

Swastika Symbol on Bharhut Stone Railing: A Case Study

Rita Dutta

Abstract

Swastika symbol has imprinted its significant space in most of the Ancient Indian designs in expressions like dakshinavarta and suvastika as well as tetraskelion. There are variety of opinions regarding the origin, chief function and the meaning of swastika. In Indian sub-continent it can be located from pre-Harappan times to the date. It occupies all possible sites of expression in the material culture including sculptures, pottery, coins, etc. The present paper is an attempt to classify and describe the swastika symbol as depicted in the Bharhut remains, especially railings. It was auspicious as well as decorative. The depiction of the said symbol is with the combined application of other symbols like srivatsa, nandipada, purna ghata, vessels of gems, conch shell, twin fish, elephant goad, flywhisk, lotus, wheel, parasol, throne, chuda, foot print, stupa, tree, etc.

Introduction

Swastika, the geometric motif, in all probabilities was derived from a simple cross design. It is believed by scholars that, a simple cross symbolizes four cardinal directions. It is an emblem of great antiquity and one of the earliest simple decorative sign consisting of a number of straight lines, easy to draw and easy to remember. The motif has a shape that is eminently graceful. It is more austere and aesthetically a very satisfying motif has found universal appreciation. Later on, this simple cross gave birth to the swastika pattern by giving its' arms equal size, length, style and thickness throughout. The peculiarity of this symbol is that it has a geometrical tension about its' form. It is an equilateral cross with all the ends of the lines extended at right angles in the same direction rotated at 45 degrees either to the right, clockwise or to the left, anti-clockwise. The one that has the arms extended to the right is generally called swastika. It is suggested that the clockwise turning (dakshinavarta) of swastika signifies the solar energy and masculine power. The other having those extended to the left is called sauvastika (Wilson Thomas 1973). The anti-clockwise (vamavarta) position symbolizes the lunar energy and feminine force (P.C. Little 1972). The other distinctive stylized variety of swastika is known as tetraskelion. It is a spiral variety of the

swastika, as the spiral arms of the tetraskelion produce an illusion of cyclic or whirling movements either to the right or left. Sometimes the ends are shown touching the next arm of the cross and the motif assumes the shape of a wheel, which symbolizes the cycle of movement of all astral and heavenly bodies. In the present case, we have used the term swastika to designate all these varieties of the sign without any discrimination. Thus there are several varieties of swastika motifs, which have been found in almost every part of the globe.

Swastika the word is derived from the Sanskrit word “su” (well being, good, excellent) and “asti” (it is, exist). It has been called by different names in different countries, though nearly all countries have in later years accepted the ancient Sanskrit name of swastika and this name is recommended as the most definite and certain, being now the most general and indeed almost universal. (Wicks Roberts 1999).

Swastika is one of the earliest known symbols depicted by human beings, possibly designed to express the mystic concept of this universe. The mind conceives abstract metaphysical thoughts in terms of certain natural and material phenomena and art is the manifestation of those thoughts through appropriate symbols. The religious association gives sanctity to the symbol. Mostly symbols are drawn from natural sources. However, different scholars explain it from different perspectives for example, to some scholars it represents the sun god, the lord Surya, the fire god, (Agrawala V.S. 1965, pp 49-50). Many scholars are of the opinion that, this symbol signifies the stylized shape of a wheel, a circle with radiating rays of sun (Herzfeld 1941, Grishman 1937 p. 72; Schmidt 1937 p.52-53, Amozagar 2002 p.19-21, Pandey 1971 p. 65-66, Mackay 1938 p. 172, Bektortash 1983 p.30, History of swastika htm.etc). While to some others it represents Indra or the rainmaker, Navagrahas or nine planets, Lakshmi and lord Ganesha, the earth, the sky, the four quarters, the eight directions etc. Some scholars have attributed a phallic significance to it and finally the deity of all deities? Others have recognized in it the generative principle that resides in a female, making it a symbol for such great mother goddess? (Wilson Thomas 1973). According to E.V Havell (1911, p.69) swastika symbolizes life. It is also suggested that the swastika is the conventionalized human form of two arms and legs, or the union of the male and female principles, the dynamic and static, mobility and immobility, harmony and balance. The symbol suggests two complementary phases of movement, centrifugal and centripetal, in-breaking and out-breaking, going out from and returning to the center, beginning and end. But whatever may be the meaning of the symbol; one thing is clear that the creator of this symbol must have been inspired by natural celestial sources.

The center of origin of this symbol is still controversial. E.J.H Mackay (1838) has suggested that this motif appears to have originated in North Syria; from there it reached Samarra in Mesopotamia and then through Susa in Persia. (South of Iran). According to Razaei (1993 p.59) Bektortash (1983), the sign was first discovered in South-West of Iran, ie; Khovestan, from there it came to South Asian civilization of Harappa. According to other scholars, swastika has been found in Mayan, Mexican, Chinese and India, everywhere being considered as auspicious and in some cases religious. It is a motif, which has been used universally from very early times, almost throughout all traditions and all civilizations of the world.

Distribution in Indian sub-continent:

A single example of swastika motif was observed on a potsherd from Rehman-Dheri, assignable to Pre-Harappan times. Seals depicting swastika motif have been found from Mohenjodaro, assigned to circa 2100-1750 B.C. (Huntington S. 1985 p.23). A string of five swastikas have been discovered on a Harappan artifact (Rajaram N.S. Jha 2006 p.496 fig.2). It is found frequently either on beads or engraved ornaments of the Indus culture. It also occurred on the pottery of Shahi-Tump in Baluchistan. The people of mature Harappan civilization had extensively utilized the symbol as a common phenomenon in different forms of culture (Possehl G.L. 2003 p.224 fig. 12.16, p.226 fig. 12.23, p. 230 fig. 12.31; Marshall J. Vol. III 1973 pl. CXIV 500-501; Sharma M & Sharma D.P. 2006 p.31, 33 fig. 20). In this connection it may be recalled that the Navdatoli chalcolithic culture has yielded different types of swastika symbols on pottery (sun symbol according to Sankalia 1958,10), which are very similar and identical with the swastika symbols found in central and western parts of Iran on bronze objects and pottery of 1st millennium B.C. (Karamian Golamreza 2006). Painted designs are available on the painted grey ware from the Ganga –Yamuna doab. An exquisitely polished crystal casket from Piprawah of 3rd century B.C. deserves special mention here. The handle of the casket was in the shape of a hollow fish, stuffed with both precious and varied objects, having gold granulated six petalled flowers and gold circular frame attached to them, along with gold leaves impressed with various symbols like swastika, triratna, triangle headed standard, gold disc impressed with profuse connected spirals, rolls of gold leaves, delicately fashioned leaves, beads of various shapes in gold, silver, semiprecious minerals and corals, cut semi-precious stones, pieces of mica, a spirally rolled copper wire etc. (Mitra D. 1971 p.80; Ghosh A. 1989 p.271). Cunningham discovered a solid barrel shaped bolt from Rampurva lion pillar dated to circa 3rd century B.C. A simple cross design is executed on the body of the bolt by incised lines (Gupta S.P. 1980 p. 24 fig 3). Swastika, along with some simple cross symbols are found on some of the earliest punch marked coins of India (Allan J. 1967). Potteries and sherds from Sonkh of the Mitra period, dated from 2nd century B.C. to 1st century B.C. deserve mention here for the depiction of symbols like swastika, nandipada, lotus etc (Hartel H. p.187 fig. 20.4 No. 5,6, pl.20 IV.A. Ed. Srinivasan Doris Meth 1989). A globular casket from the stupa at Bhattiprolu, dated circa 2nd century B.C. to 1st century B.C. contained twenty-four silver coins, which were arranged in the casket in the shape of swastika (Mitra D. p.213). The Kushan potteries from Mathura show many different forms of decorative designs including swastika, srivatsa, nandipada, purnaghata, chakra, hamsa, rosette, leaf, circle etc. (Hartel H. p.188 fig. 208. Ed. Srinivasan Doris Meth 1989). Jain Ayagapattas or votive (?) tablets from Mathura dated to Kushan period c. 1st century A.D. include depiction of swastika along with other emblems (Smith V.1994). An Ayagapatta of pre-kushan date hailed from Mathura now housed in Lucknow Museum, depicts two swastikas, one small tetraskelion variety inside a large stylized variety of swastika along with other auspicious symbols, (Sharma R.C. 1995 fig. 10). During the Kushan period it was a customary to provide the image of a deity with an umbrella. These chhatras were carved with decorative bands and auspicious symbols. Two such parasols carved with swastika along with several auspicious motifs have been reported from Mathura (Sharma R.C.1995 p.104 fig. 40, p.105 fig 41). Another large parasol of red sand stone in the Sarnath museum of the Kushan period depicts sauvastika in anti-clockwise position. Sanghol has yielded 13 coping stones, which are embellished with various auspicious

symbols along with swastika. (Sharma R.C. 1995 p. 252). The stupas at Sanchi, Bharhut, Amaravati and Manikyala are all of similar ground plan and elevation. They are hemispherical mounds of masonry. A double railing surrounds them, by four projecting gateways or toranas facing the four cardinal points. The ground plan of these stupas with the return railings of the four projecting entrances forms a gigantic swastika, (“auspicious”) mystic cross of the Buddhists (Birdwood George C.M. 1974 p.113). Three stupas from Nagarjunakonda, dated 3rd. century A.D. yielded swastikas made of brick in the center of the stupa (Mitra D. p.208). A Buddhapada from Srilanka dated 3rd. century A.D. displays swastika along with twelve auspicious symbols (Marg vol. 51). The Chinese pilgrim observed the Buddha footprints near the stupa of relics at Pataliputra Fa-hsien (5th century) and Hsuan-Tsang (two centuries later). According to Hsuan-Tsang there was a wheel on both soles, as well as vases, fish and other things and the tips of the toes had swastika tracery (Watters T. 1905 pp.92-93).

It appears to me that on the basis of available data, so far as the Indian sub-continent is concerned, the earliest reference of the depiction of this symbol has come from or might have been originated in Pre-Harappan culture and later continued to occur through the Chalcolithic and later historical period. The religious association gives added sanctity to the symbol. This symbol of antiquity has been maintained over a long period of time and found over a wide geographical area, which signifies that the presence of this symbol in itself is note worthy.

Study area:

In this article an attempt has been made to describe and classify the swastika symbols as depicted in the Bharhut remains of the Sunga period, dated to circa 2nd. Century B.C. They are now housed in the Indian museum, Kolkata. This emblematic symbol is found in various shapes and sizes on the panels of balustrades, which are round, half round, oblong, rectangular in shape, according to the architectonic needs. Sunga period is the formative stage of the Indian Buddhist narrative art. Early Indian art was essentially aniconic. During this period the tendency of depicting swastika was adopted to make the symbol important. Swastika symbol was depicted along with the combined application of other symbols like srivatsa, nandipada, purna ghata, vessel of gems, conch shell, twin fish, elephant goad, flywhisk, lotus, wheel, parasol, throne, chuda, foot print, stupa, tree, vajra etc .The inclusion of the swastika symbol in the Bharhut sculpture, marks the beginning of an attempt to utilize varied symbols in an organized manner in a group and to execute them on one place or on one object. The motifs as depicted on the remains, sometimes convey a deep metaphysical meaning, indicative of purity, prosperity and auspiciousness and cannot be dispersed as just ornamental devices. **Thus in the present case we can classify the swastika symbols of Bharhut into two types i.e. auspicious and decorative.**

So far as the auspicious aspect of the motif is concerned, swastika is carved on the following pillars, coping stone and on the cross bar panels of the railings.

1. Acc. No. 156 Purchase of Jetavana on a railing pillar medallion. (Pl. No. 1)
2. Acc No.221-222 Vessantara Jataka on a coping stone fragment. (Pl. No. 2)

3. Acc. No. 188 Worship of tree on a railing pillar. (Pl. No. 3)
4. Acc. No. 186 Worship of tree.
5. Acc. No. 283 Worship of tree on a cross bar panel. (Pl. No. 4 & 5)
6. Acc. No. 182 Worship of hair lock.
7. Acc. No. 183 Worship of footprint.
8. Acc. No. 247. Worship of stupa on a cross bar panel. (Pl. No.6, 7, & 8)

1. Acc. No. 156: Pillar medallion.

Carved on the medallion of a rail post, the episode, as has been identified by the epigraphical evidences, narrates the purchase of the Jetavana grove at Sravasti by a rich merchant named Anathapindaka from the owner Jeta and to gift it to the Buddha for the construction of a monastery. Prince Jeta, the owner of the land agreed to part with it if the entire land was covered by gold coins. The hard terms were accepted and the coins were brought in bullock carts in the grove. From the literary sources it is revealed that a total number of eighteen crores of “masurans” (gold coins) were spread. The depiction shows that the garden is full with coins of different shapes, sizes and symbols. In this connection mention could be made of one roughly square shaped tiny coin bearing the impression of swastika motif. The incised impression of the device occupies a prominent place among the datable antiquities (Sharma R.C. 1994 p.24; Anderson J. 1977 p.41 pillar No. 14; Barua B.M. 1934-37 pl. XLV no.46.)

2. Acc. No.221 & 222: Coping stone

A fragmentary copingstone depicts the Vessantara Jataka scene. Here, a standing elephant is seen covered by a beautiful decorated cloth. Clusters of stylized swastika motifs execute the designs on the cloth, which deserve special mention here.

3. Acc. No. 188: Corner pillar compartment

Carved on the lower compartment of the corner pillar is a small depiction of a mango tree with a platform in front, covered by an umbrella, represents tree worship. A very popular subject in the Buddhist sculptural art. The pedestal is adorned with tiny lotuses, flowers, leaves, trident shaped objects (or nilatpalas), and disc shaped objects impressed with connected lines. Among them appears two-tetraskelion variety of swastika motif, formed by two S like spiral curves with a circular frame attached to them. (Anderson J. 1977 p.17.pillar no3, Barua B.M. 1934-37 pl. XLVI no. 46.)

4. Acc. No.186: railing corner pillar.

The railing corner pillar depicts a Tree worship scene. The tree is placed on a throne, worshipped by many devotees. In front of the throne there is an alter, which is adorned by many tiny flowers among which there are representations of the swastika motif.

5. Acc. No. 283: Cross bar panel

The cross bar panel depicts the worship of tree artistically. The tree is placed on a throne, which is again enshrined inside a stupa like structure with three arched gateways in the front. The alter is decorated with flowers, lotuses, leaves, tridents, rolled objects, and a tetraskelion variety of swastika motif with a circular frame attached to it. (Ghosh A. 1989 p.271; Mitra D. 1971p. 80)

6. Acc. No. 182: Railing corner pillar

The railing pillar in its upper compartment depicts the worship of chuda maha festival or the worship of headdress of the Blessed one. The topknot of hair and headdress of the Buddha is placed on a throne, which is covered by a parasol above, and placed inside a stupa like structure. The alter in front of the chuda is adorned with four tiny flowers among them one depicts the swastika motif attached inside a ring. (Anderson J. 1977, p. 19. pillar No3).

7. Acc. No. 183: Railing corner pillar

The same railing pillar described above, depicts in its' middle compartment the Worship of footprint by a group of devotees. The footprint of the Lord is placed on a throne, which is covered by an umbrella or parasol above. There is an alter in front of the throne, which is adorned with impressions of three handprints and tiny flowers. Similar type of swastika motif is represented here in the flowers.

8. Acc. No. 247: Cross bar panel

Represented in the panel an architectural motif where three arched windows are seen supported by five pillars inside which contains four rectangular thrones, or alter, which is decorated in the lower part with a row of sixteen hand prints, the upper part of which is ornamented with scattered flowers, six petalled lotuses, nilatpalas, leaves etc. Among them impressions of four swastika symbols of tetraskelion variety are seen which are again attached with circular frames (Barua B.M. 1934- 37 pl. XLIV no.42).

9. Acc. No.103: Cross bar medallion

Carved on the cross bar of a full-blown lotus. The pericarp of the lotus is decorated with a hexaskelion. The spiral arms of which impart an illusion of anti- clockwise whirling motion to the center of the composition. The arrangement of this circular movement is balanced by the outer border, which is represented by an inverted purnaghata issuing full-blown lotus, buds, leaves and stalks. (Ghosh A., p. 66, pl. Xb).

Since Swastika is a symbol commonly used in Indian art, it continues till today in contemporary Indian society and religion. The symbol does not stand for any faith or belief, but all the religious sects have accepted and adopted this symbol for their purpose in all circumstances. This symbol is found to be present in all the three contemporary religions of ancient India viz. Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism and Christianity.

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