
**SYMBOLISM TO SEXISM: A STUDY ON THE HISTORY, FINDINGS
AND INTERPRETATIONS OF PHALLIC SYMBOLISM THROUGH THE
AGES**

PRAMITI SINGH

Student, Sociology (Hons), Jesus and Mary College, University of Delhi

ABSTRACT

We find, that at the very basing of the history of phallic worship and adoration is a rich heritage of symbolism; a culture of art that has its beginning and end in the portrayal of the penis. With interpretations and even cultures born out of such symbolism, it is interesting to understand its beginnings, expansion and varying significance across the globe. Principally, it aimed at placing the phallus as an-all powerful and unattainable symbol. This paper aims at tracing the unfolding of the tradition as it embedded itself in the roots of the world's dominant religions and practices, whilst setting up a world less-equal for women.

Keywords: Architecture, Art, Dominant, Generation, Hinduism, Marginalisation, Objectification, Patriarchal authority, Phallus, Privilege, Representation, Reproduction, Subjectivity, Superstition, Symbolism.

UNDERSTANDING PHALLIC SYMBOLISM

According to *Sigmund Freud* [1905] every human being passes a developmental stage that is known as the "Phallic stage", during which the child's attention is attracted to sensations from the genitals. Freud explains 'maleness exists, but not femaleness'. The significance of male and female within a sexual relationship is determined by this skewed understanding of the phallus¹. Psycho-analyst *Jacques Lacan* [1967] noted that the phallus is a symbol of not just power, but also privilege. It is linked to the patriarchal authority recognised around the society but one which no man or woman can fully personify. It's not just a writing instrument that can be a phallic symbol; but capital gains, an uncle's voice- Lacan talked about the phallus as something men try to HAVE and women try to BE. He argues, while re-working on the Freudian

¹ Freud, Sigmund. *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* [1905], in *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey et al. London: Hogarth Press, 1953-1974. Vol.7

theory, that the child attempts to *be* the mother's object of affection. In competition with the father, he concludes that the child then wishes to be the 'phallus' which fulfils its mother's desires. In pursuit of the same, the child is tangled in symbolic determinations which it doesn't understand². In "*Family Complexes*", Lacan [1938] has suggested that the authority through symbolism is based in 'The name of the Father'. One can thus, try to take the position of a 'male' in reference to the phallus, or a 'female' one by merely trying to be the phallus³.

Anika Lemaire remarked that the phallus 'takes on the symbolic meaning of absence of lack [...] due to its erectile power and function of penetration- It is the phallus which challenges the lack, packs the empty space⁴. The phallus is thus, a 'signifier of desire', of what seeks to fill what lacks. Lacan refers to the *Villa of the Mysteries* in Pompeii, where a phallus has been constructed in a way to depict its almost-revelation. He says that this form of veiling provides the phallus its recognition of a 'sign of latency'; and keeping it hidden in the 'public' is essential in gaining symbolic power. Once it has been symbolised, it's not possible to 'negate' its presence; and this image (phallic) changes its nature and function according to the symbolic order⁵.

² Laplanche, Jean and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis. *Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse*. Paris: PUF, 1967.

³ Lacan, Jacques. *The Family Complexes* [1938], trans. C. Gallagher, unpublished translation.

⁴ Anika Lemaire, *Jacques Lacan*, 5

⁵ Lacan proceeds to relate the phallus to Pythagoras' 'golden number' (nombre d'or), known in Greek as phi (Φ), also referred to as 'the cut'. The golden section is the particular division of a line so that the proportion of one segment to the other is equivalent to the latter segment to the whole, and the proportion between the two series of numbers continues indefinitely. Phi is the proportion that allows for the construction of indefinitely dyadic systems, permitting the endless correlation between two series of numbers. Lacan writes: 'The shift of ($\sim\phi$) (lowercase phi [petit phi]) as phallic image from one side to the other of the equation between the imaginary and the symbolic renders it positive in any case, even if it fills a lack. Although it props up (-1), it becomes Φ (capital phi [grand phi]) there, the symbolic phallus that cannot be negativized, the signifier of jouissance' (E, 823). In Seminar XI: *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan writes that the 'minus-phi of castration [...] centres the whole organization of the desires through the framework of the fundamental drives' (7th session, 26 February 1964, 89)



Villa of Mysteries; Source: Los Angeles Museum of Art

PHALLIC SYMBOLISM ACROSS THE GLOBE

Phallic worship remains one of the oldest forms of worship and superstition, it has only strengthened and been passed down over time as the “ideal”.

These ideas of one acting as father and the other as mother within reproductive relationships were suggested separately across regions; but carried out within similar operations of the human mind. These ideas bore into the religions of various regions. In Egypt, the deity was called the “Father” and the goddess the “Mother”. The former presided not over procreation but the agricultural work, and the ritual practices (such as cropping corn before the deity) were enacted towards reverence of the deity. Even within Hinduism, the “Siva Purana” quotes that Purusha (the male) possesses the mind which is the prime organ of sense and intellect. It is he who pervades, initiates and vivifies; while the woman remains the “universal mother”. The Tahitians believed that the universe was a result of the coming together of two beings and a New Zealand myth claimed that we had a father and a mother who were our primeval ancestors.

Thus, the doctrine of the reciprocal principles of nature- male and female- came from independent origins but the innate principle remained common to all races and people alike. This results in the universal reverence accorded to the representations of sexual parts; for they are seen as symbols of the same generative principles as gods and goddesses- as symbols of active and passive causes. We see that in Persia (according to Ptolemy), Germany (The Jewish women were seen manufacturing phalli of gold and silver as found in Ezekiel. 17.⁶), Greece

⁶ “Thou didst take also thy fair jewels of my gold, and didst make to thy-self images of men, and didst commit fornication with them.” – Noyes’s Translation of Ezekiel.

(Where reverence was paid to the Phallus and Cteis), and elsewhere the phallus came to be recognised as a symbol of 'generation'. The act of generation was seen as just another function of nature contributing towards the reproduction of species. In ancient times, these acts were ordained to those from whom these originated- In India to Siva; in Italy to Mutinus; in Egypt to Khem; and in Greece to Pan- those who were considered representatives of the generative powers of nature.

The notion of indecency however is recent; the original idea behind phallic worship was merely religious or sanctimonious in its essence. As mentioned in the Genesis, Abraham asks his servant to take the solemn oath by making him lay his hands on the 'generative' part⁷ (the most revered part of his body as a sign on sincerity). On dying Jacob made his son perform a similar ritual. A similar custom was observed among the Arabs- in taking a solemn oath, one will always place their hand on the membrum virile in sincerity. According to Westropp [1875], the notion of indecency emerged as a result of an advanced civilization inching towards its decline, as was seen in Pompeii and Rome⁸. He recognises three distinguishable phases through which phallic worship has passed- The first was where it was seen as a religious act; secondly, when it was used as a protection against evil (seen at the postern gate at Alatri and Pompeii, and amulets in Egypt); thirdly, when it came across as a result of dissolution of morals.

⁷ "...under his thigh"; where the thigh had a particular sanctity. It was the part of the sacrificial victim which was burdened as a sweet savor to the deity. Bacchus, it will be remembered, was preserved in an embryo at the thigh of Jupiter; and Pythagoras, in his initiations displayed a golden thigh.

⁸ Secret Museum of Naples; Colonel Fanin, London, 1871. This was an account of the erotic paintings, bronzes and statues in the famous "Cabinet Secret".



Gallo-Roman examples of the fascinum ("the divine phallus") in bronze, Rome; Source- Wiki Commons



Envocation to Priapus: 19th Century Engraving of a Bas-Relief from Pompeii; Source: Sacred-texts

There were three recognizable stages of phallic worship- the first was where it was looked up as an object of reverence and worship; the second marked the stage where was used as a protection against the said 'evil'- in the form of an amulet or a charm (Postern Gate, Alatri; amulets, Egypt); and the third stage marked a disbandment of morals. Across religions however this symbol was one worshipped as a symbol of fertility. This was especially prevalent in societies where a woman's standing was majorly determined by the number of children they had- E.g. Among Mohammedans, according to whom not contributing to the society is seen as a sin; a ring with the symbol of a phallus was worn by barren women in Pompeii. In Rome, women would attempt to appease the deity by making these symbols in temples as was observed in Isernia- where Saints Cosmos and Damiano were worshipped by young girls and barren women. Within Buddhist temples (E.g. Peking) too this practice has found to be commonplace amongst women. However, it is only in India where this worship has reached a widespread population. Young girls in-waiting for marriage, barren women and those hoping to have children were all ardent worshippers of Lord Shiva's symbol (The *Lingam*). In Egypt as observed by Sir Gardner Wilkinson [1815-1921], the superstitions were similarly attached to the reverence of stones in the Sheikh's tomb; while women in Ekhmim are still seen to be offering prayers to the ancient relics in hopes of progeny.

Captain Burton [1867] gave an account of how phallic worship is still prevalent in society during the 1800s. To elucidate on this, he talked about how,

"Every street from Whydah to the capital is adorned with the symbol, and the old ones are not removed. The Dahoman Priapus is a clay figure, of any size between a giant and the pigmy, crouched upon the ground, as if contemplating its own attributes. The head is sometimes a wooden block rudely carved, more often dried mud, and the eyes and teeth are supplied by cowries. The tree of life is anointed with palm-oil, which drips into a pot or a shard placed below it, and the would-be mother of children prays that the great god Legba will make her fertile."

He recognised the phallic superstition as essential to the family idea, "amongst all barbarians whose primal want is progeny, we observe a greater or less development of the phallic worship."⁹ However Wake [1875] viewed this as an imperfect view. He believes that what is not understood by an 'uncultured' mind is viewed as a source of veneration or fear; and the symbol then becomes a physical embodiment of the spirit. Since generation remains a mysterious phenomenon beyond human understanding, the reflection of the same has led to

⁹ Memoirs of the Anthropological Society of London^ vol. i, p. 320.

it being manifested in the form of certain superstitions. This quest to reflect the phenomenon thus leads to the worship of the organs that are involved in the very process; hence we recognise within primitives, a tendency towards phallic (and yoni) worship.

The second stage focused on the consequences of the very phenomenon. It moved beyond the organs leading to the act of generation, and looked at the chief agent involved in the very process. The father, then came to be seen as the sole moderator- a position of privilege contended entirely on the act and its consequences. We then recognise the essentiality embedded in a given phallic idea, leading to the family idea. This defined the social order of all primitive people. Sir William Wilson Hunter [1868] in his observations about the Santals of Bengal, showed how the categorization of people depended on the basis of family and not social occupation. He described the major six ceremonies in a Santal's life as being,

“admission into the family; admission into the tribe; admission into the race; union of his own tribe with another by marriage; formal dismissal from the living race by cremation; lastly, a reunion with the departed fathers,”¹⁰

It is only through its consequences then, that marriage too derives its significance. Among a majority of the populations it is approached with ceremonial processions marking its importance in the concerned individual's life. According to Wake, the marriage ring too had a seemingly phallic origin, which he illustrates through Ennemoser's [2011] work on the Samothracian culture-

“...earlier in Athens, the newly married, under the name of Anakes, brought offerings to the Dioscuri, in symbol of the reconciliation of opposing forces, and with reference to the hope of offspring”.¹¹

This recognisable phallic worship doesn't end with the death of the person. The honour accorded to the sole agent formed the traditions of a certain care with which the dead-bodies were treated, and the worship of ancestors was encouraged.

PHALLIC SYMBOLS WITHIN HINDUISM

Hinduism as a religion has found its only constant to be in change. Its beginnings were found in the 'Vedic Period' (the inception of the Vedas); where the early rituals were centered around acts

¹⁰ Rural Bengal, p. 203.

¹¹ Ennemoser's History of Magic (BohnV) vol. ii, p. 33.

such as Yagna invoking a force to meet material aspirations. Offerings in the form of sacrifices and hymns to praise the forces were commonplace in early tradition; but the absence of shrines suggested the nomadic nature of the population. However, Hinduism today is very territorially placed; It is often situated around a shrine- a change that came about with the coming in of agriculture, settlements in both cities and forests. But the most striking of the changes has been the move from a rationalist approach to one of unflinching theism: from a lay on gods and spirits to that of an all-powerful god. But even this powerful image was scattered across regions and populations; For some this 'God' was Shiva, for some Vishnu, and others a feminine postulation.



Source: 2500-2400 BC, Pashupati Seal, Mohenjodaro; National Museum of history

The earliest evidence of Shiva includes a seal from the Indus Valley civilization. It depicts the ithyphallic Shiva attesting the presence of a Shiva-cult, the 'Mahayogi' or 'Pashupati' along with his 'Ling' form during the pre-Vedic times. It is the earliest depiction of Shiva as 'Lingeshwara', Lord of the phallus. For the Vedic people, however, Shiva personified the unknowingness of the territory of hostile tribes and opposing environment. He was the reason for their fear and anxiety; To them he was the god of anger, death and destruction ('Rudra'). In the Brahmanas one is told to never speak his name aloud; He is an outsider, to whom the leftovers are offered. Such speculations led one to believe that Shiva was perhaps not a Vedic god; He was believed to be either a tribal god or one of Dravidian origin. He lay in the tense association between exoteric Vedic practices and esoteric Dravidian ones (Such as yoga and alchemy). The idea of 'Shiva' as created through mythology- constructs him as a shy groom; one whose children aren't reproduced in the 'typical' way; he borders himself with animal carcass, skulls, ashes; belongs to the caves and snow-tipped mountains; he is set in stone in open-temples; and is fed raw milk-

identifying him along ascetic ideals. The common disdain towards the material world reveals itself in to ways- asceticism, where one hopes to overcome material pleasure and be one with Shiva, where sexual activity is prohibited; alchemy, where one hopes to take over materialism, and sexual activity is merely ritualistic. Even though both these views bear no cognisance with the pleasure and ‘generation’ through sexual activity; the ritual representation of Shiva is a phallus. The representation of breasts in the Brahmanical past has always been kept away from art historically. The focus has been on the Lingam (Phallus) as the symbol of fertility in the imagery defining Indian history. This is symbolic of the lack of representation of women within Indian mythology.



Images of phallic worship across Bhutan, India and Japan; Source: Getty Images

CONCLUSION: PHALLIC SYMBOLISM TODAY



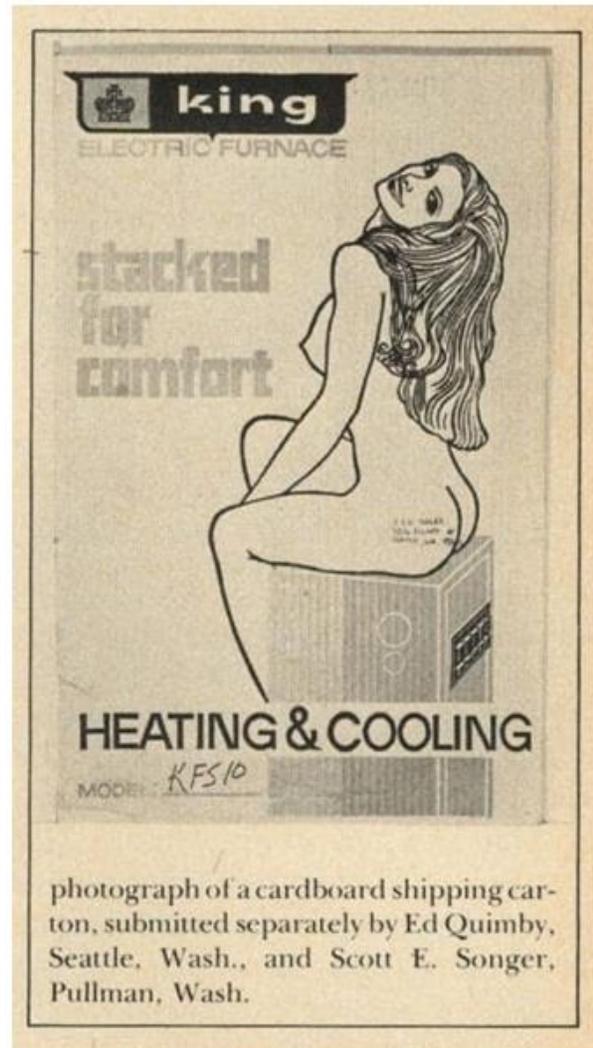
“The Marilyn Ruler.” Silhouette of Marilyn Monroe Playboy centerfold (1953), with Arata Isozaki, “Marilyn” Chair (1973);

plan detail of Kamioka Town Hall, Gifu, Japan (1976-78); aerial of Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (1981-86).

The religious connotations and reverence accorded to phallic worship have percolated into the society's most common spheres of imagery- art and architecture. Some believe that there has been an obvious lack of representation of women due to the creation of knowledge being controlled by solely men and the difficulty in finding a woman's identity in the patriarchal set-up we live in [Kleinberg 1988; Lerner 1986]. And another view proposes the obvious 'marginalisation' of women in the public space because of their exclusion from the dominant narrative. However, according to Patricia Uberoi [1990], in many areas of representation women have not only been an active participant but the most eminent figureheads-

“The issue is then transformed into one of the correctness or incorrectness of the representation, or of the socially constraining nature of the stereotypical imagery, especially for those who do not naturally fit the bill, or of the relationship between women's subjectivity and objectivity. The latter is a rather vexed question; it is patently not the case that all women at all times speak in women's voices. They, too, are captives of society's ideologies, self-alienated as gendered sub-conspicuous oppressors of their own sex. The authentic voices and genres of women, and the modes and moments of their resistance to patriarchal domination have to be located and celebrated in a self-consciously subaltern project, while conversely commending those males who, despite themselves as it were, have succeeded in expressing a genuine feminine sensibility.”

While in 2012, we see a panel on the “Best Tall Building in America” give an award to the Absolute World Towers, quoting that it derives its nickname ‘Marilyn Monroe’ quite rightly from its “curves and sexy form”; And celebrities promoting a certain ‘ideal’ body type leading to negligence of the urgency to recognise the objectification of women (towers coming up depicting Beyoncé's figure); there has been no active effort towards changing the narrative of how women will be always want to be the ‘object of desire’. Phallic symbolism, earlier a mere postulation of religion had engrained itself in the definitions of what art and architecture today stand for.



*Advertisements standardising the idea of a 'built' woman; Source:
Mitchconnell.blogspot.co.uk*

CITATIONS

Burton, Captain 1867: *The Anthropological Review*, 91-102.

Ennemoser, J. 2011: *The History of Magic*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Freud, Sigmund 1953-74: *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, London: Hogarth Press.

Hunter, William Wilson, Sir 1868: *The Annals of Rural Bengal*, New York: Leypoldt and Holt.

Kleinberg, S Jay ed 1988: *Retrieving Women's History: Changing Perceptions of the Role of Women in Politics and Society*, Oxford: Berg/Unesco.

Lacan, Jacques 1938: *The Family Complexes*, trans. C. Gallagher.

Laplanche, Jean and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis 1967: *Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse*, Paris: PUF.

Lerner, Gerda 1986: *The Creation of Patriarchy*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Uberoi, Patricia 1990: *Feminine Identity and National Ethos in Indian Calendar Art*, *Economic and Political Weekly* 25, no. 17): WS41-S48.

Westropp, Hodder M. and Wake, C. Staniland 1875: *Influence of the Phallic Idea in the Religions of Antiquity*, New York: J.W. Bouton, 706 Broadway.