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DISCRIMINATION

Symbol of Good and Evil

Hindu sues Hyatt hotel for religious discrimination after being fired for drawing his swastika

The unimaginable atrocities committed by Nazis during World War II still weigh heavily on the world's psyche, and few images reawaken the ignominy and suffering more strongly than the Nazi swastika. Devinder Paul Kaushal, a devout vegetarian Hindu from New Delhi, learned the extent of this stigma at work one day. His employment of over twelve years at the Hyatt Regency in Woodfield, just outside of Chicago, was terminated after he innocently used window cleaner to spray a swastika on a mirror he was helping to clean.

The image was immediately wiped away, but Kaushal's co-workers were taken aback, and complained. Kaushal made efforts to explain to his seniors that in his religion the swastika is a prevalent image associated with auspiciousness. But they were not convinced. He was asked to resign, and when he didn't, was fired days later. Kaushal is now suing the hotel giant for religious discrimination, seeking reinstatement, back pay and damages.

Married with two boys, ages 5 and 2, thirty-six-year-old

Kaushal told his supervisor, "There is no way that I am going to resign after working for so long with the company. If I was young, I wouldn't care. But I have a family. I am not going to resign. I don't know what you are thinking. This is my religious symbol." Kaushal claims he had no knowledge of how deep the revulsion for the swastika runs in the West. He told Hinduism Today, "I did not mean to offend anybody. Now that I have learned more about it, I do feel sorry for the holocaust victims. But people should also be aware that this is our religious symbol. We Hindus have been using it long before anybody else. It is very hard for me to get this through to the public."

His case has been in the local newspapers, as well as India Abroad. There was a report or two on the radio, but Kaushal complains that all this has been too brief and too shallow. "I wish someone would get this across to the American public, with a television documentary or something, to let people know there are very different meanings."

The swastika is a symbol of unknown origin that has been employed for thousands of years as a religious sign and a decorative emblem. It has appeared in ancient China, Egypt and India. It has been found on Greek coins, pre-Christian Celtic and Scandinavian artifacts, the catacombs of the early Christians in Rome and Byzantine buildings. Until 50 years ago, it was widely used by American Indians.

For Kaushal, who was born in Punjab and moved to New Delhi at age four, the swastika had always been the symbol of everything good. "We had our own temple," he recalls. "And whenever we did the Divali puja, the swastika was the first

image set down. When I got married, this was the first sign we put on. Whenever we buy a house or open a business, this is the first sign we put on the building." He is painfully aware of the irony--his symbol of goodness is another man's symbol of evil--and he struggles with the implications of his case. "It's a hard lesson for me to learn. I just want the public to know that our symbol has a very different meaning."

Prior to press time for this issue, Kaushal's case was scheduled for mid-October. His attorney was optimistic.

Ancient Icon

Who could foresee that the battle of World War II in Europe would deeply impact native American Indian traditions for decades? The swastika was one of the most used ancient symbols of the Native Americans. This fact is little known, not because its use was insignificant, but because in February, 1940, it was prohibited. After the outbreak of World War II, four Arizona tribes protested Nazi aggression by banning the swastika.

The proclamation of the ban (photo right) reads, "Because the above ornament, which has been a symbol of friendship among our forefathers for many centuries, has been desecrated recently by another nation of peoples, therefore, it is resolved that henceforth, from this date on and forever more, our tribes renounce the use of the emblem commonly known today as the swastika, or fylfot, on our blankets, baskets, art objects, sandpaintings and clothing."

The specific list of restrictions signifies the extent to which the tribes had used the motif in every aspect of their daily life up to the time of the ban, perhaps even more so than Hindus. A parallel might be if Hindus were to proscribe the use of the sacred symbol, Aum.

RESOURCE: THE SWASTIKA: A HISTORY, BY ROBERT R. WEGER, TREBOR REGEW AND ASSOCIATES, BOX 1806, LAFAYETTE, CALIFORNIA 94549 USA