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### The Svastika in Global Symbolism: A Comparative Cultural Analysis

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In day to day life symbols are used. Symbol means a particular kind of emblem which represents a particular notion. Symbolism has adopted a unique place in every culture. There are as many symbols as the cultures. 'Svastika' is the symbol used in many cultures and treated as an auspicious one. It is also accepted as one of the auspicious symbols in Indian culture. This word is thought over from literal as well as symbolic point of view.

Etymologically the word Svastika is derived from Su + asti + ka. The prefix 'su', denotes the meaning 'good' and 'asti', as 'being existent' and 'ka' suffix is for 'svārtha' i.e. it means no additional meaning. Thus, the word Svastika signifies good existence. Apte gives the etymology as 'svasti śubhāya hitam ka'<sup>1</sup> - which means that which is placed or put for the auspicious reason. Different Sanskrit lexicons stated the following meanings -

1. Catuṣka - the group of four
2. Maṅgaladravya - the auspicious object
3. Piṣṭakabheda/ Vṛtti - a particular symbol made with ground rice and shaped like a triangle.
4. Gṛhabheda - a particular kind of mansion
5. Āsanaviśeṣa - Yogic Posture

These are the common meanings of the word 'Svastika' found in different lexicons namely Medātithi<sup>2</sup>, Viśvālocanakośa<sup>3</sup> kośakalpataru<sup>4</sup> etc., (these meaning are recorded in the Scriptorium of the Sanskrit Dictionary, Deccan College Pune). As well as in Anekārthasaṅgraha it is stated as the synonym of Vardhamāna<sup>5</sup>. The word Vardhamāna has several meanings, among which it is a kind of mystical figure<sup>6</sup>. In śabdakalpadruma Svastika is defined as follows -

'svasti kṣemaṃ kāyati kathayati iti'<sup>7</sup>

This symbol can claim great antiquity and has existed in Europe, Asia and Africa. This paper is an attempt of seeking the development of the symbol Svastika through Sanskrit Literature. In the Indian Antiquity it is stated that the Pre form of the Svastika is just the cross<sup>8</sup>. Then the additional four lines are introduced to it.

Here I would like to clear this point that, in the etymology the 'ka' suffix is for Svārtha it means there is no additional meaning. The word 'svasti' is found ample of time in Vedic literature. It comes as an indeclinable, which means as prosperity<sup>9</sup> as well as it is also found as the adjective of non destruction<sup>10</sup>.

In Vedic literature mainly in three Vedas namely Rgveda, Yajurveda and Samaveda the word 'Svastika' is not found. In Atharvaveda this word is found in Nakshatra Kalpa, this word is stated as a species of garlic<sup>11</sup>.

In Ramayana this word is found in Ayodhya Kanda as follows -  
anyāḥ svastikavijñeyā mahāghaṇṭhādharāvārāḥ|

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śobhamānāḥ patākinyo yuktavāhāḥ susaṃhatāḥ||<sup>12</sup>

This is the description of ships, here they are named as Svastika and being the auspicious ones they are adorned with the Great Bells, flags etc.

This word is found thrice in Mahabharata namely in Adiparva, Dronaparva and Shantiparva.

1. In Adiparva it comes as an auspicious object. The verse runs like this

svastikairārdrapallavaḥ sarvataḥ pariśobhitam| (Adi Parva 1.36.55/56)

2. In Dronaparva it is connected with the word Vardhamāna which denotes the meaning as a particular auspicious object. *svastikān vardhamānāṃśca nandyāvartāṃśca kāñcanān*| (Drona Parva 7.58.19) Same reference is also found in Vishnudharmottara Purana<sup>13</sup>.

3. In Shanti Parava it is connected with luck / auspicious object. The verse runs like this -

tatropaviṣṭo dharmātmā śvetāḥ sumanaso'sprśat|

svastikānakṣatānbhūmiṃ suvarṇaṃ rajataṃ maṇīn|| (Shanti Parva 14.40.7) Here the Nilakantha commentary explains the word 'Svastika' as a 'Sarvatobhadramandala'<sup>14</sup>.

In Purana Literature this word is found differently. At some places it is used as a mystical cross mark. They are as follows - in Matsya Purana twice it is used as an auspicious symbol<sup>15</sup>. In Bhavisya Purana it is stated as a mystical cross. Thus, it is clear that in Ancient Sanskrit Literature the reference as a symbol (cihna) is found. But it is nowhere explained in detail. As well as the interpretation of the cross with four arms is not found in the literature. As it is seen in Mahabharata Nilakanthi commentary explains this symbol as Sarvatobhadra Mandala. Then the question arises when this Particular symbol is interpreted in the today's form. We get the answer in Jainism. I know that the period of Jain is before the Puranas for sake of Linguistic convenience it has taken after the Puranas.

#### **Jain concept of 'Svastika' -**

Basically this word is placed among eight chief auspicious marks by Jainas. These symbols are differently used by two sects of Jainism namely Shvetambara and Digamara. But the Svastika is common to both of them. This is connected with the Seventh Tirthamkara 'Suparshva'<sup>16</sup>.

Four arms of the Svastika symbolize the four Gati (destiny): Narak (demon), Triyanch (animal), Manushya (human) and Dev (angel). It represents the perpetual nature of the universe in the Madhya Lok (material world), where a being is destined to have one of those states based on

its **Karma** (deeds). It also represents the four columns of the Jain Sangh: Sadhus, Sadhvis, Shravaks and Shravikas - monks, nuns, male and female laymen. It also represents the four characteristics of the soul: infinite knowledge (Ananta Jnyana), infinite perception (Ananta Darshan), infinite happiness (Ananta Sukha) and infinite energy (Ananta Virya)<sup>17</sup>. Thus this symbol states that man get above mentioned four stages according to his Karma in successive births. But siddha, in his next life attains to Nirvana and is therefore beyond these 4 stages. Thus "the svastika represents such a siddha in the following way. The point or Bindu in the centre from which the 4 paths branch out is jiva or life and the 4 paths symbolize the 4 conditions of life. But as a Siddha is free from all these, the end of each line is turned to show that the four states are closed for him". Same might be the idea in the Jaina Inscriptions.

1. The hathi gumpa Inscription Udaygiri cave 7

2. Nasik inscription No. 10

In both the places the symbol is placed immediately after the word Siddha<sup>18</sup>.

Similarly Hindus can also relate it or interpret it with fourfold Class, Ashramas and Human goals. But in the literature such kind of interpretation is not found. While worshipping, the reference of Sarvatobhadra Manadala is found often in Hindu culture. In Rgvediyapujavidhi the description of Shankha, Chakra, Padma etc. is found as auspicious symbols, but Svastika is found nowhere. Thus it seems that this particular symbol is an adoption from Janina culture to Hindus. Or it can be the extension of Sarvatobhadra Mandala, because basic idea behind drawing Sarvatobhadra and Svastika is same. It is for making the auspicious seat for Deities.

Later on when the symbol Svastika is accepted by Hindus, many scholars have interpreted it and connected it to the Vedic Literature.

Pt. Mahdevashasti Joshi has stated the following Mantra in his book entitled 'Sanskritici Pratike'- svasti na iṃdro vṛddhaśravāḥ svasti naḥ pūṣā viśvavedāḥ|

svasti nastārksyo ariṣṭanemiḥ svasti no bṛhaspatirdadhātu||<sup>19</sup>

Human being desires the prosperity in his life. Wherever there is wealth, good communication, love etc. there is the existence of good thing. Thus, the symbol of this indefinable feeling is 'Svastika'. According to him it is the foremost symbol, created by human being<sup>20</sup>.

Pt. Mahadevashastri Joshi has rightly pointed out that philosophical interpretation plays an important role for the firm basis of any symbol.

Let's overview the interpretation from symbolic point of view.

Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery records the following meaning of Svastika-

1. So be it, that is luck
2. Sun –
  - a) General emblem of sun, rain and wind deities; especially of supreme deity collectively stated as Sun deity.
  - b) Agriculture and the succession of generations
  - c) Fire drill, representing the Sun or moon according to which direction it turns, something related to Prometheus (Greek Mythology related to known as the benefactor who brought fire to mankind)
  - d) Over doors protection against fire; also a general amulet or lucky charm against evil Eye.
3. The mystic center
  - a) Direction – Clockwise: increase growth, the venereal Sun; lucky; white magic
  - b) Anti clockwise: decay ...death; the autumnal Sun, unlucky; black magic.
4. In a circle or triangle – it denotes cosmic harmony.
5. It is related to the cross, circle Solomon's knot etc.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, the implications of 'Svastika' are wide and varied.

The book entitled 'Sacred Hindu Symbols' has stated regarding the origination of Svastika: "Essentially there are two symbols

1. The Greek cross with arms of equal length - 
2. The cross with four arms appearing to rotate in the same direction." 

Naturally, scholars differ worldwide. Here some opinions of foreign scholars noted for consideration.

1. According to Ludwig Müller, it represents supreme deity.
2. Colley March sees the Swastika as a specific sign, denoting rotation about an axis.
3. For Mackenzie it is associated with agriculture and with the point of the compass.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, being seen these interpretations it is clear that Scholars interpreted it variously. It can be said that human being loves prosperity. Therefore the symbol of Svastika is agreeable to him and from ages it is accepted. The

'Svastika' can be interpreted that the four points of two lines denote four directions and the four additional lines come from those four points can denote the sub directions. The middle point can be the origin and dissolution of the world. Thus this symbol can be the symbol of the world.

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8. Vries Adde, 'Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery', North Holland Publishing Company, Amsterdam, London, 1976 (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition)
9. A Vedic Word Concordance Vedanga Section (च - ञ), Vishweshvarananda Vedic Research Institute, Hosiarpur, India, 1973.
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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Apte Dictionary Page No. 1741

<sup>2</sup> Medhātithi 14.66

<sup>3</sup> Viśvālocanakośa 30.171

<sup>4</sup> Kośakalpataru -II.2771

<sup>5</sup> Anekārthasaṁgraha - 4.189

<sup>6</sup> Apte Dictionary Page No.1397

<sup>7</sup> Shabdakalpadruma Page No.489

<sup>8</sup> Encyclopedia of Indian Culture Vol. IV – Page no. 1419.

<sup>9</sup> svasti na ṁdro vṛddhaśravāḥ svasti naḥ pūṣā viśvavedāḥ|  
svasti nastārksyo ariṣṭanemiḥ svasti no bṛhaspatird-  
adhātu|| Ṛ.1.89.9  
saḥ naḥ piteva sūnave'gne sūpāyano bhava? sacasvā naḥ  
svastaye|| Ṛ.1.1.9

- <sup>10</sup> svasti avināśāya| Nirukta 3.21
- <sup>11</sup> aśvinyāṃ svastikaṃ mālyāṃ madayantī priyaṅgubhiḥ|  
rūpājīvāyāstatsnānaṃ saubhāgyaṃ bhogavardhanam|  
atharvavedanakṣatrakalpa 45.7
- <sup>12</sup> Rāmāyaṇa, Ayodhyā Kāṇḍa
- <sup>13</sup> Vishnudharmottara Purana - 2.163.23.
- <sup>14</sup> sarvatobhadrādyañkitāni devatāpīṭhāni... (Nīlakamṭhī on MBH 12.40.7)
- <sup>15</sup> Matsya Purana atheṣṭāni pravakṣyāmi maṅgaladrav-  
yāni...svastikaṃ vardhamānaṃ ca... 243.20., śriyaṃ  
devīm pravakṣyāmi...padmasvastikaśaṅkhairvā bhūṣi-tāṃ  
kuṇḍalālakaiḥ| 261.42
- <sup>16</sup> Kalloka Page No.329 (Here the list of 24 Tirthankaras  
along with the description regarding Fathers name,  
Mothers name, Arrived Place and auspicious object is  
mentioned in the chart form. )
- <sup>17</sup> Indian Antiquity XXVII.Page No.196.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid Page No.196
- <sup>19</sup> Shanti Mantra of Prashnopanishad Page No.
- <sup>20</sup> Sanskritichi Pratike, Page No.1-2.
- <sup>21</sup> Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery, Page No. 39
- <sup>22</sup> Sacred Hindu Symbols, Page No. 451-52