

## **SYMBOLS IN CHANDRA SHYAM DANGOL'S STONE SCULPTURES**

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### **Abstract**

*Chandra Shyam Dangol's stone sculptures have symbols that suggest the concepts of wisdom and enlightenment. The symbols are images that signify something else beyond themselves. The recurrent symbols in the sculptures are the figures of divinities, lotus, sword, mudras (gestures) of meditating characters and the image of Shivalinga. These mystical symbols suggest spiritual values. They make the viewers aware of the self and the external world and inspire the unity of these entities. Due to the mythical and spiritual subject matters, the works appear to be magical and mystical. The symbolic artworks enhance moral values and contribute to refine the civilization. 'Stone sculptures of Chandra Shyam Dangol', the area of this research, is explored from the symbolist perspective of Thomas Carlyle and Susanne K. Langer. Symbols suggest the silent aspects of reality. Symbols in Dangol's artworks suggest invisible spiritual dimensions of human experience. Since the paper derives the thesis statement through the interpretation of sculptures, and there are the possibilities of multiple interpretations, this research is qualitative.*

**Key words:** *symbol, lotus, enlightenment, Manjushree, bodhisattva, Pancha Buddhas*

### **Introduction: Chandra Shyam Dangol and his Sculptures**

Chandra Shyam Dangol, one of the renowned contemporary Nepali sculptors, takes inspiration from traditional Nepali arts and associated myths, and creates fine stone sculptures that have symbolic significance. The images in the artworks suggest further ideas and concepts beyond themselves. Before supporting this statement, the paper introduces the artist and his works. Dangol hails from Khokana, the traditional Newar settlement full of arts, architecture and cultural rituals. He acquired primary skills of stone carving from his father when he was young. He refined his craftsmanship and techniques of stone carving from his studies at Tribhuvan University and earned his Master in Fine Arts (Sculpture). He has been working in the field of stone carving for three decades and has created hundreds of stone sculptures including the gigantic sculpture of standing Manjushree, the tallest stone sculpture of Nepal (33

ft), installed in Manjushree Park, Chobhar, Kathmandu. Ten artisans in the leadership of Dangol worked tirelessly round the clock for four years to complete the sculpture (Khokana Stone Carving, [www.stonecarvingnepal.com/about/team-single/?id=1782](http://www.stonecarvingnepal.com/about/team-single/?id=1782)). His artworks have been collected by national and international museums, art galleries, institutions and private collectors.

He has been sharing his art techniques, visions and stone carving skills with the artists of the new generation as a distinguished professor at Suzhou Art and Design Technology Institute, Suzhou, China and Sirjana College of Fine Arts, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, Nepal. He is a member of Nepal Handicrafts Federation, Nepal Heritage Society and Artist's Society of Nepal (Khokana Stone Carving, [www.stonecarvingnepal.com/about/team-single/?id=1782](http://www.stonecarvingnepal.com/about/team-single/?id=1782)). He has been honored with prestigious awards like 'National Best Enterpreniur'-2006/07 by Small Scale Cottage Industry, Government of Nepal, Achievement award -2008 by Oita Asian Sculpture

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Exhibition, Japan and Fine Arts Special Award - 2011 by Nepal Academy of Fine Arts, Kathmandu. Sculptor Dangol owns a huge stone carving studio where carves images accompanied by a dozen of artisans and assistants.

Dangol's interest in sculpture began at an early age when he used to observe stone images in an ambiance of the Newar artistic and cultural landscape in Khokana, Lalitpur. His specialization is in stone sculpture. He attempts to preserve the tradition of Nepali art by acquiring native skills and adding new dimensions to his works. The exposure of his works to the international audience has contributed to carving the identity of Nepal beyond the border (Sirjana College of Fine Arts). He has taken part in six dozen national and international art exhibitions including World Shanghai Expo 2010 with his 12 ft tall Bodhisattva. Maitreya Buddha sculpture (18 ft high) installed in Bara district is another masterpiece by the artist.

Chandra Shyam Dangol's works present the divine characters of Hindu and Buddhist myths. The recurrent characters are the representations of Lord Shiva, Shivalinga, goddess Laxmi, Dhyani Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, Lokeshvara, Mahamanjushree, Kuber and Lord Ganesha. His artworks make the viewers aware of Nepal's cultural heritage and inheritance. Dangol's works revitalize the cultural history of Kathmandu valley (Tourism Mail, 2018). Dangol is one of the few sculptors who have crafted monumental stone sculptures in Nepal. About his experience in creating stone sculpture, Dangol himself says:

Today, for me, art is not just a means of making a living but also my mission in life. I want to be one of the instigators to usher in a new renaissance of traditional art in Nepal. . . to understand art, one requires more than keen eyes, one needs to have been embedded in art theory and art history-to be immersed in an art world where you can learn. . . I found solace and escape in the wonderful world of sculptures. Carving a figure out of a slab of stone gave me immense pleasure. I worked hard, and my work sustained me. I always wanted to work on colossal

statues that stand tall and capture the imagination of the people, so I decided to take a gamble and invested all my savings on a couple of large pieces of stone. I also hired a few artisans and started overseeing their work as opposed to carving the rock myself. It allowed me to maintain quality control (qtd. in Thapa, 2016, p.19).

With his dedication, hard work, craftsmanship and confidence Dangol has created many masterpieces of stone sculptures in the domain of Nepali art (Thapa, 2016). The monumental size and fine form make his works distinct from the rest.

Dangol uses symbols to suggest the hidden meaning of the artworks to the viewers. The expressions in symbols signify abstract ideas (Rampley, 1997). It provides depth to the aesthetic composition. The images suggest something else beyond themselves. Lotus is the dominant symbol in many sculptures that suggests purity and enlightenment (Ward, 1952). Shivalinga symbolizes the unity of Shiva and Shakti (Brown, 1990). The artist uses symbols to put ideas and concepts in the pictures which we cannot experience with our senses but through our imagination. A symbol may signify multiple significances. The significance remains in silence and darkness. A symbol attempts to express the invisible or intangible aspects of reality employing visible images (Balter, 2009). This research traces the symbols in Chandra Shyam Dangol's artworks and attempts to show their significances. The concept of symbolism in art has been elaborated in a separate section.

#### Research Methodology

The research area is 'Chandra Shyam Dangol's stone sculptures' which has been studied from the perspective of symbolism. Symbolism is the tool for the interpretation and analysis of Dangol's artworks. It is qualitative research, for the artworks have been interpreted to support the thesis statement, and the interpretation of the sculptures can be multiple depending on the viewers. His sculptures are primary sources, and the books and articles on art are secondary sources. Artist's studio and the sites

(where the sculptures have been installed) have been visited to view the artworks. The artist and art critics have been interviewed.

### **Art and Symbols**

Artists use symbols to suggest deeper significances indirectly. According to Carlyle (1992), a symbol indicates the silence and secrecy in a work of art. It is an ambivalent sign of concealment and revelation at the same time. The symbol attempts to reveal something but it does not do so with clarity. It hides something in the darkness. The finite symbolic form embodies infinite possibilities (Carlyle 1992). The symbolic expression may imply immaterial, ideal, or intangible truth (Berefelt, 1969). Symbolism, a loosely organized Western art movement, began in the 19th century, focused on the use of symbols that suggest beyond themselves. Symbolist artists sought to express emotions, ideas and experiences through the subtle and suggestive application of symbols (Berefelt, 1969). Colors, images and figures in artworks can be the symbols (Sharma, 2009). The symbolists attempt to liberate artworks from their expository descriptions in detail. The use of symbols makes a work of art concise. They evoke the intuitions of the viewer's inner life and attempt to communicate the underlined mystery of existence despite the difficulty in deriving precise significance (Langer, 1979). They suggest the state of the artist's imagination and hint at the dark and silent reality.

As the music suggests some sense, symbols suggest plural significances. We hear the music but we are unable to pinpoint the meaning of that music with certainty. Similarly, we can see the symbols in visual arts but their meanings may be multiple (Sharma, 2021). Lines, colors and brushstrokes also can be symbols. The use of symbols enhances the quality of the art. The symbolists stress the inner qualities of the visual composition. The expressions are based on the artist's conviction that there is a different reality beyond the physical world (Langer, 1979). The invisible and intangible reality can be glimpsed through the creative responses of the artists. In visual arts, symbolists turn toward the magical and mystical aspects of reality.

They attempt to create the subtle connection between the visible and invisible existence through the suggestive qualities of visual compositions (Balter, 2009). Profound significances of reality can be experienced intuitively through the perception of symbols in the artworks.

In the context of Nepali art, the lotus flower is the symbol of purity and enlightenment (Ward, 1952). Lotus grows in mud but has beautiful blossoms untouched by the mud. The symbol implies that human beings are attached to the material world but they should try to achieve enlightenment transcending the material reality. Lotus is also the symbol of our consciousness. It is believed that the arising Kundalini in the body of enlightened being develops into a lotus flower with thousand petals on the head. Lotus is also the symbol of Prakriti or female principal. The Vajra in the hands of Buddhist deities is the combination of Prakriti and Purusa (Shakya, 2000). The lotus flower (female principle) is penetrated by a straight cylindrical shape (male principle). This symbolically suggests the unity of the individual self and cosmic being. This paper traces symbols in Chandra Shyam Dangol's stone sculptures and attempts to show their significances.



Fig.1 Chandra Shyam Dangol. *Manjushree*, 2016

Dangol's Sculptures: Symbols and Significances  
Chandra Shyam Dangol's stone sculptures have symbols that suggest something else beyond themselves. Lotus, sword, Shivalinga, figures of deities and their mudras (gestures) are the recurrent symbols in his artworks that signify ethical and spiritual values like wisdom, purity and enlightenment. For instance, Dangol's 33ft. high monumental Manjushree stone sculpture (Fig.1) in Manjushree park of Chobhar represents the Manjushree bodhisattva, the symbol of prajna or wisdom. The bodhisattva stands on the lotus flower. Lotus is the symbol of purity and enlightenment (Ward, 1952). Manjushree, the oldest bodhisattva, has been depicted as a bodhisattva with a flaming sword in his right hand, symbolizing the realization of transcendent wisdom which is supposed to cut down ignorance (Shakya, 2000). The text supported by the lotus held in his left hand is a Prajnaparamita manuscript, symbolizing his attainment of enlightenment and the blossoming of wisdom. Prajnaparamita, the title of the work, also means the perfection of wisdom: "prajna" means wisdom and "paramita" means perfection (Conze, 1973, p.79). Manuscript, sword and lotus are the coherent symbols suggesting wisdom. For the creation of such work, the artist has the rich mythological tapestry of awareness and symbolic significances of attributes. Manjushree is identified as the oldest bodhisattva in Mahayana literature. Bodhisattva is the concept of Mahayana Buddhism which is different from Hinayana Buddhism (Sharma, 2014).

In Hinayana, the Buddha is a "great teacher and leader but not a god" and "his tremendous success was due to the fact that his experience of enlightenment was potentially reproducible by anyone" (Aran, 1978, p.47). The followers of Hinayana did not make idols of the Buddha because it was thought "impossible to represent him once he had passed into Nirvana, a state of being inconceivable in human" (47). According to Mahayana, enlightenment is possible for human beings "not only by their own endeavor but also through the vicarious suffering of a new deity, the

bodhisattva, an intermediary between the passive Buddha and the suffering humans" (p.49). Waldschmidt & Leonore (1967) clarify the concept of bodhisattvas:

Bodhisattvas, 'Being of Enlightenment', who are potential Buddhas or Buddhas designate. These blessed beings have come within reach of their goal, the rank of a Buddha, having travelled the way that leads through the ten stages (bhumi) of supreme virtue and perfection; they have, however, abstained from taking the final step to deliverance and extinction in order to stand by those who have remained behind on earth, their former companions in suffering, to help them in their troubles and guide to them along the right path. These Bodhisattvas thus have the function of helpers to those who belong to this branch of the Buddhist religion. (p.29)

Bodhisattvas, the enlightened ones function as the bridge between the Buddha and the common human beings who seek nirvana. They guide the sadhakas toward enlightenment. Manjushree is the oldest bodhisattva. He is believed to be the teacher of all the Buddhas including the last one Siddhartha Gautam (Williams, 1989). When he attained enlightenment, he has been known as the bodhisattva of wisdom (Emmerick, 1992). He is also known as an Arhat who also represents the wisdom in the Hinayana tradition. The figure of Manjushree is associated with the interesting myth related to Swayambhunath. According to Swayambhu Purana, the Kathmandu Valley was once a lake. In faraway China, on the mountain of Wu-tai Shan, the bodhisattva Manjushree entered into meditation and became aware of the existence of Adi Buddha (primordial Buddha) in the form of brilliant flame beyond the Himalaya in a huge lake. It is believed that Manjushree came on a pilgrimage. He saw a lotus flower in the center of the lake, which emitted brilliant radiance (Williams, 1989). He cut a gorge at Chobhar with his flaming sword to allow the lake to drain. The place where the lotus

flower settled became the Swayambhunath Stupa. Adi Buddha became visible on the full moon day of the month of Kartika from the thousand-petalled lotus (Elton Yoga, [www.eltonyoga.com/blog/manjushri-kathmandu-valley/](http://www.eltonyoga.com/blog/manjushri-kathmandu-valley/)). This lotus flower is the symbol of the primordial Buddha, Swayambhu, the Self-Existent One (Vajrachrya, 1996). The flower with ten thousand petals is believed to have sparkling diamonds on their surface, shining pearls beneath them and the gleaming rubies at the center. The pollen grains are golden. Seeds look like emeralds. The fluttering flaming is emerging from the center that transforms the beholders (Elton Yoga, [www.eltonyoga.com/blog/manjushri-kathmandu-valley/](http://www.eltonyoga.com/blog/manjushri-kathmandu-valley/)). The symbolic sword in the hand of Manjushree is called the *prajna khadga* or the sword of wisdom, which is believed to destroy the darkness of ignorance by the luminous rays issuing out of it (Emmerick, 1992). Manjushree is believed to have been the teacher of the seven Buddhas.

Chandra Shyam Dangol's miniature Chaitya (a type of Buddhist architecture) in the form of sculpture presents the figures of Pancha Buddhas (Fig.2). The Chaitya is the symbol of death and the quest for enlightenment. Generally, the relics of the Buddha or Buddhist sages are kept inside the chaitya and the structure is constructed. The relic reminds one of death. A person is existing now but he/she may vanish from the world at any moment. The figures of pancha Buddhas and their mudras (gestures) also symbolize various concepts related to meditation and enlightenment (Hirakawa, 1990). A chaitya refers to a shrine or sanctuary in Buddhism. The term "chaitya" is from a root *chita* meaning "heaped-up", a Sanskrit term for a mound or "funeral pile". It is believed as a sacred construction for prayer (Emmerick, 1992). At this sacred memorial monument, the sadhakas or devotees meet or meditate on the existence of the self in the world.



Fig.2 Chandra Shyam Dangol. *Chaitya* (western side), 2010

On four sides, there are the images of four Buddhas. The fifth one is invisible since it is in the middle facing upward. The word "Buddha" denotes "self". Once the sadhaka realizes the self, he/she identifies himself/herself with the Buddha. There is no difference between the self and the other. In this sense, the figure of the Buddha is the symbol of the self (Lopez, 2001). The experience of Buddhahood is synonymous with *apada* (wordless, trackless).

The images of Pancha Buddhas are on the lotus flower in *padmasana* (lotus posture). There is lotus blossom on the head of the Buddhas symbolizing *sahshrachakra* (the arousal of kundalini up to the crown covered with a lotus having a thousand petals), a state of transformation. Lotus is a symbol of purity and enlightenment. The lotus grows in the mud but the flower is untouched by the dirt. Despite the fact that the Buddhas existed in the physical world, they are untouched by material and mundane desires since they are enlightened (Landaw and Weber, 1993).

Akshobhaya, Amitabha, Ratnasambhava and Amoghasiddhi and Vairochana are Pancha Buddhas or five dhyani Buddhas which are representatives of five different qualities of Shakyamuni Buddha. All these Buddhas are sitting on the lotus flower

symbolizing their enlightened state (Hirakawa, 1990). These Five Buddhas represent five paradises in five different directions i.e. East, West, North, South and Central.

Amitabh Buddha in the west direction is believed that he frees the sadhakas from the cycle of life (birth, death and again rebirth). He sits in dhyana (meditation) mudra (Fig.2). It is also known as Samadhi or yoga mudra (Conze, 1973). Both of his hands are placed on the lap right hand on the left-hand fingers facing upward. Meditation leads to yoga (union of the self and cosmos), and yoga leads toward samadhi (the oneness with the universal spirit). Amitabh Buddha in dhyana mudra is the symbol of samadhi.

Ratnasambhava Buddha (Fig.3) in the southern side is in varada mudra (gesture of providing a boon to the sadhakas and devotees). The palm of the right hand is resting vertically near the right knee facing forward whereas the left hand is resting on the lap facing upward. He is the symbol of compassion, charity and offering (Lopez, 2001).

Amoghasiddhi Buddha in the north is in abhaya mudra (gesture of fearlessness) is the symbol of protection (Divya Vajra Vajracharya 93). In abhaya mudra, the right hand is raised to shoulder height with a bent arm and the face of the palm is facing outward with fingers upright. When the Buddha achieves enlightenment, he becomes one with the universe. There is no distinction between the self and the other. In this state, the feeling of fear is not there.

Akshobhaya Buddha is in bhumisparsha mudra (touching the earth with one hand). This gesture is the symbol of Buddha's awakening as he claims the earth as the witness of his enlightenment (Lopez, 2001). The right hand is on the right knee, fingers touching the lotus throne and the palm facing inward. Akshobhaya Buddha is considered as the heavenly Buddha who reigns over the eastern paradise. By meditating on the name of Akshobhaya Buddha, one can overcome any kind of anger as well as hatred (Lopez, 2001).



Fig.3 Chandra Shyam Dangol. *Chaitya* (southern side). 2010

Vairochana Buddha is considered as the supreme Buddha among Pancha Buddhas. This Buddha is the symbol of sunyata, the oneness of the self and the other or essence of the dharma (Vajracharya 96). In Dangol's sculpture, Vairochana Buddha is invisible since it remains at the center in the combined form of Pancha Buddhas. But in the individual figure, he is in dharmachakra mudra (teaching the law or turning the wheel of law). In this gesture, both hands are held against the chest, the left facing inward, covering the right facing outward. He gave his first sermon in this gesture after he attained enlightenment (Landaw & Weber, 1993). It is believed that if one meditates on Vairochana Buddha, the person becomes able to vanquish ignorance. Various symbols in the Chaitya suggest wisdom, peace and enlightenment.

Chandra Shyam Dangol's Shivalinga (Fig.4) symbolizes the union of Shiva and Shakti. The vertical cylindrical shape has penetrated the circular disc. The work represents the belief that the whole universe is within the Shivalinga, the union of Prakriti and Purusa. It is the united form of individual sadhaka and cosmic being or male and female principles. In the union of Prakriti and Purusa or Shakti and Shiva, all the constituents of the universe become one (Sharma, 2020 ). The duality between the self and the other does not exist.

This is visually depicted through the penetrated disk (yoni) by the Linga (phallus). The individual sadhaka (practitioner) realizes this non-duality through sadhana or meditation. He finds the whole cosmos within himself (167). In the exhibition catalog, Mainali (2007) writes about the significance of Shivalinga:

Art is beauty, and beauty is bliss. Shivalinga, which is beyond beauty and bliss, is the symbol of absolute bliss (paramananda), light, peace and infinity. It has been extended beyond land and sky encompassing every particle of the universe. It is beyond the beginning and the end, and timeless within time. (1) Dangol's work presents the theme of cosmic harmony. The union of Shiva and Shakti encompasses the entire universe. According to Hindu mythology, Shiva represents the male principle or Purusa whereas Shakti represents the female principle or Prakriti, the union of these two forces creates cosmic harmony with continuity of life and world (Brown, 1990). When an individual sadhaka (practitioner of yoga) as Purusa unites oneself with Prakriti or cosmic force through meditation, s/he is supposed to achieve the status of Shiva. He finds himself as Shiva being united with Shakti in cosmic harmony (Hurtado, 1990). The difficulties and obstacles between the individual self and the world are swept away, for s/he finds himself/herself in every part of the world and the whole cosmos within himself/herself (Sharma, 2020).



Fig.4 Chandra Shyam Dangol. *Shivalinga*. 2018

All the constituents of the universe become the integral parts of the Shivalinga. Shivalinga assimilates both erotic and spiritual concepts. Aran (1978) writes about Shivalinga:

Shiva cult in Nepal comes in the form of Lingam (Phallus), which was the early form of Shiva Icon. [T]he Lingam is roughly cylindrical in shape, standing upright on its narrow end and rounded at the top. It usually stands on a flat rimmed disc called yoni being possibly the female symbol. There is an indentation on one side of the yoni, the purpose of which is to drain off the water poured over the Lingam as offering. (p.78)

As in Shivalinga, male and female principles are depicted in the union in the form of Uma and Mahesvara. There is no duality between the individual self and the other, individual soul and the cosmic soul, and you and me. They are the manifestations of the same entity the cosmic being (Brahman). Everything is filled with divine spirit creating unity and oneness in them. About the unity of the individual self and the universal self, Khadka (1995) writes:

It is the self that is supreme, self has a double aspect to it: the individual and the universal self, and they can be expressed diversely: the individual self can be regarded as one's smaller self, the universal self as one's larger self, though essentially, there are no smaller or larger selves. They are one self. Recognition of the unity and universality of the self is one of the major metaphysical ends of Hinduism. There is no duality of subject/object. (p.31)

Khadka (1995) further says that an individual soul identifies with the supreme soul or Brahman. When an individual self or yogi assimilates and identifies oneself with the Brahman or cosmic being, he experiences "one life, one world, one existence" (Vivekananda, 1915). Then the individual self visualizes himself in every image of the world. He finds Brahman within himself, and himself within Brahman. A person becomes all-embracing consciousness which is at once Being and Bliss (Khadka, 1995). Among the various pleasures of this world, "sex as a powerful motivating factor, which, like other passions and

desires can be used rather than suppressed" (Aran, 1978, pp.53-54). In the union, for a transitory moment, the male and the female experience absolute bliss by assimilating themselves in one entity forgetting themselves and the world around them (Rae, 1994). This transitory experience helps the initiator to create the vision of the enlightenment. Dangol's Shivalinga is the symbol of the union of the Shiva and Shakti or the self and the other. His stone sculptures symbolize the spiritual concepts and ideas beyond the presented images.

### **Conclusion**

Chandra Shyam Dangol's stone sculptures symbolize spiritual ideas about the harmonious coexistence of

the self and the other. The characters, figures and images in the artworks suggest beyond themselves. The recurrent symbols are the figures of bodhisattvas, Pancha Buddhas, Shivalinga, sword, lotus, different gestures and postures. Figures of bodhisattvas symbolize wisdom. Lotus symbolizes purity and enlightenment. Shivalinga is the symbol of the union of the self and the cosmic being. These symbols in stone sculptures suggest something else beyond themselves. They take curious viewers toward myths and spiritual ideas. The significance of the symbols is related to the harmonious existence of the individual in the world.

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