

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

The Symbol 'Chakra' in Ancient Indian Tradition

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Abstract:

In ancient Indian tradition the symbol Chakra stands for the Supreme Law of the cosmos and human life. In Rigveda, Chakra is described as 'Sanemi' or 'Sanabhi'. Chakra is also described as an important weapon of Vishnu. Several Buddhist texts mention its relevance. In art Sarnath Pillar is the best example where 'Mahachakra' at the top defines that the king should rule through Dhamma. The emblem of our National flag 'Chakra' has been adopted from Sarnath Pillar which depicts the perfect picture of cosmos and human life. Various artists have adopted and depicted this symbol in architecture. Jainas also worshiped 'Chakrapatta' on the tablets. Thus, this symbol has a Universal appeal.

Keywords: Chakra, cosmos, symbol, spokes, chakravarti

1. Introduction

The symbol of Chakra as representing the supreme ideals of the cosmic manifestation on the one hand and of the individual life on the other has been a part of Indian tradition from the most ancient times.

The concept of the Chakra was mentioned in the Vedas as the symbol of creation known as 'Brahma Chakra' and of time 'Kalachakra'.¹ It was later known as 'Samsara Chakra' and in Buddhism it referred as 'Bhava Chakra' and 'Dharma Chakra'. The Chakra stands for the perfect cycle of life which is at once beautiful and accessible to all, and therefore called 'Sudarsana Chakra', the wheel of the Divine Preserver of World and Life.

2. Discussion

In the Vedic period Chakra is the symbol of movement (Gati) in accordance with a rhythm (chhandas). The basic quality of wheel is its dual characteristic as seen in the ascent and descent, as the rhythmic unfoldment of time in the form of the rotation of night and day, the bright and dark halves of the month (suklapaksha and Krishnapaksha), two semesters of the Samvatsara (Uttarayana and Dakshinayana) and lastly the ever present process of contraction and expansion.² These are symbolized in nature as 'Sun' and therefore 'Martanda Surya' is conceived of as the 'Great Wheel', 'Maha Chakra' or 'Brihat Chakra'.

Chakra with its cyclic movement in a rhythmic order brings great blessing and happiness, for eg. the cycle of six seasons (Shat-Ritu Chakra) presents a charming poetry of flowers, plants, singing birds and many other harmonies. Childhood, Youth and Old Age depend on the potency of the Chakra, etc. Thus, the meaning of the Chakra has a universal appeal. It stands for the Supreme Law of the Cosmos and human life.³

The Chakra in the Rigveda is described as 'Sanemi', or 'Sanabhi' or 'Trinabhi'. Nemi is the circumference and nabhi is the centre of the wheel.⁴ The Chakra has a two fold aspect the centre and the circumference. There is rest at the centre and movement in the circumference. Unity in the centre and movement in the circumference. The complete Chakra presents a harmony between the two. There is no better symbol than the wheel, showing the law of unity in diversity. Rigveda mentioned that Chakra may have any number of spokes from one, three, five, six, twelve to one thousand.⁵ Each spoke is like a geometry of life or creativity, and it leads to mutual understanding to recognize that the wheel of human-life is comprised of a thousand spokes.

The Buddhist also influenced with this description for eg. In Lalit Vistara it is mentioned that the Chakra that was studded with many jewels, adorned with many gems, decorated with a bejewelled ornaments had thousand spokes and thousand rays which is set in motion through long time by innumerable Buddhas or Arhatts.⁶

The worship of wheel was an intimate part of Indian culture. It has been preserved upto now in every Hindu household where the commencement of the marriage ceremony takes place with offering worship to the wheel of the potter (Chakrapuja or Chakapuja) who is named as Prajapati. It suggests that marriage is by far the most important institution by which the wheel of the Creator is kept revolving for ever. All the women inmates of the house visit the potter's wheel and perform the ceremony there. There is hardly any other cult of such universal hold as this Chakra worship.⁷

In puchmarked coins also Chakra symbol with four, six spokes have been depicted.⁸ Panchal and Ujjaini rulers have also adopted Chakra as a symbol in their coins.⁹ The word 'Achyu' in Brahmi script is inscribed on the obverse of Panchala coins and Chakra as reverse which has eight spokes.¹⁰ 'Achyut' is the name of Vishnu in Vishnusahastranama. Many more examples found in literature and art certify the fact that word Chakra is described as an important attribute of weapon of Vishnu and Krishna as well.

In Indian art the Sarnath Pillar is the best example of the combination of the Chakravarti and the Yogi ideals. The carving on the round drum of four wheels and four animals covers a very wide range both in time and space.¹¹ The group of four animals representing the four fold manifestation on the level of the cosmos and the men. They are associated variously with four continents, four cities, four gateways of a royal place where the place symbolizes the dominion of Chakravarti - king, the sovereign whose Chakra rolls in four directions over the earth.¹² In short this leads us to the ancient cult of the four quarters. The followers of which is known as 'Disa-Vratika'. It is stated that both Sramanas and Brahmanas were followers of these cults in quest of religious piety and freedom (mukti) from the world. The four animals on the abacus are paired with four Chakras. Here, the Chakra represents the divine Pranic power called 'Purusha' and the animal is 'Pasu'. So, each pair of animal and Chakra is symbol of Purushapasu, half human and half animal. The former stands for divine power and the latter for material body.

The four adored lions on the abacus seated back to back signifies that the power behind them is derived from one source which is their axis and which rises from a centre between their heads as the Mahadharmachakra or the Great wheel of Law. The kind who stood on the highest terrace of the Dharma palace is typified by the four lions. Buddha was a born Chakravarti. Asoka himself was a Chakravarti sovereign who took to this path by a new kind of victory viz., 'Dhamma-Vijaya'. The divine of heavenly wheel (divya-chakra) was the foremost possession of the Chakravarti king and topped the list of seven jewels which each Chakravarti sovereign invariably possess. The Lalita Vistara explains the Dharma. Chakra pravartana of the Buddha as a 'Dharma-Yajna' or 'Dharma-Varsha' (Showers of Dharma). The wheel of Dharma is also called an 'Amrit Chakra' 'Anuttara-Chakra' and 'Excellent-wheel' which is most

wonderful.¹³ The Maha Chakra at the top defines that the king ruled through the principles of Dhamma and as Kautilya stated 'State and morality run together.'

The emblem of our national flag 'Chakra' has been adopted from the four wheels carved on the drum of the Sarnath Lion Pillar. It has 24 spokes which symbolize the metaphysical basis of cosmic manifestation or the nature of the material world which has following elements - Prakriti, Mahatattva. (Buddhi), Ahankara, Mana, Five Cognitive sense organs (Jananedriya), Five motor sense organs (Karmendriya), Five Tanmatra (Sabda, Akasa, Sparsh, Rasa, Gandha) and five Mahabhutas (ether, air, fire, water and earth). In short, it is the perfect depiction of cosmos and of human life.¹⁴

Chakra is frequently depicted and repeated motif in the railings and gateways of Sanchistupa Number I and II. In Sanchi Stupa No. I Chakra symbol is carved with four lions and lotus. Likewise in Sanchi Stupa No. II four men and women are represented worshipping the Chakra. The worship of Chakra is also represented in Bharhut, Bodhgaya, Amravati and Mathura Stupa.¹⁵ On the Prasenjit pillar at Bharhut beautiful Chakra is depicted.¹⁶

In Jainism also the symbol Chakra is depicted on the sculptures of Mahavira and Risebhnath found at Kankali Tila, Jaina Stupa. The other form of Chakra worship by the Jainas is shown in the 'Chakra-patta' on the tablets.

In Gupta period Chakra is carved in Sanchi and Udaigiri pillar. Later on, Dharma Chakra ideal personified as 'Chakra-purusha' as depicted on the 'Chakra-Vikrama' coin of Chandragupta Vikramaditya.

The Chakra worship began more popular as the new explanation of Chakra is given by the Bhagavata sect. They define Chakra Sudarsana as the principle of life (Prana), Divine power (maya), Activity (Kriya), Energy (Sakti), Emotions (Bhava), Ideals (Unmesha), Exertion (Udyama) and will (Samkalpa).¹⁷

The symbol chakra has been depicted in several temples from Gupta onwards in different styles such as Konarka, Chaturbhuj temple, Mt. Abu, Hoysala temple etc.¹⁸

3. Conclusion

Thus, it is clear that the Chakra, as the symbol of the cosmos, Time, Supreme Law (Vedic Ritta and Buddhist Dhamma) and finally of the Divine Will was the fruit of a number of religious, philosophic and cult motifs which received universal approval for thousands of years in the accumulated tradition of the Indian people.

4. References

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