

Symbol Politics in Islamic Republic of Pakistan

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Abstract:

Electoral Symbol is an object which is being printed on ballot papers against the names of contesting candidates in an election. Electoral symbol allotted to a political party or any individual who intend to contest election from any constituency. Electoral symbol plays a very important role in the success of any individual or Political Party. Election symbols depict a party ideology and line of action as embodied in the manifesto of any political party. Sometimes mere selection of unique and easily understandable object as an election symbol paved the way of success for any party or individual. It is also very useful tool to gain the attention of general public and masses begun to follow any party or contesting candidate. This article analyse the role of electoral symbols in the electoral politics of Pakistan and how electoral symbols affect the voting behaviour in electoral politics in Pakistan. The article will also highlight that either any concrete effort was made to materialised the message associated with electoral symbol after getting power or these electoral symbols were remain printed on ballot paper and have no use after getting stamp of nine holes.

Keywords: *Symbol, Party ideology, emotions, elections, political parties, impact, results*

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INTRODUCTION

The desire to rule over fellow human beings has been a recurring theme throughout history, often stemming from a variety of motives and ambitions. This aspiration for power and control has been observed in various contexts, such as politics, social structures, and psychological perspectives. History is replete with examples of individuals and empires seeking dominion over others. The relationship between power and politics is interlinked and determined many factors around it.

Niccolò Machiavelli explores the acquisition, maintenance, and use of political power. He highlights the desire for rulers to maintain authority, which often involves controlling others and consolidating power.¹ Hobbes argues that human beings have an innate desire for power and domination due to the state of nature. The struggle for power arises from the need for self-preservation.² Rousseau proposed that the desire to rule others comes from the establishment of societal structures where individuals seek power to protect their own interests within a community. Various psychological theories, such as those by Alfred Adler or Sigmund Freud, suggest that the desire for power and control is rooted in deep-seated psychological needs. Individuals may seek power to compensate for feelings of inadequacy or to satisfy an inherent need for dominance.³ The relationship between power and politics is a fundamental aspect of social organization and governance.

¹ Niccolò Machiavelli, *"The Prince"*, (London Grant Richard, Leicester Squire, 1903),p,45.

² Thomas Hobbs, *"Leviathan, The Matter, Forme and Power of a Common Wealth"*, (Oxford High Street, 1881),p,73.

³ Sigmund Freud, *"Civilization and Its Discontents"*, (Prabhat Prakashan, New Dehli ,1962),p,89.

Power plays a crucial role in shaping political structures, decision-making processes, and the distribution of resources.

Machiavelli's seminal work delves into the relationship between power and politics. It discusses the strategies and tactics necessary for rulers to gain, maintain, and expand their control in political settings. The relationship between power and politics is intricate and multifaceted. Power is inherent in political structures and decision-making processes. Historical examples, theoretical frameworks, and practical observations all emphasize the interconnectedness of power and politics. Understanding this relationship involves exploring various historical, theoretical, and practical dimensions of how power operates within political systems and influences societal organization and governance.⁴

Politics can be defined as the process and activities associated with governance, decision-making, and the distribution of power and resources within a given society. It involves the competition, cooperation, and negotiation among individuals, groups, and institutions to determine how a community, state, or nation is governed and how public policies are formulated and implemented. Politics encompasses various aspects, including the exercise of authority, the creation of laws, the management of conflicts, and the articulation of diverse interests and ideologies within a social or governmental framework. Ultimately, it is the arena where power,

⁴ Niccolo Machiavelli, "*The Prince*", (London Grant Richard, Leicester Squire, 1903),p,34.

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influence, and governance intersect, shaping the structure and functioning of societies at local, national, and international levels.⁵

Politics is one of the oldest methods in running the states and sometimes affairs of the state. Contesting election is one of the most popular methods of gaining power and controlling the statecraft in any country. Elections are the complex event reflecting the general will of the human collectivity inhabiting a particular country.⁶ Election is as old as the ancient civilization of Greece. International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences reveals about elections first taking a central place in politics in Greek city state of eastern Mediterranean in the fifth and sixth centuries B.C.⁷ There were many methods of balloting vote in favor or against any decision settled down by election. The Athenians voted by show of hands, and used pebbles when secrecy of ballot was required particularly in the case of ostracizing somebody. The Spartans recorded their vote with a shout and sometimes by the clashing of spears in shields. Sometimes the leader of the assembly held his informal position because of the support lent to them by the majority.⁸ It is noted that the Athenians generally used voting to elect such individuals for the specialized fields, such as military leadership. In ancient Rome, decision in legislation and in choosing the principal officials was made by

⁵ "Politics." *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, s.v. "politics," accessed November 6, 2023,

<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/politics>.

⁶ Tahir Kamran, "*Election Commission of Pakistan: Role in Politics*", (South Asia Partnership Pakistan, 2009),p,7.

⁷ W.J.M Mackenzie, Elections in *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, Vol,5, edited by David.L.Sills (New York, The Macmillan Company & The Free Press, 1972),p,3.

⁸ Tahir Kamran, "*Election Commission of Pakistan: Role in Politics*", (South Asia Partnership Pakistan, 2009),p,8.

a plurality of centuries or by a plurality of tribes. One man one vote prevailed within each of these constituencies but units varied in size. In the Roman republic coated slips of wood served as ballot papers.⁹ In the era of rapid change from 17th century onward, the complete independence of kings had become largely a saga of the past. Hence the consultation with the feudal council and then by the representative of the other interest group has to be sought by the person at the helm. These developments subsequently formed the basis of the parliamentary traditions in Europe. Such a great events like Magna Carta in 1215,¹⁰ and thereafter Glorious Revolution in 1688,¹¹ and the socio-economic impact engendered by the Industrial Revolution went a long way to undermine the tradition of absolute rule in England.¹² In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when the assemblies of States were substituted by autocratic modernizing monarchies, England held on to the elections in the face of formidable challenges. In the nineteenth century, three broad trends could be discerned in the evolution of the electoral system in the democratic politics. First broadening the right of franchise, second equalizing the basis of representation in the government and third was standardizing the electoral procedure.¹³

⁹ Will Durant, *"The Story of Civilization, The Life of Greece"*, (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1966),p,123.

¹⁰ Winston.S.Churchill, *"A History of English Speaking Peoples, The Birth of Britain"*, vol.1, (London, Dodd, Mead & Company, 1980), p,133.

¹¹ Winston.S.Churchill, *"A History of English Speaking Peoples, The Birth of Britain"*, vol.1, (London, Dodd, Mead & Company, 1980), p,133.

¹² Tahir Kamran, *"Election Commission of Pakistan: Role in Politics"*, (South Asia Partnership Pakistan, 2009),p,10.

¹³ Ibid

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The representative institutions in India owe their origin after the war of independence when the new ruler of India introduced Indian Council Act of 1861. Legislative Councils were set up initially where a small number of Indian found a niche how so ever marginal it had been. Those Indian legislators were nominated and belonged to the upper strata of the society like the big landlords, retired officials of East India Company and Princes of Indian States.¹⁴ Nevertheless the Indian Council Act served as an initial step that subsequently set in motion an evolutionary process, culminating into a democratic set up from 1883 onward when Lord Ripon created representative local governments at District and Tehsil level.¹⁵ Ironically the representative institutions were just only served as advisory body rather than making policies.¹⁶ Hence holding of the elections in colonial period was strictly controlled affair and this colonial policy is being followed in letter and spirit. The right of franchise was based on property and educational qualifications. It is pertinent to note here that the Hindus, being economically and educationally more advanced than the Muslims, managed to clinch majority in voting process.¹⁷ After the creation of Pakistan, the Parliamentary system was run without holding a single general election for initial nine years of political history of Pakistan. The two national parliaments were come into existence indirectly by the provincial assemblies. The Provincial Assembly elections were held in

¹⁴ Syed Razi Wasti, "*Muslim Struggle for Freedom in British India*", (Lahore, Book Traders, 1993),p,48.

¹⁵ Vincent.A.Smith, "*The Oxford History of India*", (Karachi, Oxford University Press, 2001), p,689.

¹⁶ Andrew.R.Wilder, "*The Pakistani Voter: Electoral Politics and Voting Behaviour in Punjab*", (Karachi, Oxford University Press, 1999), p,4.

¹⁷ Tahir Kamran, "*Election Commission of Pakistan: Role in Politics*", (South Asia Partnership Pakistan, 2009),p,14.

Punjab in 1951 and North West Frontier Province and in 1953 Sindh Assembly elections were held and in 1954 election took place in East Bengal, forming the basis of national Legislature.

Election symbols as a guide for illiterate voters, many countries, including Pakistan, South Africa, Italy, India, the Bahamas, Egypt, Singapore, Thailand, and, formerly, many US states printed a party or candidate symbol next to the candidate's name. These symbols, which may be complex logos of simple pictures of everyday objects, are prominently displayed in the election materials of candidates, and become the one of the most important parts of their branding. While symbols are frequently mentioned in ethnographic accounts of elections,¹⁸

Symbols, particularly everyday objects can have an emotive appeal to voters, and different groups of voters may be attracted by different symbols. Candidates, moreover, may find symbols that have some tie to their personality or platform especially effective. The right way for candidates to choose symbols thus varies both across constituencies and across candidates. While political parties are permanently assigned symbols by the election commission, independent candidates apply for a symbol from a list of available ones, giving their top three choices. When multiple independent candidates choose the same symbol, a drawing of lots determines the winner.

In many democracies, political parties or candidates must include election symbols next to their names on the ballot. These symbols are intended as

¹⁸ Mukulika Banerji, "*Why India Votes?*", (London, Routledge,2015), p,120

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an aid for voters incapable of reading candidate names, though the policy has persisted in democracies with high levels of literacy. These symbols are assigned or chosen before the election, and politicians often make these symbols a central part of their election campaign.

Symbols are potentially much more evocative signifiers than ballot order. In the case of established political parties, they may become associated with traditions of electoral success, or with specific policies. Even symbols with no past electoral use may convey information to voters. The Italian Christian Democrat's cross symbol, for instance, conveyed a message about the relationship between the party and the Catholic Church. In these situations, voters are using symbols to infer candidate ideology and qualifications in much the same way they might use party identification or candidate occupation when those are listed on the ballot.¹⁹

However, even pictures of everyday objects may convey similar semiotic content. A lantern, for instance, may convey images of light and enlightenment, guidance and leadership. Voters may use these symbols to infer candidate's ideology or qualifications even when they symbol assignment have only a limited relationship to their actual traits.²⁰

Political parties or candidates generally choose symbols that have positive connotations for voters: Strength, competence, benevolence etc. Which symbols carry such connotations, of course, varies from culture to culture, and from constituency to constituency, so the choices of candidates should

¹⁹ Damon M Cann, "*Party Identification and Vote Choice in Partisan and Nonpartisan Election*", (2015, *Political Behavior* 37 (1)), p, 43-66.

²⁰ Louise Riis Villadsen, "*Ballot Position and Election Results: Evidence from a Natural Experiment*", (2016, *Electoral Studies*), p, 172-183

vary spatially, unlike the strategic responses of candidates to ballot position. At a minimum, candidates should favor goods which are familiar to voters, in order to maximize the number of voters making inferences based on the symbol, or to make the candidate seem more familiar to voters.²¹

The informational effect of symbols may be stronger where it echoes existing information about the candidate. A farmer candidate, for instance, can reinforce his image as a farmer by choosing a plough as a symbol, while the same choice by a non-farmer would seem random. To the extent possible, candidates should thus choose symbols that represent some aspect of themselves and their ideology, even when the symbols have no explicit political relevance. Symbols should influence vote choice, candidates should choose symbols that are common within their constituencies, and that candidates should choose symbols that are reflective of their own appeal and aspirations.

Election symbols, like other aspects of ballot structure, have a small but appreciable effect on vote choice, with candidates winning their favorite symbols winning significantly more votes than those that do not. Note that this is very probably an underestimate of the potential effect of symbols. In addition, many of the most attractive symbols are presumably chosen by political parties. The results suggest that more study of the role of visual culture in politics may be warranted.

²¹ Saad Gulzar, “How Campaign Respond to Ballot Position: A New Mechanism for Order Effects”, (2002, Southern Political Science Association) *The Journal of Politics*, Vol 84, No 2.

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Unlike with other elements of ballot structure, the nature of what constitutes a good symbol varies from constituency to constituency and from candidate to candidate, with candidates choosing symbols likely to be familiar to themselves and to their voters, and that project their own willingness to pay for votes. This indicates that candidates are strategically responding to the behavioral heuristics of voters, attempting to maximize the degree to which “irrational” elements of voter’s decision calculus benefit them. To the extent that these choices contain meaningful information about candidate type, symbols, and images more generally, may in fact be a more reasonable decision heuristic for voters than others commonly in use. Future research may wish to focus on the way images are chosen to signal the policy and personality of candidates.

Political symbols demonstrate ownership and authority, but also direct and maintain shared yet possibly contested meanings in the public space. There are two dynamics of political symbols as a form of meaning making: intentions and impact. The second dimension explored will be the ways in which these symbols can be used to demarcate landscapes, imbuing them with specific meaning, again paying particular attention to the intended meanings and audiences and how these contrast with their practical outreach. The working definition of political symbols being used refers specifically to their physical manifestations. These can include flags, monuments, memorials, and also commemorative acts and political performances during which political symbols are re-evaluated/redesigned, politicised or put into action to rally identities. It would be interested in politics of symbols from the moment of their inception and design to their actual, and various, uses. The symbols under investigations may also be used for violent ends, to provoke confrontation or fear. It may, for

example, look at the politics of commissioning of such symbols and sites, investigate debates about their political purpose and/or artistic value, or explore the emergence of alternative and dissonant symbols. It may look at the commissioning and designing political symbols, where tensions between concerns over aesthetic values versus political intentions emerge.²²

Studies of political symbolism and symbolic action fall into two competing traditions: that of meanings, which emphasizes the positive role symbols play in the integration of society, and that of masters, which stresses the use of political symbols in manipulation. While each of these frameworks contributes an important perspective to the analysis of political symbolism.²³

In the January 1965 presidential election, Ayub Khan chose the rose as his electoral symbol as he went into battle with the elderly Fatima Jinnah. If Ayub's supporters thought the rose would give off a mesmerizing scent for the country, Ms. Jinnah's supporters had a more literary idea. They chose for her the lantern, a powerful suggestion that Pakistan was in need not so much of the rose as of light in every hearth and every home. By that reasoning, the Ayub darkness could be put to flight by Fatima Jinnah's luminosity. Ayub Khan's rose carried the day in however questionable a manner, but the lantern had conveyed its message to the electorate.²⁴ If

²² W.J.M Mackenzie, Elections in *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, Vol,5, edited by David.L.Sills (New York, The Macmillan Company & The Free Press, 1972),p,5.

²³ Symbol of Democratic Ideals, *The Nation*, Lahore, July 9, 2009.

²⁴ Sharif Al Mujahid, "Pakistan's first Presidential Elections", (Asian Survey, Volume 5, Issue 6) 286-87.

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Ayub's supporters thought the rose would give off a mesmerizing scent for the country as the fragrance of prosperity and development, Ms. Fatima Jinnah's supporters had a more literary idea. They chose for her the lantern, a powerful suggestion that Pakistan was in need not so much of the rose as of light in every hearth and every home. By that reasoning, the Ayub darkness could be put to flight by Fatima Jinnah's luminosity. Ayub Khan's rose carried the day in however questionable a manner, but the lantern had conveyed its message to the electorate.²⁵

The boat, 'nouka' as we know it, has consistently been a representation of the Awami League, a symbol which certainly is in tune with Bangladesh's nature. In a land crisscrossed by rivers and possessed of poetry resting on endless paeans to the boat, to a crossing of the river, it is only proper that this traditional mode of transport will serve as the motif of the party's politics.²⁶ Zulfikar Ali Bhutto needed to give out a more pungent message to the people, which is when the sword became an important symbol for his Pakistan People's Party. Initially PPP was interested in symbol of Riffle, which was not available in the list of electoral symbols and then opted for the symbol of Sword²⁷ inspired by the sword of Hazrat Ali which was named like Bhutto "Zulfiqar" and he also threatened his opponent with his electoral symbol sword while addressing to his followers, laborers, farmers and poor faction of society, that "I have given you sword to kill the

²⁵ Maya Tudor, *"The Promise of Power: The Origins of Democracy in India and Autocracy in Pakistan"*, Cambridge University, Cambridge, 2013, p, 21.

²⁶ GW Chaudhar, *"The Last Days of United Pakistan"*, Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd, 1974, p, 213

²⁷ Kausar Niazi, *"Deedah-i-ver ki Dastaan-i-Hayat: Zulfikar Ali Bhutto"*, Lahore: Ahmad Ali Publications, 2015 p,143

opponent”²⁸ the predominantly the most dangerous opponent that was their own fear with the power of vote and instigate them “Parchi ko Barchhi Bnao”²⁹ thereby mean that beat them with the power of your vote.

Before the 1988 election, Pakistan Peoples Party insisted on its well known and well accepted election symbol of Sword. But Election Commission of Pakistan had already dropped the symbol of Sword and Plough from the list of electoral symbols. The party appealed to the President and filed a case in the Supreme Court, but ECP’s decision was maintained and PPP contested the elections on its new electoral symbol of Arrow. The party opted for the symbol of Arrow, as it was comparatively close to its previous symbol of Sword. The symbol was prominently displayed in public meetings, party posters and advertisements as well. It was also printed on the tri-color party flag. Benazir Bhutto frequently referred to the symbol in her campaign speeches. The party coined a new slogan. “Zalem-o ke dil may teer, Benazir”, (The arrow in the heart of the tyrants, Benazir Bhutto) to popularize the newly allotted symbol.³⁰ Since the electoral symbol of arrow is being used in the elections as Party Symbol.

The Supreme Court verdict on party-based elections spoiled the existing scheme and posed a serious challenge. Anti-PPP forces responded hastily though assembling anti-PPP forces on common political platform of Islami Jamhoori Itihad.³¹ IJI decided to contest the elections on common symbols

²⁸ Aslam Gurdaspuri, “*Zulfiqar Ali Bhutti ki Dastan-e-Hayat aur Pakistan Peoples Party*”, Fiction House Lahore, 2010, p, 465

²⁹ Ibid, p, 440

³⁰ Benazir Bhutto, “*Daughter of the East*”, Hamish Hamiltan, 1989, p, 323

³¹ Ishtiaq Ahmad, “*Pakistan The Garrison State*”, Oxford University Press Karachi, 2013, p, 281

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and opted for the symbol of “Bicycle”. It was the symbol of Muslim League (Convention) in the 1970 elections. It was a vehicle of the poor and a commonly known object People could easily relate to it. The symbol had also an economic linkage. In the electoral history of Pakistan, the symbol of “Bicycle” is closely linked with the King’s party and pro-establishment factions of Muslim League in different elections. IJI’s electoral symbol bicycle was prominently displayed, even during rallies.³²

In 1990 elections, Symbols were allocated to 48 political parties while others got rejected due to the eligibility criteria. Most of the leading political alliances and parties were allotted the symbols of their choice. People’s Democratic Alliance, (PDA, a four party alliance led by the ruling Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) of Benazir Bhutto), opted for the symbol of “Arrow” and IJI retained the symbol of “Bicycle”. ANP, JUI(F) and PDP retained their respective symbols of “Lantern”, ”Book” and”Umbrella”. MQM opted for the symbol of ”Kite” for the 1990 elections and Pakistan Awami Tehreek opted for the symbol of “Clock”. Some smaller political parties received their old symbols, while some received new ones.³³ The retention of old symbols by major political parties and alliances facilitated their voters to recognize the symbol of party of his/her choice easily and thus facilitated their campaign.

In 1993 elections, the ECP deleted six seemingly identical symbols from the list and added twenty new electoral symbols, all in all 96 electoral symbols were available. The ECP invited applications for allocations of

³² Rahat Zubair Malik, *“Politics of Alliances: A Case Study of Islami Jamhoori Ittehad(IJI)”*, Islamabad: Quaid-i-Azam University, History Department, 2011, p, 98

³³ ECP, *Report on the General Elections 1990*, p, 117-119

symbols and ninety political parties including fifteen non-Muslim political parties submitted their applications. ECP issued electoral symbols to political parties.³⁴ A major controversy emerged on the symbol of “Bicycle” as four political parties, including two factions of Pakistan Muslim League, Pakistan Islamic Front and JUP (Niazi) applied for it. The ECP rejected claims of latter two parties, and accepted the claims of Muslim League factions. It allotted the symbol of Bicycle to PML (Junejo) as a result of drawing of lots according to the rules of the ECP. PML (N) had submitted no second preference.³⁵ Later the Secretary General of Party Sartaj Aziz opted for the symbol of “Tiger” for the elections.³⁶

PPP retained its symbol of “Arrow”, ANP retained “Lantern” and Haq Parsat Group (MQM) retained “Kite”. IJM was allocated “Book” and NDA “Umbrella” due to the presence of JUI (F), PDP in two newly created alliances. PIF opted for the symbol of “Car” and MDM allocated the symbol of “Ladder”.³⁷

In 1997 election, a great number of the political parties submitted their applications for the allocation of party symbols. The ECP allocated sixty-four electoral symbols to political parties for the Muslim seats and 15 for the non-Muslim political parties. The minorities remained segregated from mainstream politics through maintenance of the separate electorate. Even mainstream political parties maintained their distance from the politics of

³⁴ ECP, *Report on General Elections 1993*, p, 143-145

³⁵ Annexure B, Chapter18, ECP. *Report on General Elections 1993*, p, 165-169.

³⁶ ECP, *Report on General Elections 1993*, p, 147.

³⁷ ECP, *Report on General Elections 1993*, p, 144.

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minority.³⁸ The major political parties in the election maintained their election symbols as they were allotted in the last elections.³⁹ No major conflict was observed regarding the allocation of election symbol. The remaining elections more or less were held with the same electoral symbols.

Conclusion

In Pakistan a significant portion of the population is either illiterate or unable to read and write. This major portion of the population is spread over the rural areas and even in urban area as well where education facilities are scarce. The poor population of these neglected areas spends their lives hands to mouth and is unable to afford sending their children to schools and colleges, which ultimately increase the ratio of illiteracy in the country. So it is aptly said that majority of the electorates are unable to read or identify the names of candidates of their choice on ballot paper without bearing the election symbols. This significant portion of the electorate cannot be ignored merely for reason of being illiterate. To exclude this portion of the population from the franchise is to infringe upon their right to vote. In order to enhance and provide equal right of franchise to the illiterate, aged as well as those people whose level of understanding is low, the electoral symbol is used in election process. To facilitate the identity of a candidate for such electors, a picture of a familiar object is being printed on the ballot paper against the name of each contesting candidate. The candidate run their election campaign on the basis of pictorial symbol,

³⁸ *Commonwealth Observer*, p, 12.

³⁹ Anwar H. Saiyed, "*Pakistan in 1997: Nawaz Sharif's Second Chance to Govern*," Asian Survey 38, no. 2 (Feb 1998), p, 118.

which itself is a source of publicity and has great effect on the public mind thus enabling the voters to have easy access to the candidates of their choice. An election symbol is such a universally accepted tool which helps the electors in identifying their candidates and in marking the ballot without any difficulty. The candidates also find it convenient to reach out to the electorate during campaign period by using election symbol allotted to them. Thus the process of allocation of election symbols to political parties and the candidates becomes critical in an election. In country like Pakistan, an election symbol is not merely a tool of election process but a lot of controversies are also attached with it. Sometime a specific election symbol becomes a bone of contention between the political parties or the candidates. Pakistan has witnessed many disputes arising out of allotment of election symbols. It is also a major weapon into the hands of election commission to play its unconstitutional role against any political party or candidates our history is replete with such examples. A wisely chosen and easily understandable election symbol plays a pivotal role in the success of any political party or individual.