean to you?**
        - *Probe:* Is it relevant to your life or work? How?
    - **How important or relevant do you think decolonization is for India today?**
        - *Probe:* In what areas is it most needed?
    - **Are there aspects of Indian culture, values, or traditions that feel particularly important to preserve or revive?**
        - *Probe:* What makes these special to you?
- **Contemporary Context**
    - **Do you feel there's a tendency to view Western culture, aesthetics, or design as superior to Indian traditions?**

        - *Probe:* Where do you see this? How does it affect people?
    - What would it mean for Indian culture to have more presence and representation in global digital spaces?
        - *Probe:* Why does this matter, or why doesn't it?
    - **Cultural Appropriation**

PART D: DIGITAL INTERFACES & REPRESENTATION (15-20 minutes)

Current UI Experience

- How much time would you say you spend using digital interfaces daily - apps, websites, software?
- When you use digital tools, do you ever notice the icons and symbols used in the interface?
    - *Probe:* Which ones stand out to you?
- Have you ever thought about where these icons come from or what cultural assumptions they carry?
    - *Show 5-7 examples: home icon (house), trash icon (waste bin), save icon (floppy disk), search icon (magnifying glass), share icon, settings icon (gear)*

- **Cultural Representation**
    - Do you feel your culture is represented in the digital interfaces you use daily?
        - *Probe:* Why or why not? What's missing?
    - When you see these standard UI icons, do they feel natural or familiar to you, or do they feel like they come from a different cultural context?
        - *Probe:* Can you explain what makes them feel familiar or foreign?
    - Are there Indian concepts, values, festivals, rituals, or ideas that you feel are missing from digital spaces?
        - *Probe:* What would it mean to see these represented?

PART E: ICON-SPECIFIC EXPLORATION (20-25 minutes)

Introduction: "I'd like to explore how certain concepts might be understood or symbolized differently from an Indian cultural perspective. I'll name a concept, and I'd like you to share what images, feelings, symbols, or ideas come to mind for you."

Conceptual Associations

[For each concept, allow participant to respond freely, then probe deeper]

- **The Five Elements (Pancha Mahabhuta)**
    - When I mention the five elements in Indian philosophy, what comes to mind?
    - *Probe:* How might each element be visually represented? What symbols or patterns connect to earth, water, fire, air, and space/ether?
- **Time / Samay**

        - How is time conceptualized in Indian philosophy or culture?
        - *Probe:* Is it linear? Cyclical? How might this be visually represented differently from Western clock imagery?
    - **Water / Jal**
        - What does water symbolize or represent in Indian culture?
        - *Probe:* Beyond just the physical element—what cultural, spiritual, or emotional meanings does it carry?
    - **Fire/ Agni**
        - What associations or meanings does fire hold in Indian traditions?
        - *Probe:* Think about rituals, festivals, symbolism.
    - **Earth/Ground/Dharti**
        - What does earth represent culturally or spiritually?
        - *Probe:* How is it honored or represented in art, ritual, or daily life?
    - **Sky/Space/Akaash**
        - What does the sky or space represent in Indian thought?
        - *Probe:* How does this differ from Western conceptions?
    - **Air/ Vayu**

- **Functional Concepts**
    - **Refresh/Renewal**
        - The typical refresh icon is a circular arrow. What Indian concepts or symbols represent renewal, regeneration, or cycles?
        - *Probe:* Think about seasons, rituals, natural cycles.
    - **Waste/Delete**
        - The typical trash icon is a waste bin. What concepts or practices in Indian culture relate to disposal, letting go, or removal?
        - *Probe:* Are there respectful ways to discard things? Rituals around release?
    - **Save/Preserve**
        - The save icon is often a floppy disk (which most people have never used). What Indian symbols represent preservation, protection, or safekeeping?
        - *Probe:* Think about how knowledge, stories, or valuable things are kept.
    - **Home/Belonging**
        - The home icon is usually a Western-style house. What represents home, belonging, or origin in Indian culture?
        - *Probe:* What symbols convey safety, return, or rootedness?
    - **Search/Seeking**
        - Search is typically a magnifying glass. What represents seeking, discovery, or the pursuit of knowledge in Indian traditions?
        - *Probe:* How is the search for truth or understanding symbolized?
    - **Share/Connection**
        - How is generosity, sharing, or community connection expressed symbolically in Indian culture?

PART F: CLOSING (5-7 minutes)

Final Thoughts

- Is there anything about Indian culture, symbols, or digital design that we haven't discussed but you think is important for this research?
- Do you have any questions for me about the research or how your contribution will be used?
- **A word/ phrase that comes to mind when you think of Indian pride or celebrating our own culture**

- **Next Steps**
  - Thank participants for their time and insights
  - Explain next steps: transcription, analysis, potential co-design workshop invitation, feedback session
  - Confirm their preferred email for follow-up
  - Offer to share research findings when complete
  - Stop recording
  - Ask if they're comfortable or need any support after discussing these topics

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