

The Svastika: Connecting us to the Heavens

by Dinesh S. Parakh

Perhaps no symbol is more widespread and beloved, and yet more misunderstood and maligned, than the *svastika*. From its ancient origins as a symbol of good luck, prosperity, and fortune to 20th century (misappropriation) by Nazi Germany, the *svastika* has been a constant in human consciousness for thousands of years. And not just as a religious symbol: the Carlsberg brewing company used the *svastika* as its logo for over a hundred years; Dublin, Ireland had a *Svastika* Laundry; a Native American basketball team used the *svastika* as its logo in the early 20th century; and you can still take a summer roadtrip to *Swastika*, Ontario! This article is the briefest introduction to the concept and history of the *svastika*, as part of an effort to reclaim this sacred symbol.

The word *svastika* (known also by variants such as *swastik*, *swastika*, *suastika*, etc.) is a Sanskrit term which essentially means any lucky or auspicious object, and also refers to the mark made on persons or things to bring good luck. Apte's Sanskrit dictionary gives about twelve different meanings, including "a kind of mystical mark on persons or things denoting good luck"; "a lucky object"; "the meeting of four roads"; "the crossing of arms, making a sign like that of a cross", etc.

The *svastika* is prominent in the Eastern religions of Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism – and has been for at least thousands of years. Statues of the Buddha invariably have the *svastika* stamped on the middle of the chest, homage perhaps to the alleged stamping of the *svastika* on the body of the Buddha after his death. In Hinduism, the *svastika* is considered to be one of the 108 symbols of Vishnu, and represents the Sun's rays, Surya, and Ganapati. The *svastika* is prominent in Jainism, where it is the symbol of the 7th Tirthankara Suparshva, and where its four arms represent the four possible realms of rebirth: heaven, hell, animal, and human. The *svastika* is also a prominent part of the symbol of the Jain cosmos. (Of course, this is just the most cursory treatment; the religious symbolism of the *svastika* is very extensive and deep.)

Through these three great faiths, the *svastika* symbol travelled through South, South-east, and East Asia, resulting in the fact that the *svastika* even today is a common motif in China, Japan, Korea, and other Asian countries—most commonly associated with Buddhism.

The earliest appearance of the *svastika* symbol in modern linear history dates back to 10,000 BCE, on a mammoth ivory bird figurine near present-day Kiev, Ukraine. The *svastika* appears throughout the Indus Valley civilization, ancient Mesopotamia, sub-saharan Africa, and Neolithic China. The *svastika* symbol has also been used by different aboriginal American cultures. A golden necklace found in Iran dating back to 1000 BCE features *svastikas* prominently. The symbol is found on ancient Greek and Roman art and was embossed on Celtic warrior shields and burial grounds. Germanic, Baltic, Slavic, and Sami (Finnish) cultures have all used the *svastika* symbol. It is important to note that in all of these uses, the *svastika* was either a neutral (decorative) or a positive symbol. In Asia, particularly South Asia but also East Asia, the *svastika* continues to be very common symbol used at the household level.

So just how did the Nazis get a hold of the *svastika*? The Nazis believed in a doctrine of racial purity, specifically, purity of the Aryan race. The *svastika* was seen to be a symbol of that ancient and pure Aryan race. Whether this Aryan race existed in Northern Europe, the Caucasus, or India is almost beside the point, when one looks at recent scholarship casting doubt upon the British-inspired Aryan invasion theory and the alleged migration of the Aryans. So, yes, the *svastika* may have been an ancient symbol of the Aryans, but no-one knows whether the Aryans as a people even existed. And since there is no copyright on this ancient symbol, the Nazis were free to adopt and twist it for their own perverted aims.

Because the *svastika* is so widespread in different cultures of the worlds and at different times in history, various theories have been put forth as to its origins. That is, why did so many countries and cultures, at different times in history, adopt this symbol? Nothing is certain, but it has been posited that a singular astronomical event in the distant past – perhaps the intersection and cosmic dance of two comets – was witnessed by people all over the ancient world who then made it part of their culture.

But there are really only two fundamental possibilities for its ubiquity around the world. First, if one assumes that the *svastika* comes from the *sanatana dharma* of ancient India, then its spread could be linked to the widespread influence of ancient India throughout the world. Ancient India had well-known links to South East & East Asia and Europe, and links can be made to other parts of the world where the *svastika* is found. The *svastika* could have spread outwards from its Indian homeland as a pleasing and meaningful shape.

However, a less jingoistic possibility is that the *svastika* represents something primeval to the human race—not just Indians. Just as variants of the yogic tradition have arisen independently in all cultures of the world, so too could the *svastika* have originated in the subconscious (or superconscious) of our own species, as the representation of a human universal – the universal flow of energy. The most common meanings of the *svastika* symbolism throughout the world are that it is a representation of the Sun, and that it represents the flow of Energy. In fact, in the Indian esoteric tradition of *vastu-vidya*, the *svastika* indeed represents the universal flow of energy from *ucca* to *nica* positions. Furthermore, the actual physical shape of the *svastika* has an astronomical counterpart in the heavens, in the movement of the constellation popularly known as the Big Dipper. Thus, the *svastika* integrates *bhuh*, *bhuvah*, *suvah* – the Earth, the Heavens, and the Space in between. So the *svastika* could very well be nothing less than a visual representation of the universal energy which animates this entire cosmos—an attempt by humans to give form to the formless, name to the nameless.

The next time you see a *svastika*, at a minimum, please try to disassociate it in your own mind from its co-optation by the Nazis and the accompanying horrors of World War II. Even better would be to see it as a symbol of fortune and luck. But if you can, pause for a moment to reflect on the more profound meaning: of the *svastika* as a divine bridge linking humans to the cosmos, and encapsulating the flow of universal energy that animates us all. Meditate on what the *svastika* represents (perhaps sitting in the yoga asana known as *svastikasana*), and you just might find yourself catching the tail of this divine comet!

References:

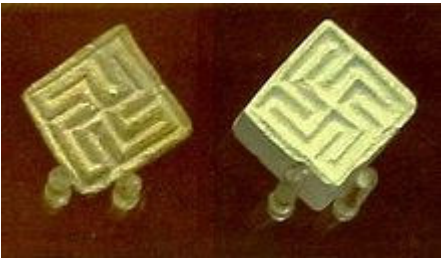
Wikipedia has an excellent article on the *svastika* with some memorable images and comprehensive references. It would be a good place to start any further research. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Svastika>.



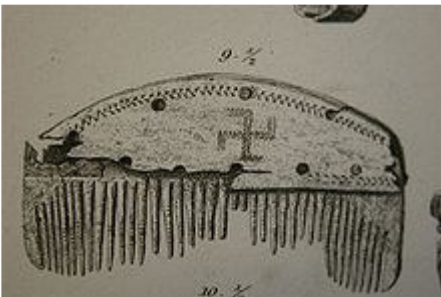
Golden necklace of three *Svastikas* found in [Marlik](#), [Gilan](#) Province [Iran](#), dates back to first millennium B.C.



[Chilocco Indian Agricultural School](#) basketball team in 1909



Seals from the [Indus Valley Civilization](#) preserved at the [British Museum](#)



A comb with a *svastika* found in [Nydam Mose](#), Denmark