

# THE SWASTIKA: USE AND ABUSE OF A SACRED SYMBOL

*A joint partnership project with the  
Hindu American Foundation,  
American Jewish Committee, and  
Interfaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington.*

# SYMBOLS, BY DEFINITION, HAVE POWER. THROUGHOUT HISTORY SYMBOLS HAVE BEEN USED TO CONSECRATE AND POSITIVELY INSPIRE, AS WELL AS TO INTIMIDATE AND HARM. PERHAPS NO ABUSE OF A SYMBOL IS MORE POTENT THAN ONE ASSOCIATED WITH GENOCIDE.

*This publication is designed to briefly explain the positive meaning and significance of the swastika for Buddhists, Hindus, Jains and Zoroastrians as well as note the painful significance of the Nazi symbol for the Jewish community.*

## MEANING OF THE SWASTIKA

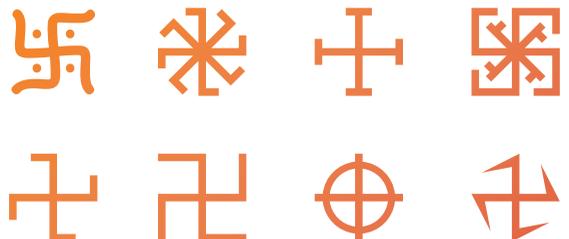
The swastika (or svastika) has been used for more than 10,000 years in the Indus Saraswati Valley civilizations. Similar shaped symbols have also been used in other cultures such as ancient Troy, and by Native Americans in North America, for just as long. The word swastika in Sanskrit translates to “that which makes all well.” *Su* means “good” and *asti* means “to exist.” It appears in one of the most frequently used mantras of the Rg Veda [1.89.6], the oldest scripture known to man.

The swastika is considered extremely sacred and holy by many faith traditions including Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, and remains very widely used from ancient times to the present day. Zoroastrians also use a similar symbol for religious reasons. The swastika is understood to be auspicious and is found engraved on sacred objects of worship as well as on doorways of temples, homes, and businesses. It also takes prominence in many religious ceremonies to celebrate weddings, consecrate new homes, and embark on new

ventures or any such promising and hopeful undertaking. It is used on a myriad of other objects in daily use in many Asian countries, especially India. Because the swastika has been so widely used for so long, it has been interpreted in a variety of ways by practitioners of many Eastern religions.

Interpretations used by Hindus include:

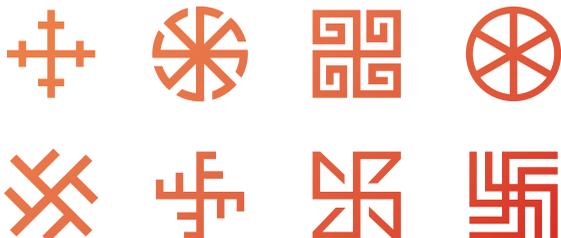
- › The four Vedas (Rig, Yajur, Sama, Atharva): the oldest Hindu scriptures
- › The four goals of life: Dharma, Artha, Kama, Moksha (right action, material prosperity, mental and physical happiness, and spiritual freedom)
- › The limbs are also interpreted as representing the four seasons.



- › The four directions (north, south, east, and west)
- › The four yugas or epochs (Satya, Treta, Dvapara, Kali)
- › A solar symbol, spreading light in all directions
- › A representation of Lord Ganesha, the Remover of obstacles, the Repository of wisdom and who is invariably invoked at the start of any religious ceremony in the form and sacred sound of Aum

In Buddhism, the four arms of the swastika are interpreted to represent the four Noble Truths taught by the Buddha: there is suffering; the origin of suffering is desire; suffering can cease; and the eight-fold path is the way out of suffering.

In Jainism, the swastika is the primary holy symbol and is the sign of the seventh Jina (Saint), the Tirthankara Suparsva. All Jain temples and holy books must contain the swastika, and ceremonies typically begin and end with creating a swastika mark several times with rice around the altar. The four segments of the swastika represent the four destinies of living beings: life as a human being; as a celestial being; as a fish, bird, or animal; and as living in hell.



Symbols just like the swastika have also been used in other ancient cultures. A figurine carved with a recognizable armed cross symbol dating to 10,000-13,000 BCE was found in Ukraine. In the Balkans, the symbol has been used for at least the past 8,000 years. Outside of India, the symbol is called different things and has different meanings in its various cultural and linguistic contexts.

## THE JEWISH PERSPECTIVE

For Jews, the Nazi symbol is inextricably linked with the German National Socialist plan to rid the world of the Jewish people. In Europe and America, the Nazi symbol, called a *hakenkreuz* by the Nazis and mistakenly referred to as the 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 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 employment. Their citizenship was revoked, and they became demonized, described in language usually reserved for vermin. Ultimately, 6 million Jews were exterminated by the Nazis during the Holocaust.

The Nazi symbol was not an incidental or occasional image: some viewed the symbol

THE SWASTIKA 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.

**DECLARATION OF THE SECOND HINDU-JEWISH LEADERSHIP SUMMIT, FEBRUARY 2008, JERUSALEM**

as a representation of an imagined Aryan identity, arguing that there was a “master race” or group of people known as the Aryans. Such beliefs melded religious ideas with popular historical and racial theories of the time—theories which have long since been disproven. Aryan is a Sanskrit term meaning “noble” and refers to the conduct of people rather than a specific group or race of people. 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 use of the Hakenkreuz did not end with the defeat of Nazi Germany. For the last six decades, many hateful movements—including white supremacist groups, which define non-whites as subhuman and Jews as the



offspring of Satan—have adopted it. When Jewish graves are desecrated or houses of worship attacked, spray-painted Nazi symbols are frequently found. Some anti-Israel activists are now using it to demonize or delegitimize Israel by claiming it is like Nazi Germany. In the Jewish experience, there is no more devastating and hurtful symbol than the Nazi symbol.

But for billions of the world’s population in India, China, Korea, Indonesia, Tibet, Thailand, and indeed in most of Asia, the swastika is a most sacred symbol that has for millennia signified goodness and well-being in both religious and social contexts. As the world shrinks with globalization, people travel, migrate, and mingle more than ever before. We can no longer ignore such widely differing interpretations of a symbol so widely used in so many parts of the world.

In 2008, at the second Hindu-Jewish Leadership Summit, a resolution was formally adopted recognizing the long positive history of the swastika:

*“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.”*

*Declaration of the Second Hindu-Jewish Leadership Summit, February 2008, Jerusalem*

## ISSUED BY



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