

## Significance of Political Symbols

For a society that still depends on cultural symbols for its self-understanding and political articulation, it becomes absolutely necessary to discover or fashion out and rally around images that disseminate such meanings and messages that are filled either with emotion or reason. However, images or cultural symbols that, on an affirmative or positive side, are an embodiment of peace and non-violence would always be considered desirable by those who have a lasting interest in the safety and security of the human community at large. However, the reconfiguration of certain symbols as fierce and violent depends on the politics of those who are seeking such symbolism. This Janus-faced character of certain symbols such as the lion on the national emblem has been succinctly dealt with in a scholarly editorial comment in the current issue of *Economic & Political Weekly*. The editorial comment tends to nudge us to normatively explore—particularly through the Buddhist tradition—those symbols that are an embodiment of the principle of compassion, love, and friendship. As has been already mentioned in it, the *dhamma chakka* or *dhamma chakra* has been a Buddhist symbol with a profound meaning that can offer a definite direction both to the state's use of power with impartiality and hence judiciously and to the individual to develop an attitude of righteousness in being affable with fellow human beings.

The moral quality that the state is supposed to invest in the value of justice and the ethical practice of impartiality would help the “ruler, that is, a *chakkavatti*” to overcome their imperialist ambitions to perpetually bring the world under their control. What is perhaps relevant in today's context is to expect the governing class—or the ruling class in a loose sense of the term—to follow the normative dimension that was integrated into the semantics of the *dhamma chakka* symbolism during the Buddhist epoch.

In the modern times, the symbol of the *chakra* can help us in understanding the egalitarian nature of democracy, particularly parliamentary democracy. It is needless to mention that according to the Indian Constitution, it has become possible for a person to contest in an election and get elected to different legislative bodies. The right to contest and occupy public office is constitutionally guaranteed irrespective of the social background of a person.

The configuration of state power has to follow the democratic principle by which there would be a rotation in the rank of those who are competing to acquire some place at every level in the system of state power. Rotation, in an ideal sense, has to happen in the specific Indian context, across genders, castes, tribes, and

minorities. The rotation that forms the egalitarian dimension of the *chakra* involves inversions, thus pushing some people up and some down the ladder of power. It follows the *chakra* dynamic, according to which every axis of the wheel on the conversion belt goes up but has to come down too. However, the Constitution does not have specific provisions to push down those who have been at the top of the ladder all the time. There are no term restrictions to occupying the topmost public office in India. Moreover, in the Indian parliamentary context, the element of rotation of power through the means of periodic elections can be well undermined by the unethical practices of such power brokers who engineer defections to hold on to political power in perpetuity.

The framers of the Constitution seems to have relied upon the ethical initiative that is to be taken by the power-holders for the ceaseless rotation or circulation of political power. This would ethically imply the following—“I will rule and will be ruled in turn.” Ironically, the *chakra* dynamism and the rotation dimension, which is attendant on the former, have been regularly undermined by the dominant power-seekers who do not want to take the ethical initiative by leaving the position of power once they have enjoyed being there for a stipulated amount of time. These powerful political elites do have what could be termed as a substantive sense of being powerful in controlling political institutions as well as the people's capacity to make political judgments that are favourable to the perpetuation of their dominant power.

Ironically, the power aspirants, particularly from the lower castes and Adivasi communities, have arguably enjoyed only the subsidised satisfaction that is the result of the patronised symbolism of those who control the strings of power. However, to be propelled to the public offices—either through the patronised symbolism of dominant political forces or through the constitutional provisions of affirmative action—has only a symbolic rather than a substantive value. As the experience with the beneficiaries of political reservations shows, reaching to the position of power may be an initial condition but the essential criterion of such a rotation mechanism can have a moral significance only when the power-seekers from historically deprived social sections develop the power of determination to use the constitutionally offered opportunity to assert against the systemic wrongs and direct the state power towards the principle of righteousness—both moral/political as well as constitutional.

