

The Swastika *explained!*



Hindu American Foundation

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The Swastika explained!

Understanding the Symbolism of the Swastika



In Sanskrit, the word swastika (also spelled as svastika or saustika) is a combination of 'su' (meaning 'good') and 'asti' (meaning 'to exist'), which often gets translated to 'all is well.' For many Hindus, the swastika is a symbol of good fortune, first appearing in the Rg Veda [1.89.6], the oldest scripture known to man. The swastika has been used for more than 10,000 years; by the Indus-Saraswati Valley civilizations, in ancient Troy, and by Native Americans in North America, to highlight just a few of the cultures who used the swastika in their respective religious and cultural practices.

Swastika in Hinduism

However, the swastika holds special significance for the Hindu community as it is an important symbol of auspiciousness and prosperity that continues to be used to this day. Therefore, it is commonly used at the entrance of Hindu homes, temples and business, as well as

displayed as an integral part of worship rituals and on invitations to special occasions such as weddings and other rites of passage.

For many Hindu ceremonies, a swastika is drawn with either colored powder, flowers, or with diyas. There are a variety of symbolic meanings associated with the design of the swastika in Hinduism. Some of the more popular interpretations of the meaning behind the arms in the design are:

- › **The four Vedas:** Rg, Yajur, Sama, and Atharva. These are the oldest Hindu scriptures and form the foundational teachings of Hinduism.
- › **The four goals of life:** Dharma (right action), Artha (Material prosperity), Kama (mental and physical happiness), and Moksha (spiritual freedom). These are considered the four aims of life which describe the human experience for many.

- › **The four Yugas (eras):** Satya Yuga, Treta Yuga, Dvapara Yuga, and Kali Yuga. In Hinduism, time is conceived both cyclically and over vast eras.
- › **The four stages of life (ashramas):** Brahmacharya (student), Grihastha (householder), Vanaprastha (retired elder), and Sannyasa (renunciation).
- › **The four seasons:** Fall, Winter, Spring, and Summer. Though not every place on Earth experiences the seasons in the same way and some places use different terms and concepts to describe the transitions from season to season, the four limbs of the swastika can be taken to represent the seasons mirroring the procession of the stages of life.
- › **The four directions:** North, South, East, and West. The four limbs of the swastika represent the four cardinal directions with Polaris (the North Star) as the anchor in the middle.

A Symbol for Many

The significance of the swastika is not limited to Hinduism and those that practice it. Other faith traditions originating in India also regularly use the swastika, with similar optimism and favorable meaning. From ancient times to the present day, Buddhists, Hindus, and Jains, all incorporate the swastika in their religious practices. As the swastika has been so widely used for so long, it has been interpreted in a variety of

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7th century Sangameshwara Temple, Alampur, Telangana India

ways by practitioners of dharma faiths. For Buddhists, the swastika signifies the Buddha's footprints and heart. In Jainism, the swastika is the symbol of their seventh enlightened teacher, Tirthankara, with the arms symbolizing the four types of beings—heavenly, human, animal, and hellish.

While the swastika is India's most enduring ancient symbol, the oldest known use of the symbol dates back to the end of the last Ice Age, in what is now known as Ukraine. A figurine carved with a recognizable armed plus sign dating to 10,000-13,000 BCE was found there. It is unclear how these ancient people interpreted the symbol and its meaning is still unknown. In the Balkans, the symbol has been used for at least the past 8,000 years.

The swastika is still visible as a decorative and architectural pattern which has come to be known as the Greek key pattern and is commonly found on tiles and textiles. It has been said that the Greeks adopted the swastika as a peace symbol. The swastika remained a popular embroidery motif in Eastern

Europe and Russia right up to WWII. Russian author, Pavel Kutenkov, identified nearly 200 variations across the region. The Phoenicians also used the swastika as a symbol of the sun. Whereas in Armenia, they have been found using a swastika-like symbol to represent eternity and eternal light. In Africa, pottery found in the region of Kush (modern Sudan) shows clear armed plus signs. West African cultures have also used the symbol. Neolithic cultures in China used the symbol too, which predated the spread of Buddhism. In North America, native peoples have long used swastika-like symbols. To the Hopi people, it represents wandering clans. And to the Navajo, it's a whirling log used during healing ceremonies.

In the 19th century, the symbol had a major resurgence of usage in Europe and North America as a good luck symbol and the swastikas and swastika-like symbols appeared on Coca-Cola and

beer bottles. The Boy Scouts in the US and other scouting groups in Europe used swastikas on badges. The UK's Royal Air Force had it on planes as recent as 1939; and the US Army's 45th Infantry Division used it as a sleeve insignia during the 1920s up until the rise of the Nazis.

Nazi Appropriation

Despite the long history of positive intent and religious symbolism, for Jews, the Nazi symbol is inextricably linked with the German National Socialist Party plan to rid the world of the Jewish people. In Europe and America, the Nazi emblem, called a hakenkreuz by the Nazis and mistaken as a swastika, became a symbol of hate and genocide against the Jews—a symbol that is scrawled on walls by racists and antisemites.

Hitler first used it as a symbol for the National Socialist Party in 1920, but its adoption as the sole national flag for Nazi Germany in 1935 coincided with the passage of laws defining German Jews as being of "inferior blood" and beginning the process of terrorizing them. Jews lost their right to vote, their ability to marry, and in some cases, their lives. Their citizenship was revoked, and they became demonized, described in language usually reserved for vermin.

The Nazis used the hakenkreuz to represent their notion of Aryan identity. However, they severely misunderstood and failed in their understanding of the meaning of the Sanskrit term 'aryan.' Rooted in the now disproven Aryan Invasion Theory, the Nazi usage imagines that there was a "master race" or group of people known as the Aryans, some



Early Anglo-Saxon cinerary urn with swastika motifs from North Elmham, Norfolk.

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of whom physically invaded the Indian subcontinent. In reality, the word aryan means 'noble' and refers to the conduct of people. Recent genetic evidence shows that any mass migrations of people into India occurred well before the time period proposed by the Aryan Invasion or Aryan Migration theories. Furthermore, there is no traditional understanding or evidence of any invasion of outside people during this time period supported by India's sacred or historic texts.

The Nazis called their emblem the hakenkreuz, which was incorrectly translated to the Sanskrit word "swastika" rather than "hooked cross" in English translations of Mein Kampf. The main



Hindu swastika



Nazi hakenkreuz

difference they made to the original symbol was adjusting the orientation of it. The Nazi swastika is at a forty-five-degree angle (with some stylistic exceptions) while the religious and cultural ones are not. The Hindu swastika features clockwise curves on the symbol, and depictions of it also often feature dots.

The Swastika Today

Unfortunately, the use of the hakenkreuz did not end with the defeat of Nazi Germany as many hateful movements—including white supremacist groups have adopted it. After the horrors committed by the Nazis, there has been a justifiable

revulsion to Nazi symbolism, including the Nazi presentation of its emblem.

In the US, a student faced being expelled for displaying a Hindu swastika in his fraternity house. The Hindu American Foundation stepped in to assist and help him avoid expulsion.

The European Union attempted to ban all use of the swastika, regardless of the renditions. Understandably, Hindus rose in defense of their sacred symbol. Speaking out against the proposed EU ban a representative of the Hindu Forum of Britain said, "The swastika has been around for 5,000 years as a symbol of peace," noting that banning all use of the swastika would be akin to banning the Christian cross because the Ku Klux Klan used burning crosses to terrorize African Americans.

In recent years, numerous efforts through interfaith dialogue have been undertaken to dispel the misunderstandings surrounding the ancient symbol.

In 2008, at the second Hindu-Jewish Leadership Summit in Jerusalem, a resolution formally recognized the long positive history of the swastika, stating that the: "Svastika is an ancient and greatly auspicious symbol of the Hindu tradition. It is inscribed on Hindu temples, ritual altars, entrances, and even account books. A distorted version of this sacred symbol was misappropriated by the Third Reich in Germany, and abused as an emblem under which heinous crimes were perpetrated against humanity, particularly the Jewish people. The participants recognize that this symbol is, and has been sacred to Hindus for millennia, long before its misappropriation."

For billions of the world's population the swastika has remained a most sacred symbol that has for millennia signified goodness and well-being in both religious and social contexts. There is even a town of Swastika in Ontario, Canada, which was founded in 1908. For many people today, the association between Nazism, white supremacy, and the swastika seems inseparable and any traditional use by Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, and others insensitive. However, through dialogue and education the important distinction between the Nazi hakenkreuz and the Hindu swastika can become common knowledge.

Additional Readings and Resources:

- › Learn All About the Swastika
<https://www.hinduamerican.org/swastika>
- › How the world love the swastika - until Hitler stole it
<https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-29644591>
- › The Nazi from Swastika, Ont.
<https://nationalpost.com/news/canada/the-nazi-from-swastika-ont-how-canadas-most-unusually-named-town-spawned-a-notorious-hitler-fangirl>
- › Declaration of the Second Hindu-Jewish Leadership Summit
http://www.millenniumpeacesummit.org/2nd_Hindu-Jewish_Leadership_Summit_Declaration.pdf
- › The Jain Symbol
<https://pluralism.org/the-jain-symbol>
- › How Does The Jain Swastik Differ From the Symbol of Hate
<https://youngminds.vja.org/how-does-the-jain-swastik-differ-from-the-symbol-of-hate-d715b1e922b5>





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Discussion Questions

In addition to the reading, have students watch this short video,
[*“The Swastika: A Symbol of Auspiciousness,”*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FU7qZvDI9ec&t=3s)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FU7qZvDI9ec&t=3s>

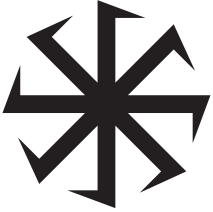
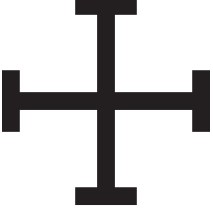



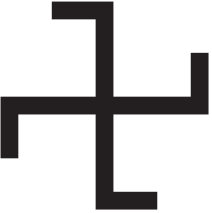
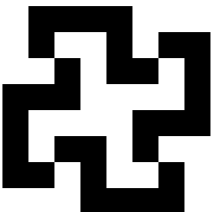


Use the following questions to reflect further on what you have read and watched about the history of the swastika.

- › As the swastika has been misappropriated for hateful reasons, what otherwise positive symbols have been misconstrued for negative meanings in different communities?
- › What do you think are culturally appropriate ways to display symbols that have different meanings for different communities?
- › What are some positive examples that have been used featuring Hindu symbols?
- › Why is the history of a symbol important?
- › What are the differences between symbols that represent facts versus opinions or beliefs?

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Aligning Symbols and Communities

In this matching activity, students will review what they have learned about the global and historical uses of this symbol. Have students match up the design with the correct community.

 <div data-bbox="105 793 414 856">1</div>	 <div data-bbox="479 793 787 856">2</div>	 <div data-bbox="852 793 1161 856">3</div>
 <div data-bbox="105 1161 414 1224">4</div>	 <div data-bbox="479 1161 787 1224">5</div>	 <div data-bbox="852 1161 1161 1224">6</div>
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- › Jain
- › Navajo
- › Greek
- › Buddhist
- › Armenian
- › Ghanaian
- › Slavic
- › Phoenician
- › Islamic

Answers

1-Slavic 2-Phoenician 3-Jain 4-Greek 5-Ghanaian 6-Navajo 7-Armenian 8-Islamic 9-Buddhist












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Examining the Interpretation of Symbols

In this chart there are several types of symbols—some are universally known and accepted; others are specific to a particular demographic (age, religion, occupation, etc.). Review the different types of symbols and fill in the chart with any that you can think of.

Type of Symbol	Examples	Meaning <i>What does this symbol explain?</i>	Intent <i>Neutral, positive, or negative? and why?</i>
Faith Symbols that hold a particular meaning for a specific religious community.  			
Universal Symbols that are widely recognized with its meaning accepted by all.  			
Visible/Invisible Symbols that are a visible representation of an invisible trait.  			
Cultural Symbols that hold meaning within a culture 			
Trendy Symbols that capture a fashionable or up-to-date feeling 			
Transformative Meaning Symbols whose meaning has transformed over time 			



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The Hindu American Foundation (HAF) is an educational and advocacy organization established in 2003.

HAF focuses on educating the public about Hindus and Hinduism and advocating for policies and practices that ensure the well-being of all people and the planet. We work directly with educators and journalists to ensure accurate understanding of Hindus and Hinduism. We also work with policymakers and key stakeholders to champion issues of concern to Hindu Americans, including defending civil and human rights and protecting all living beings. Inspired by our guiding principles and Hindu teachings, HAF promotes dignity, mutual respect, and pluralism.

HAF is a non-partisan, non-profit tax-exempt public charity pursuant to Internal Revenue Code Section 501(c)3.

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