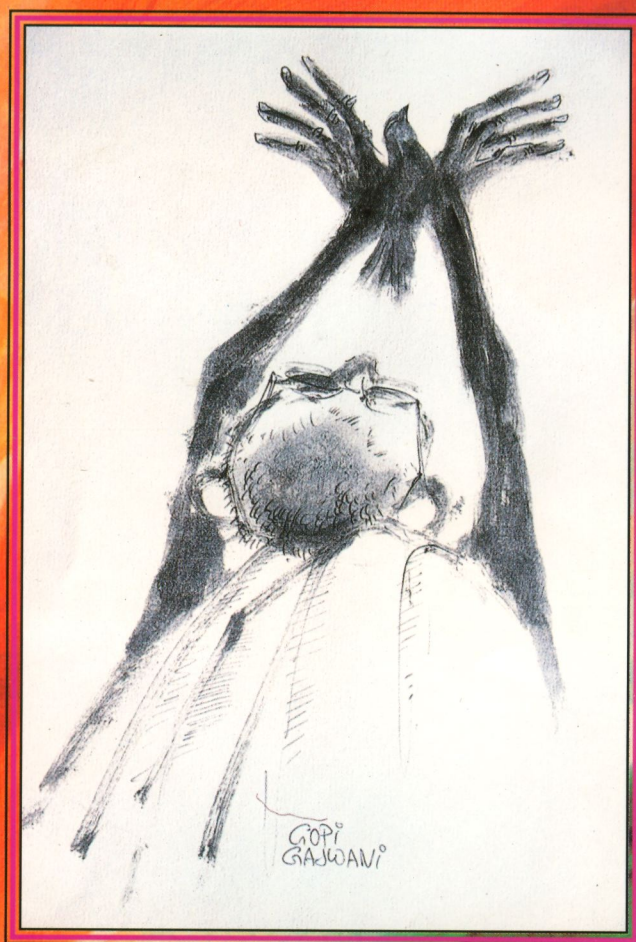


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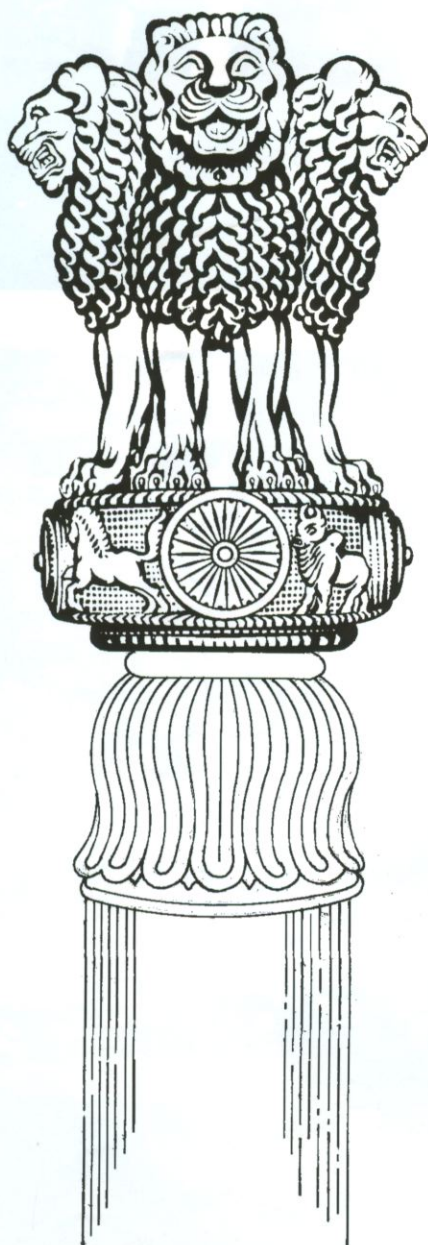
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NATIONAL SYMBOLS

Text and Photographs: Nihal Mathur



Symbolizing the paramount authority of the state is the national emblem adapted from the Lion Capital of Asoka at Sarnath. Asoka, the great Mauryan king who lived between 273-232 BC, was an ardent Buddhist. Of the many pillars erected by Asoka in north India only ten survive today. Nearly forty feet tall, these highly polished round pillars measuring three feet in diameter were topped by a capital, mounted on an abacus.

The original Sarnath capital, from where the inspiration came, has four lions, standing back to back, with a

The need to highlight the importance of national symbols in public consciousness can hardly be stressed considering that they encapsulate the ethos of a country. After 50th years of Independence, it is important to recall the larger meaning behind these national symbols for a better understanding and appreciation of what it means to be an Indian.

*A portrait of an Indian peacock, playfully posing for its picture.
(Soumitra Manmohan)*



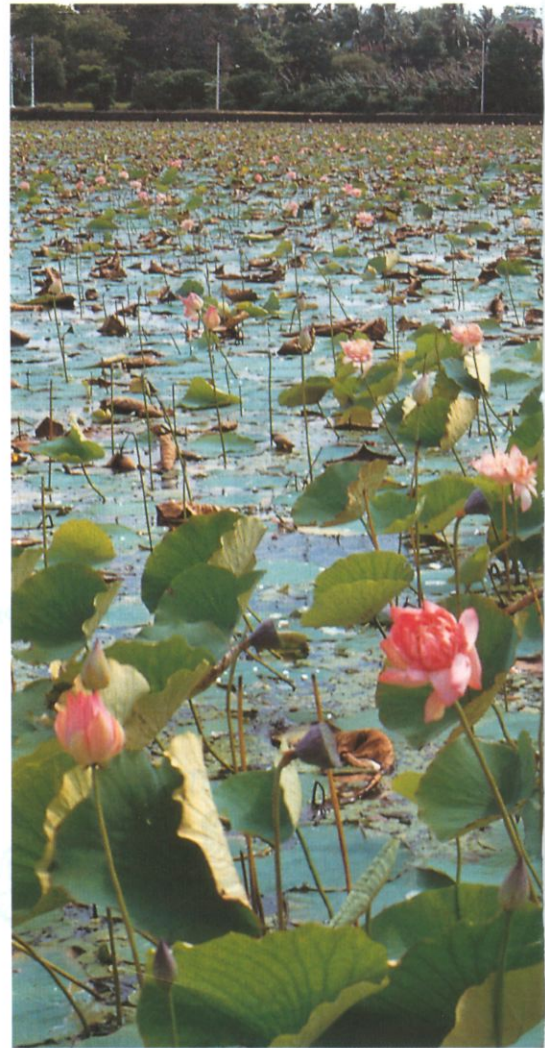
frieze on the abacus carrying sculptures in relief of an elephant, a horse, a bull and a lion. The sculptures are separated by intervening wheels over an inverted lotus. Carved out of a single block of polished sandstone, the capital was crowned by a wheel, also cut in stone. This was the the Dharma Chakra or the Eternal Wheel of Law. These pillars were royal edicts that directed the people to follow the Buddhist Laws of Piety. It should be noted, however, that the animal motifs, inverted lotus and the wheel — characteristic symbols of the Asokan dynasty — had a deep mythological significance and went further back in time to Vedic India around 1500 BC.

In the state emblem adapted by the Government of India on 26th January 1950, only three lions are visible, the fourth being hidden from view. In the centre of the abacus, there is the wheel with a bull on the right and a horse on the left. The wheel crowning the capital and the inverted lotus were omitted. In their place the words *Satyameva Jayate* from the Upanishads meaning "Truth Alone Triumphs" have been inscribed in Devanagari script.

Today, the state emblem is the official seal of the President of India and Central and State Governments of the Indian Union. Used only for official purposes, India's national emblem commands utmost respect and loyalty, while proclaiming independent India's identity and sovereignty.

The tiger — Lord of the Indian Jungles — evokes royalty, majesty and power. India's unique wildlife continues to be a source of national pride within the community of nations. This is because India is home to all kinds of habitats — the 'Tundra'-like conditions in high Himalayas, the temperate 'Alpine' Zone on the lower reaches of the ranges, the 'Savanna' type grasslands of the Indo-Gangetic plains, the 'Ethiopian' kind of desert and dry bush country and of course the wet and evergreen mangrove and 'Tropical' forests. With its position at top of the ecological pyramid, the tiger is the symbol of India's wealth of wildlife.

It isn't as if the tiger is exclusive to India alone. It has a wide geographic range over Asia and was, till the 1940s, known to exist in 8 different sub species out of which, the Caspian, the Bali and



Above right: A harvester amidst a sea of lotus, blooming tall and radiant above the muggy waters Below: Peacocks drink at a water hole in the company of wild deer at Sariska National Park





the Javan tigers have become extinct. The five surviving sub-species namely, the South China, the Indo-Chinese, the Sumatran, the Siberian and the Royal Bengal are truly making their last stand. International agencies estimate a worldwide population of wild tigers between 5000-7500 out of which nearly half are said to be in India only. It isn't surprising that in popular imagination the tiger remains synonymous with India.

To protect the national animal a special Project Tiger was launched in 1973. Nine tiger reserves all over the country were specially set aside for the protection of this striped cat. Fourteen more tiger reserves have been added since. Today, the tiger advances as a symbol of India's conservation of its wildlife heritage.

Of the three species of peacock on the planet, it is the Blue Indian Peafowl (*Pavo cristatus*) which is well known in the world and most abundantly and widely distributed in the subcontinent. From among two thousand different species of birds found in India, it is

undoubtedly the peacock which is absolutely stunning. Perhaps no other bird has so deeply influenced Indian imagination as the peacock. This is reflected in the Indian way of life.

Ancient Sanskrit texts celebrate the peacock as a symbol of joy. And indeed, when the dark clouds of the monsoon arrive, the peacock, in its resplendent plumage, dances in gay abandon, welcoming the showers upon the dry and scorching earth. Breathtaking to behold, the different dancing manoeuvres of the peacock find expression in the classical, folk and tribal dancing traditions of India. Its strident calls not only herald the onset of rains but is also said to beckon separated lovers to reunite. This is a recurrent theme in the folk songs and poetry of India. In the science of Indian classical music, there are meters known after the peacock which are also vividly portrayed in Indian miniature paintings. Images of this beautiful bird are fashioned in fabric, carved in wood and stone and shaped in clay and metal by traditional craftsmen. The

bird's beauty and charm truly reflects the Indian arts.

Symbolic of many qualities — grace, pride, beauty, love and mysticism, the peacock is depicted in pictures in the company of Indian gods and goddesses. It is the sacred bird of India, protected not only by a religious sentiment but also by parliamentary statute. The peacock is the national bird of India.

Commanding a central presence in the timeless setting of India's countryside, is the mighty banyan, a tree endemic to the Indian subcontinent. The distinctive feature of this enormous tree are the aerial roots that hang down from the many branches like clumps of shredded ropes. Upon reaching the ground, these roots act as auxiliary trunks and provide support to the great mass of the tree as it grows bigger in size. Getting columnar support from these aerial roots, the banyan begins to spread out, covering an ever increasing area. Often the main and older trunk dies and the auxiliary trunks take over the function of the original one. Constantly regenerating, the tree never seems to die and in that sense comes to symbolize immortality.

There are several famous banyans in India that are well known for their age, spanning centuries. Perhaps the most celebrated and well documented banyan is in the Botanical gardens in Calcutta. But each town and village in India boasts of its very own "largest" banyan. A witness to the life and times of its people, the banyan is deeply rooted in the culture of this land, where it is symbolic of wisdom and divine protection. The *bodhi* tree was a banyan, under which Buddha attained enlightenment. Sanctity for the tree also comes from the fact that it is worshipped by the women for begetting children, since the tree also symbolizes fecundity and growth.

What's amazing about the banyan is the fact that it is a veritable micro-habitat for countless creatures that derive sustenance from its fruit and flower, leaf and stem, bark and root. For man the banyan provides shelter from the summer sun or monsoon rains. Often the banyan becomes the focal point for the village community to gather and transact much of its affairs. There is a sense of belonging with the banyan. It is a small wonder that the banyan is the



national tree of India.

From the still water lakes of Kashmir in the north to the hundreds of ponds both big and small between Nagercoil and Kanyakumari down south; from the marshy mud banks of the Brahmaputra in eastern Assam to the remote village water tanks in the sand

bound western Rajasthan, we see the lotus that grows across the length and breadth of India.

The lotus is found in many warmer parts of the planet but South-East Asia is its real home. So although not an exclusive Indian flower, the lotus, *Nelumbo nucifera*, nevertheless is

identified with India. It is in Indian thought that this extraordinarily beautiful flower becomes a powerful symbol. Rich in meaning and metaphor, the lotus symbolizes divinity, fertility, wealth and knowledge. But among the many nuances of the symbol, the lotus symbolizes enlightenment.

Above: The massive reach of the Banyan covers huge domains with the help of countless aerial roots that hover down from the branches and provide support to the tree as it continues to grow Below: With a mark of royal defiance, the Indian tiger commands respect of all who enter the jungle. (Soumitra Mohan)



Lending to its uniqueness, the flower grows in murky waters, and rises on a long stalk, usually three to four feet above the surface to bloom gloriously. Untouched by the unclean water below, the lotus comes to symbolize the purity of heart and mind.

By analogy, humans beings are instructed by Indian scriptures to live a life of non-attachment in this world. However, this may prove to be too daunting a task to set for oneself in this world of many attractions. Then, in Indian thought, there is the last and final lotus — the *Charan Kamal* or the Lotus Feet of the Almighty. As Tulsidas writes in the Ramayana: *Kamal Charan Bando Harirai* or "Go to the Lotus Feet of the Guru for Salvation". It was this depth of thought that made the founding fathers of modern India enshrine the lotus in the Constitution as the National Flower.