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Published by Anonymous on Aug. 02, 1997

MEDIA

The Twist of Fate

Jain leader struggles to de-stigmatize the swastika

When Prakash Mody pulled his February 24th issue of Time magazine out of the mailbox, he felt his heart sink. There on the cover was a huge gold swastika set against a backdrop of starving victims of the holocaust. It was the lead-in for an article on gold originally belonging to Jews which the German Nazis had stored in Swiss banks during World War II and which had never been returned to its rightful owners. The image was used to evoke the horrors--some never put to rest--of Nazi Germany. But for Mody, a devout Jain, it was just one more vilification of his cherished swastika, symbol of good luck, prosperity and all things auspicious, not only to followers of his faith, but to Hindus, Buddhists and dozens of ancient cultures.

He complained to Time that such prominent use of the swastika with no acknowledgement of its auspicious meanings to other religions was creating problems for minority religions. He received a polite reply stating: "You are correct in pointing out that that swastika is an ancient symbol that is often used to represent prosperity and good fortune. Hitler adopted the swastika, but with a major change: he switched the direction of the arms so that the top arm faced right instead of left. We were glad to hear from you about this subject. Symbols often

have very different meanings to people."

Time stopped short of printing any clarification, likely unaware of the depth of the problem. They also repeated the common error--found even in reputable dictionaries--about the swastika: that Hitler used the "right-handed" (clockwise rotating) swastika and everyone else the left-handed one. This is simply not true. The right-handed swastika is the most commonly used in world religions including Jainism, Hinduism and Buddhism. Mody proposes the Nazi swastika always be set at 45°i, as the Nazis did in later years, in order to at least partly distinguish it from the sacred usage.

Jains have faced this problem repeatedly in the West. Mody told Hinduism Today, "In 1973 Jain leaders of all sects met in India and adopted a single symbol, to be used by all Jains, regardless of their denomination [see right]. Over a decade ago, the North American Federation of Jain Organizations adopted the same logo, but removed the swastika, fearing the association of Jainism with Nazis. Four years ago when the Jains applied to join the Ontario Multi-Faith Council, I asked that we use the original symbol with the swastika. The council agreed, saying that even if some objected that it was a Nazi symbol, since it was traditionally sacred to the Jains, it was our right to use it. But when the Vancouver, Canada, Multi-faith Action Society printed a 1996- 1997 calendar they only used the palm portion of the Jain symbol and removed the upper half of the design, which included the swastika. I wrote and asked them to use the complete image in the future, but they have not responded." He recently convinced the Canadian Gage Dictionary to carry the auspicious meaning of the swastika.

The Nazi stigma carries real hazards to Jains and Hindus. Attacks apparently promoted by the presence of the swastika as religious building decorations have occurred at several temples.

A South Indian lady settled in New Jersey told Hinduism Today correspondent Radhika Srinivasan that she used to draw auspicious rangoli, floral designs which included swastikas, in front of her home, as is the universal custom in India, but promptly discontinued the practice after receiving anonymous threats. Nearby residents of Irish and Polish descent Radhika spoke with could hardly associate the name swastika with sanctity, piety or anything positive.

Adolf Hitler adopted what was known as the "twisted or broken cross" to promote "German or Positive Christianity." He replaced the cross with the swastika in all churches. He selected the dynamic swastika from several hundred alternatives as a counter to the communist hammer-and-sickle emblem. The swastika is one of the most widely used symbols, found in the ancient cultures of Mesopotamia, Greece, Central Asia, Scythia, Parthia, pre-Columbian Mexico and the Americas. The American Navajo Indians called it tsil no' oli, "whirling winds." It is found on the Indus Valley seals, on rock petroglyphs near Mayan tombs and, according to one expert, even King Solomon's temple.

To those in India, all this may seem needless fussing, for they are not aware of the potent emotional associations of the swastika, nor of the Jews' collective oath to "never forget" (or allow the world to forget) what happened to them under the

Nazis. But the Nazis are dead and gone, and Jains, Hindus and others would prefer that the Nazis not be allowed this one last victory of snatching away our ancient, holy and much-beloved symbol of good fortune.