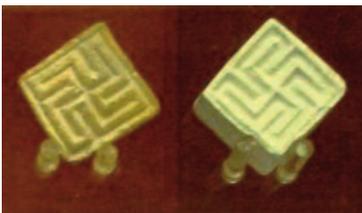


The Ancient symbol of Swastika, its distortion, uses and misuses

By Sekhar Chakrabarti

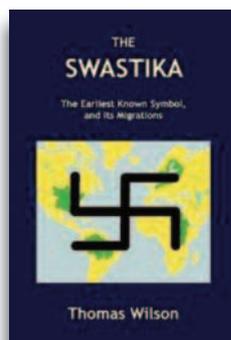
The Swastika



The Swastika is one of (if not) the oldest symbols in the world. Its reference in India dates back to Vedic period, i.e. 3000 – 2500 BC. Relics found in India dating back to Mohenjo-Daro period have the emblem of Swastika on them. Many scholars say that the symbol is even older.

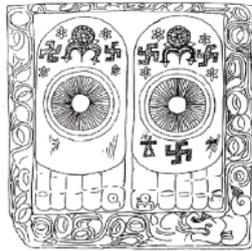
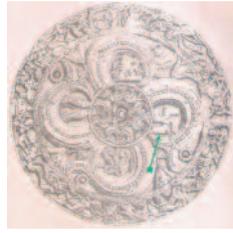
<< Seals of the Indus Valley Civilization. also showing Swastikas. British Museum. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:IndusValleySeals.JPG>

< The Swastika: The Earliest Known Symbol & Its Migrations (Symbolon Press, 2010), originally published in 1896, under the auspices of the erstwhile U S National Museum (now the Smithsonian).



According to Thomas Wilson who participated in the excavation of an Indian burial mound in Ohio 1890s where several large copper swastikas were discovered. *The swastika symbol occurs in Mesopotamia and India as early as 8000 years ago, and prolifically on artifacts unearthed at the site of ancient Troy. It also appears on hundreds of Greek ceramic objects of the Geometric period, dating between the tenth and seventh centuries BC. Its use by indigenous peoples along the Mississippi and Amazon Rivers before 300 AD has raised serious questions about a possible diffusion from Eurasia. How or when this may have occurred, however, has never been established, nor has the underlying significance of the swastika ever been fully understood. The front cover illustration is from the book "Tree of Life, Mythical Archetype" by Gregory Haynes. Haynes was the first to observe that the four largest rivers on the four continents bordering the Atlantic Ocean (the Nile, Amazon, Mississippi, and Baltic) stand in relation to each other as do the outer arms of an enormous swastika. In "Tree of Life, Mythical Archetype" he persuasively argues that ancient navigators mapped these four rivers and derived the swastika from them.*

The Swastika symbolizes light or the god of light, forked lightning, rain and water. It is a mark of good fortunes to the Hindus, Jains and Buddhists. Swastika (Sanskrit: Svastika), is derived from the Sanskrit word svasti (sv = well; asti = is), meaning good fortune, luck and well-being. It is a cross with four arms of equal length, with the ends of each arm bent at a right angle. Sometimes dots are added between each arm. It is a symbol connoting general auspiciousness. It represents purity of soul, truth, and stability or, alternatively, Surya - the sun. Its rotation in four directions has been used to represent many ideas, but primarily describes the four directions, the four Vedas and their harmonious whole. The symbol imitates in the rotation of its arms the course taken daily by the sun, H.J.D. Astley in the "Swastika: A study (The Quest, 1925) wrote; 'Swastika represents the constant movement of the sun, and the course of the



sun in the heaven revolving normally from left to right' It represents Brahma, Vishnu and Siva – Creator, Preserver, Destroyer..

In the Buddhist tradition, Swastika is referred to as "The Seal on Buddha's Heart". In Japanese and Chinese Buddha images, a Swastika often appears on the chest of Gautama Buddha.

< Swastika-patta, Tablet of Homage carved with a Swastika, Mathura, from the Jaina Kankali Tila at Mathura. About 1st century A.D. now preserved in Lucknow Museum. (Agrawala, fig53)

<< Limestone panel depicting the Buddhapada (footprints of the Buddha). Great Stupa at Amaravati, Guntur District, Andhra Pradesh, India, 1st century BC © The Trustees of the British Museum

Buddha-pada (feet of Buddha), carved on a rectangular slab. The margin of the slab was carved with scroll of acanthus and rosettes. The foot-print shows important symbols like tri-ratna, svastika, srivatsa, ankusa and elliptical objects, meticulously carved in low-relief. From Amaravati, Andhra Pradesh, being assignable on paleographical grounds to circa 1st century B.C --2nd century AD,

< Buddhapada from Amaravati. British Museum, No. 1880.7 — 9.43. After Chutiwongs 1990, pl. 1

<http://www.apmae.es/pdfs/doc20103.pdf> (page29)

The footprints of the Buddha are one of the early representations of the Buddha in the anti-conic (no statues) stage of Buddhist art.

Many coins and seals of ancient India carry the Swastika

< Yola, silver drachm, early type c. 125-150 CE. Swastika right, Brahmi legend around.

In the Buddhist tradition of India, it is referred to as "The Seal on Buddha's Heart". In Japanese and Chinese Buddha images, a swastika often appears on the chest of Gautama Buddha.

Demand for 'Swastika' on the National Flag of Independent India

During the Constituent Assembly 'Flag Debates' on 22nd July 1947, less than a month before gaining independence when India adopted her National flag, When Asoka Chakra was proposed for the Indian Flag, H.V. Kamath, a prominent member had demanded the 'Swastika', the ancient Indian symbol be inscribed on the centre wheel of the proposed flag. "I thought that this Flag, being the Flag of our new Indian Republic, of Bharatavarsha, should adequately symbolise our ancient culture, the culture of our spirit, the spirit which has animated our sages and our seers, which gave the message of Satyam, Shivam, Sundaram (truth is eternal and beautiful), to the world, the message of peace, the peace not merely of stillness, not merely a passive peace, but a dynamic peace that passeth all understanding, the peace of which the great Valmiki has sung (Samudraiva gambirye dhairyecha himavaniva). I thought, if the Swastika be inscribed inside the Chakra it would along with the Dharma Chakra of Asoka fittingly symbolise our ancient culture, that is to say, the esoteric and esoteric

aspects of our culture. The Dharma Chakra symbolises the esoteric and the Swastika symbolises the esoteric aspects. But, I have now seen the flag and I find that it is somewhat hard to fit the Swastika into this Chakra”.

In Poona (Pune) members of a political outfit (RSS, considered to be Hindu fundamentalists) outraged with the acceptance of partition of India and creation of the new state of Pakistan for the Muslims, raised on independence day - instead of the new national flag of India - a Saffron flag charged with the traditional Swastika symbol in protest.



Uses of Swastika in Social, Religious and cultural events

This widely used symbol of auspices can be seen on temples, houses, doorways, clothing, and in 'N' numbers of objects and artifacts. It is commonly used as a charm to bring good fortune but it has a variety of religious meanings as well. It is also a major part of the decoration for festivals and ceremonies

< Swastika banner being hung for an Indian wedding, Mumbai.

<< Swastika rangoli (decoration welcoming visitors to a home)



The left-hand Swastika (called a Sauvastika) usually represents the goddess Kali, night and magic. However, this form of the Swastika according to Hindu iconography is also not "evil" and this form also not uncommon in Buddhists iconography.



< Swastika in ornamentation of a postage stamp.

Swastika: The Globetrotting Symbol

The symbol of Swastika is a part of the ethos of ancient India that has been found worldwide. No one will argue that the Swastika was in any manner the monopoly of India alone. This is not the exclusive possession of any one community or country; it belonged to the whole people.



< The House flag of the Scindia Steam Navigation Company, established in 1919. Following the global shipping slump of the 1980s, Scindia S.N. Co. gradually closed down and sold off its fleet.

Swastika banners are also freely waved in Suriname, Guyana and the Caribbean by the citizens of Indian origins.

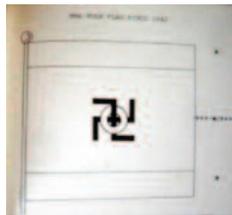
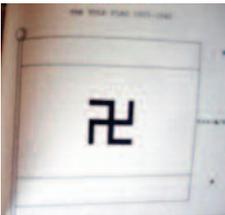
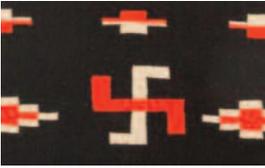
The Great Council (Guyana Sanatana Dharam Maha Sabha) - the leading Hindu organization's flag.



< The squarish flag divided horizontally white over bright orange with the organisation's badge - a Swastika in dark green superimposed in the centre. Source: The flag Bulletin , July-August 1982, p.131

It is believed that from India the symbol of Swastika travelled to central Asia, Persia, Greece, Italy and to Germany. Jewish synagogues in North Africa had Swastikas on their walls.





As stated earlier, Swastika motif is also widely in use by Native Americans since time immemorial. The Symbolic connotation may not be the same from one tribe to another and across the culture groups of North America. The Swastika symbol featured in the ancient Mississippian culture of the Mound Builders in North America. The Mound Builders associated great mystical value to the swastika and the sacred rites, myths and symbols of the Mississippians play a role in the beliefs of many Native American tribes, viz Navajos. Source; <http://www.warpaths2peacepipes.com/native-american-symbols/swastika-symbol.htm>

< <http://nativeamericanjewelrytips.wordpress.com/2010/06/10/native-american-symbol-whirling-log-swastika/>

Swastika Flag in Panama

The Tule Indians live on the islands scattered along the coast of Panama, from Gulf of Blas to Columbia. James Marill tells us (The Flag Bulletin, XXI: 6/97. P.195) that Richard O. Marsh an American helped the Tule to have a "Tule Territory" as a reservation under an "American of high character". In order to gain the sympathies of America and the rest of the world, Marsh helped to write a Tule Declaration of Independence. In 1925 the Tule community raised their new Flag at El Porvenir. According Clyde Keeler; the sacred Swastika (Kikir in Tule word) represents the tree of life turning in the water of life, as seen from above. It is a symbol of the birthing of the world by the Earth-mother. Kikir also means Octopus. In 1942 an American scout plane from the Canal Zone spotted the Tule flag flying in the islands and thought Nazis had landed in Panama. The plane swept down and clipped of the top of the flagpole with its wing. After that incident tribal nose-ring was superimposed over the Swastika, because Germans do not wear nose ring. The Tule flag is now reserved for ceremonies.

The Hakenkreuz : Swastika in Germany

In the 1830s German archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann found artifacts with Swastikas near Dardanelles resembling those he had found near the Oder River in Germany and proclaimed it to be an ancient German symbol. By, 1914, during the WW-I, the Wandervogel, a militarist German youth movement, made it a national emblem.

Steven Heller, the art director of The NY Times Book Review, writes in "The Swastika: Symbol Beyond Redemption?" "Schlieman presumed that the Swastika was a religious symbol of his German ancestors which linked ancient Teutons, Homeric Greeks and Vedic India." This book presents an exploration of the meaning, mysteries, and misunderstanding of the most powerful symbol in the history of mankind. The book analyzes the swastika's pre-Nazi religious and commercial uses in all of its varied permutations, the Nazi appropriation and misuses of the form, and its contemporary applications as both a racist and an apolitical icon. Tracing the symbol to its beginnings in antiquity, the author explores the myth and cult of swastika lore and its evolving use as a commercial trademark and logo, then speculates on the future of the symbol.

There are many other books published on Swastika symbolism by historians of repute, like Malcomn Quinn's "The Swastika: Constructing the Symbol". This book examines the role that the swastika played in the construction of the Aryan myth in the



nineteenth century, and its use in Nazi ideology as a symbol of party, nation and race, treating it as symbolic phenomenon in a cultural context.

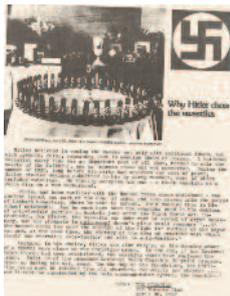
The Hakenkreuz : Swastika became a Hatred Symbol



< In 1920, the Nazis claimed it for themselves. A dentist Friedrich Krohn redesigned the emblem reversing its arms to make them appear clockwise. *The 'Hakenkreuz' flag of the NSDAP (Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeitspartei) combined the socialist red with two other colours of pre-war Germany. (Alfred Znamierowski, p.243). It was held that the red and white was symbolical of the commercial strength of the nation, while the black and white represented the armed might on which that prosperity depended. (EMC Barraclough, p.135). The Nazis adopted the Swastika because it was understood as an Aryan symbol indicating racial purity and superiority. The main difference between the Nazi swastika and the ancient auspicious symbol of various religious cultures, is that the Nazi swastika is at a slant.*



< The Nazis propagated a historical theory in which the early Aryans of India were white invaders. There may also be a connection with the Swastika's magical connections, for Hitler and other Nazi leaders were keenly interested in the occult. *"As National Socialists, we see our program in our flag. In red we see the social idea of the movement; in white, the nationalistic idea; in the Swastika, the mission of the struggle for the victory of the Aryan man, and, by the same token, the victory of the idea of creative work."* Wrote Adolf Hitler in Mein Kampf.



<< In 1935, the Reichstag unanimously decided that the Reich and National flag was the 'Hakenkreuz' flag. (EMC Barraclough, p.135). After the end of the WW II, the Allied Control Commission formally banned all Nazi insignia from Germany.



< Flag of the German American Bund (AV) - a pre-World War II American Nazi organization active in the United States between 1933 and 1941. The German American Bund (Amerikadeutscher Volksbund) was an American Nazi organization established in the 1930s. Its main goal was to promote a favorable view/support of Nazi Germany.



< The Parti National Social Chretien, a political party, later known, as the Canadian National Socialist Unity Party or National Unity Party founded in Canada, from 1933 (1934 ?) to 1938 also had a similar blue flag charged with a slant red Swastika on the white disc. The party was identified with Nazism, and anti-Semitism. An American book "Imperfect Justice", depicting the Swiss flag overlaid with a Swastika made of gold bars has caused outrage in Switzerland.



< In January 2003, a Zurich lawyer filed criminal charges against the former US deputy treasury secretary Stuart Eizenstat, when he published a book, entitled "Imperfect Justice", about the struggle of Holocaust survivors to reclaim their assets. The Swiss government wanted publication stopped, but historians who studied Switzerland's wartime past are divided over whether the cover accurately represents history. Eizenstat later told the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation that he had nothing to apologise for, since the Swiss National Bank had processed Nazi gold during the war. http://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/archive/New_book_reopens_old_wounds.html?cid=3076326

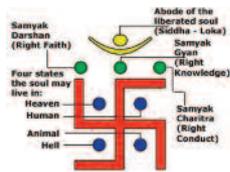


< In January 2005, Prince Harry of Britain received flak world-wide when he was photographed at a fancy-dress party in Nazi African Korps uniform complete with a red Swastika armband just days before Holocaust Memorial Day. The ensuing uproar forced Harry to issue an apology to the Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth.

<< The Falun Gong of China also used the Indian style of the Swastika emblem. Falun Gong or Falun Dafa (literally means "Dharma Wheel Practice" or "Law Wheel Practice") is a spiritual discipline first introduced in China in 1992 through public lectures by its founder, Li Hongzhi.

The Swastika on Jain Flag

In 1975 the Jain Flag featuring the Swastika was adopted by all sects of Jainism while commemorating the 2500th anniversary of the nirvana of Lord Mahaveera.



< There is the swastika in the centre of the flag. It represents the four states of existence of life. The three dots above the swastika represent the Ratnatraya or "three jewels" of Jainism: Samyak darshan "Right Faith", Samyak Gyan "Right Knowledge", and Samyak Charitra "Right Conduct".

< Ananda Marga is a global spiritual, religious and social service organization founded in 1955. The symbol of Ananda Marga is called Pratik (emblem). The pratik is composed of two interconnected triangles where one points upwards and the other points downwards. This geometrical shape is also found the Anahata Chakra. The Pratik is a symbol that expresses a universal ideology of Self-Realization and service to humanity. The swastika - Signifies personal victory, in the sense of spiritual fulfillment and salvation.



In the center of the triangle is a rising sun, and in the core of the rising sun is a swastika. The triangle pointing downwards symbolizes internal development or meditation for self-realization. The triangle pointing upwards symbolizes action in the external world. The two triangles are in perfect balance. A person must balance their internal life with service in the world. The rising sun indicates progress that is the result of a balanced way of life. Thus the spiritual aspirant progresses towards their goal of self-realization. This spiritual victory is indicated by the swastika. Swastika means "to have a good existence of a permanent nature." Upwards pointing triangle: signifies work in the world, i.e. social work. Downwards pointing triangle: signifies inner work, i.e. meditation. The sun - the sum of work in the world and inner development leads to personal and spiritual development.



< Appropriation of the Swastika is the subject of a critically acclaimed recent theatrical production by Australian group Back to Back. Ganesh Versus the Third Reich, features an ensemble cast with physical and learning disabilities, deals with Lord Ganesha travelling to Hitler's Germany to reclaim the Hindu symbol from the Nazis. (backtobacktheatre.com)



Swastika ban call upsets Hindus

In 2007 Hindus in Europe joined forces to oppose German calls for a law across the European Union banning the display of Swastika symbols, contesting the swastika symbolizes peace not hate. The swastika has been around for 5000 years as a symbol of peace. This is exactly the opposite (anti-clock wise) of how it was used by the Third Reich. "... Just because Hitler misused the symbol, abused it and used it to propagate a reign of terror and racism and discrimination, it does not mean that its peaceful use should be banned." said Ramesh Kallidai of the Hindu Forum of Britain. (Reuters, January 17, 2007).

The greatest paradox of modern world history

Admittedly, it was the Nazis who were otherwise great users of flags made the Swastika a hated symbol. Sarah Boxer's article published in The New York Times on 07 Sept. 2000

(Page 11, Column 1) entitled 'A Symbol of Hatred Pleads Not Guilty' raised a pertinent question: Can the swastika ever be redeemed? She delves into the origin of the Swastika, its distortion, uses and misuses in Europe and writes; 'Before the Nazi party adopted the swastika and turned it into the most potent icon of racial hatred, it traveled the world as a good luck symbol. It was known in France, Germany, Britain, Scandinavia, China, Japan, India and the United States. Buddha's footprints were said to be swastikas. Navajo blankets were woven with swastikas. Synagogues in North Africa, Palestine and Hartford were built with swastika mosaics.'



< Swastika symbol in decoration in a ancient temple in Vietnam (Nha Trang).

Conclusion

How such an auspicious symbol came to represent the hated Nazi tyrannical oppression and racial genocide is perhaps one of greatest paradox. While the Western world associate the Swastika with Adolf Hitler and the nightmare of World War II, societies practicing Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and believer of many other sects - see it differently - as an auspicious sign of good fortune to be precise - a symbol - representing aspects of their faith. They've been doing this from time immemorial - in temples, idols, rituals, decorations, and on artifacts, coins and flags.

Thus, we may conclude by saying - next time you visit a temple or a religious congregation in Southeast Asia, don't freak out when you see the place festooned with Swastikas ! Swastikas of good fortune.



Biography

Sekhar Chakrabarti is an internationally famed senior philatelist. Born in 1946, he began collecting stamps featuring flags in the early 1960s. His other passion is Vexillology. His collection 'Flags on Stamps' have been highly appreciated and brought laurels to his country from several International stamp exhibitions held under the auspices of the *Federation Internationale de Philatelie* (FIP). He has authored the book entitled "*The Indian National Flag unfurled through Philately*" (ISBN: 978-93-81523-39-1, Niyogi Books, New Delhi, 2012). His name found a place in the *Limca Book of National Records* for his collections of most stamps issued from foreign countries featuring the Indian national flag. He has curated philatelic exhibitions in India and Cairo (Egypt) organized by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, Govt. of India. He has also served as a jury member at several philatelic exhibitions organized by India Post and several other philatelic organizations in India. He is at present a retired engineer and lives in Kolkata, India.

