



THE DHVAJA SYMBOL IN INDIAN LITERATURE, ART AND ICONOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT

The Dhvaja (flag, banner or standard) is one of the important and significant symbols from ancient India. It is commonly known as an Indradhvaja or 'triangular headed standard' which can be seen on various ancient Indian coins such as those of Ujjain, Sātavāhana, Śuṅga, Kurara, Eraṇ, Mitra etc. Some sculptures from Bharhut and Sanchi have depictions of Dhvaja. Also this symbol can be seen on Jain Ayāgapaṭṭas, in the Udaygiri-Khandgiri caves. We also find references to Dhvaja in ancient literature like Bharata-Nāṭyaśāstra, Br̥hat-Saṃhitā, Samarāṅgaṇasūtradhāra. It is proposed to trace the history and depiction of Dhvaja symbol in literature and art forms and to explore the relationship between the unidentified symbols from Ayāgapaṭṭa and Dhvajās.

Keywords: dhvaja, Indradhvaja, ketu, ayāgapaṭṭa, bhadraśana

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The *Dhvaja* in the early Indian tradition consisted of three components, *ketu* (crest), *yaṣṭī* (staff or pole) and *paṭṭa* (cloth or drapery added later for ornamentation) (Thapliyal:1983: 89). The term *dhvaja* occurs twice in the R̥V (*Rig Veda*) denoting a portable standard carried into battle. One of the hymns (R̥V7.85.2) invokes *Indra-Varuṇa*, and the other (R̥V 10.103.11) *Indra* for victory in battle. The tradition of worshipping *Indradhvaja* probably has its origins in the concept of *Indra* in a symbolic form accompanying one in battle to ensure victory.

According to Wayman, this symbol i.e. triangle headed standard, is surely the *Indradhvaja* described in Varāhamihira's *Br̥hatsaṃhitā*, Chapter 42. This paragon of banners was obtained by Indra from Viṣṇu's radiance and was placed on an eight-wheeled chariot. The banner was on a kind of pole suitably ornamented with garlands, royal parasol (*chattra*), bells, and *piṭaka*-ornaments. Agrawala also lists the banners of the epic heroes. Besides, there are the *dhvaja* banners associated with religious shrines (Wayman: 1989: 239).

Literature

We get references of *dhvaja* in literature from the Vedic period. The *dhvaja* had an important place in battle during the *Rgvedic* period:

*spardhante vā u devahūye atra yeṣu
dhvajeṣu didyavḥ patanti | yuvṃ tām
indrāvaruṇāvamitran hataṃ parācḥ śarvā
viśūcḥ||* (R.V.7.85.2)

In literature attention is drawn to a long list in the *Mahābhārata* (Droṇa Parva: 80.1-29). The banners of the *Mahābhārata* heroes on the two sides were decorated with a number of animal figures and other objects called *Lakṣma* or *Rūpa*. These banners are generally styled as *ketu* and *dhvaja* which were of great variety. Indeed each one of them was assigned a particular symbol (*rūpa-lakṣma*), colour (*varṇa*) and name (*nāma*) derived from the animal or objects associated with it. They were decorated with garlands as we find in the case of several of the *chakras* depicted at Sanchi. (Agrawala:1964: 15)

The *Indradhvaja* at present is a festival pole. It indicates the influence of image worship and the practice of carrying the idol on festive occasions. To make an *Indradhvaja*, the rites include felling a tree for making the sacrificial pole and it being carried and erected at a designated place. At the end of the festival the *Indradhvaja* was lowered and set away. It was closely identified with the king and the fall of the *dhvaja* was believed to portend the death of the king. These staffs and poles were the early proto-types of the later *dhvajās*, or banners, which could be held high and carried. *Dhvajās* with various figures and heads on the flags attached at the top are mentioned in the *Mahābhārata* as protective divinities. (Dange:1985-87: 8)

The *Bharatanāṭyaśāstra* also mentions the *dhvaja*:

*ayṃ dhvajamaḥ śrīmāna mahendrasya
pravartate|
atredānīmayṃ vedo nāṭyasajñḥ prayujyatām||*
(B.N.S.54)

In *Bharatanāṭyaśāstra* the *dhavaja* is also referred to as *Jarjara*. The *Pūrvaraṅga* of *Nāṭyaśāstra* mentions a tradition of worshiping *jarjara* (*indradvaja* or an auspicious pole) on stage i.e. consecration of the stage (*raṅgapūjana*) which took place after the building of a new playhouse

(theatre) and the rites of which are described in the third chapter (Kuiper: 1975: 242).

The *Samarāṅgaṇa-sūtradhāra*, the text composed by the Paramara king Bhoj of Dhar (eleventh century CE) has one whole chapter devoted to the *dhvaja* i.e. *Indradhvajanirūpaṇa* which describes the ceremonial creation of *Indradhvaja* or Indra's banner to which worship was offered by the king and the people.

Mitākṣara, a commentary on *Yājñavalkasmṛti* from twelfth century CE, also refers to the *Indradhvaja*. It states that a King can erect the *dhvaja* on the twelfth day of the bright half of *Bhādrapada* month and at that time moon should be in *uttarāśadhā* or *dhaniṣṭhā nakṣatra*. The *Dhvaja* could to be lowered on full moon day of the same half and in *bharaṇi nakṣatra* (Kane: 1941: 825).

Jain texts like the *Uttarādhyayan-sūtra* narrate the stories of *Pratyeka Buddha*. The story of king *Dvimukha*, one of the *Pratyeka Buddha*, also refers *Indradhvaja*. Prakrit texts like the *Nāyādhammakahāo* and *Bhagavatisūtra* also mentions *indalaththi* (*indrayaṣṭi*) which refers to *Indradhvaja*.

In a discussion on the meanings of *dhvaja*, *ketu* and *patākā* in the *Mahābhārata*, Hopkins shows that *dhvaja* is often a synonym of *ketu*, though sometimes the former means the whole arrangement including the staff and the image or banner, while the latter indicates only the symbol or banner alone. He further points out that *ketu* is sometimes synonymous with *patākā* or flag and the *dhvaja* is the metallic top-piece of the staff, or that together with the staff which bore flags beneath the emblem. It is interesting, however, to note that the *Amarakoṣa* (*Kṣatriya-varga*, VIII.101) regards *patākā*, *vaijayantī*, *ketana* and *dhvaja* as synonymous words (Sircar 2008: 220).

Art and Iconography

Dhvaja symbol on Coins

One of the frequent symbols depicted on the punch-marked coins (from circa fourth century BCE) and the local and tribal coins up to circa third century CE is known to numismatics as the 'triangle-headed standard' (Fig.4.1). The symbol essentially consists

of a crest looking like an inverted triangle on a staff and held in position by a pin underneath and decorated with a couple of streamers generally at the top right. Punch-marked coins impressed with this motif have been found at widely scattered sites all over the sub-continent from Taxila in the northwest to Patna in the east and Amaravati and Madras in the south (Gupta:1969: symbols 12,185, 292). The motif is also found on many local and tribal coins issued by the *Audumbaras*, *Kuṇindas* and *Yaudheyas* in the north. (Fig.4.2) The wide provenance of the symbol shows that it was not the standard of any particular tribe, clan or dynasty but had a special and pre-eminent place over all other personal or dynastic standards.

The *Dhvaja* symbol (triangle headed standard) occurs on the coins issued by the Sātavāhana kings Sātakarṇi I Sātakarṇi II (Fig.4.3), and. James Prinsep was the earliest to identify the triangle-headed standard with *jaya-dhvaja*. V.S.Agrawala has also identified the symbol with *indradhvaja* or *vaijayantī* standard sacred to *Indra*. Sarma describes the motif occurring on the Andhra coins as *Indra-yaṣṭī*, a royal symbol of authority (Sarma: 1980: 72).

The triangle headed standard symbol is a commonly seen on several coins. They are found on various coins of Kaushambi, Taxila, and Ujjain in a railing and it is found on coins of Eran also (Fig.4.4). A similar object occurs on Andhra coins and on the disc from Pataliputra, Pricsep calls it as a *jayadhvaja*. (Allan 1981: introduction xxxiv)

Dhvaja symbol in Caves

The famous inscription of King Kharvela incised partly in front and partly on the roof of the Hathigumpha cave, on the southern face of the Udayagiri Hills in Odisha have two symbols at the beginning and a third one at the end of the record. This third symbol is identified as a sacred tree within a square enclosure or railing (Jayasval and Banerji 1929-30: 76). Inscription in the Tiger cave from Khandgiri hills also have the same symbol and an inscription from Vaikuntha cave has this symbol without railing. (Fig.4.5) The Ananta cave from Khandagiri also has the dhvaja symbol on the back wall with other symbols like *svastika*, *śrīvatsa* along with that of *Tīrthaṅkara* images (Fig.4.6).

Dhvaja symbol as a Maṅgala Sign

An *aṣṭamaṅgalaka hāra* (Fig.4.7) depicted on a pillar of a gateway (*toraṇa*) in the Great Stupa at Sanchi, Madhya Pradesh, first century BCE also has the *dhvaja* symbol. (Agrawala:1953: plate 16). *Ayāgapatṭas* are votive slabs generally associated with the Jaina religion. The carvings on most of the *ayāgapatṭas* are exuberant and reflect the skill of the artists in weaving a good number of motifs. The religious character of these *ayāgapatṭas* is evident not only by the accompanying inscriptions but by the depiction of *stūpas*, figures of *Tīrthaṅkaras*, *caityavr̥kṣa*, *dharmacakra* and auspicious symbols, including *aṣṭamaṅgalas*, particularly sacred to Jainism. (Shah 1975: 64)

According to Dr. Führer, the eight auspicious marks of the Jainas are the mystic cross (*Svastika*), mirror (*Darpaṇa*), pot (*Kalaśa*), a cane seat, shaped like an hour-glass (*Bhadrāsana*), two small fish, flower garland and book (Smith: 1901: 16). According to the *Śvetāmbara* canonical text *Aupapātika-sūtra*, they are *svastika*, *śrīvatsa*, *nandyāvarta*, *vardhamānaka* (powder flask), the full vase, *darpaṇa* (mirror) and *matsya yugma* (a pair of fish). According to the *Tiloypannati*, the Digambara tradition gives the following set of *aṣṭamaṅgalas*: *bhr̥ṅgāra*, a type of vessel, *kalaśa*, the full vase, *darpaṇa*, the mirror, *chāmara*, the flywhisk, *dhvaja*, the banner, *vyajana*, the fan, *chattra*, the parasol, and *supratiṣṭha*, the auspicious seat (Shah: 1975: 492). In *Triśaṣṭhi-śalākāpuruṣa*, the reference by Hemacandra to *bali-patṭas* with *aṣṭamaṅgala* symbols is interesting since this is supported by the evidence of *aṣṭamaṅgalas* on *ayāgapatṭas* of the Kushan era obtained from Mathura. The *ayāgapatṭa* set up by *Acalā*, wife of Bhadrānandi (Fig.4.8) shows four symbols in the upper panel and eight more in the lower panel. In the lower panel, the partially mutilated first symbol from the right end was possibly the *śrīvatsa*. The second is the *svastika*, the third a half open lotus bud, fourth is a pair of fish, fifth a water jar, the sixth, a heap of jewels (*ratna-rāśi*), the seventh seems to be a cross-stand with a scripture on it, perhaps the *sthāpanā*, but it could have been the *bhadrāsana*.

A better preserved set of eight symbols is obtained on the *ayāgapatṭa* (Fig.4.9) set up by

Sihanādika (J 249 of the Lucknow Museum). In the uppermost central rectangular panel, the tablet of Sihanādika shows a pair of fish, a heavenly car, a *śrīvatsa*, and a powder flask. In the corresponding part of the lowermost panel are shown a *triratna* symbol, a full blown lotus, a symbol which Agrawala recognised as *Indra-yaṣṭi* or *vaijayantī* and a *maṅgala-kalaśa* (Shah 1975: 490). Tiwari (2010: 351) identified this *Indra-yaṣṭi* symbol as *Sthāpanā* (a cross stand with a manuscript on it) or the *bhadrāsana*.

The tablet (Fig. 4.10) set up by an unknown donor (J 250 of the Lucknow Museum) has in the central bigger circle an ornamental *svastika*, enclosing in its four arms the *svastika*, *śrīvatsa*, *mīna-yugala* and *Indra-yaṣṭi* (*vaijayantī?* *sthāpanā?*) symbols (Shah 1975: 491). According to Burges (1892: 312) the smaller emblems enclosed by the larger ones are, (1) at the top, a *svastika*, which is commonly used as a lucky or sacred mark by all Indian sects, (2) below, two fish, which are likewise considered very generally as marks of good omen, (3) on the left, another variety of the *triśūla*, common on Buddhist monuments and (4) on the right, a mark which looks like a monogram, formed of the syllables *na* and *vo*, and it not uncommon on Buddhist sculptures, and is also used for ornaments.

The *ayāgapatṭa* (Fig.4.11) set up by Śivamitra, recovered in a fragmentary form, shows in the centre the leg of a big cross-legged stand which, in the tablets noted above, has been referred to as *sthāpanā* (?) or an *Indra-yaṣṭi* (?) etc. (Shah:1975: 492).

According to Wayman (1989: 238) belief in auspicious objects is very old, and common to all the three main sects of early India, namely Brāhmaṇism, Buddhism and Jainism. The *Mahābhārata*, Droṇa-Parva, 82, 20-22 mentions numerous objects which Arjuna looked at or touched as auspicious when starting for battle, amongst which maidens are also mentioned. The *Vāmana-Purāṇa*, (verse 14, lines 35-36) also mentions several objects which are auspicious. Kane cites the following verse from a manuscript of the *Śakuna-Kārikā*, which speaks of eight auspicious objects:

darpaṇaḥ pūrṇa-kalaśaḥ kanyā sumanaso' akṣṭāḥ| dīpa-mālā dhvajā lājāḥ saṃproktaṃ cāṣṭamaṅgalaṃ ||

According to the Coomaraswamy, the four that are on the lower section are the *ratnatraya*, the full lotus, a questionable item that might be the *bhadrāsana*, and the full vase. The four symbols in the votive tablet of an unknown donor, are arranged in the four directions, taking the top one as 'East', thus, *svastika* in east, *śrīvatsa* in south, fish-pair in west and the same questionable item in north. The usual list in the Jaina works according to Shah is as follows, *svastika*, *śrīvatsa*, *nandyāvarta*, *vardhmānaka*, *bhadrāsana*, *kalaśa*, *darpaṇa* and *matsya*. This list substitutes the *svastika* and the *nandyāvarta* for the *triratna* and the lotus of the oldest Jaina depiction. The *bhadrāsana* seems to confirm Coomaraswamy's query of *bhadrāsana* for the item in the lower part of the Mathura votive tablet. This is also presumably the *sthāpanā* as described by Shah, a symbolic representation of his *ācārya* or teacher which a Jaina monk keeps before him while delivering a discourse. The ornamental form in the Mathura depiction suggests that it would represent the absent Jaina *Tīrthaṅkara* by the name *bhadrāsana*. N.P. Joshi in his article, "Early Jaina Icons from Mathura" also identified this sacred symbol from *ayāgapatṭas* as *bhadrāsana*. (Wayman: 1989: 332)

Conclusion

The foregoing discussion it is clearly evident that the *dhvaja* was an auspicious symbol in ancient Indian tradition. There are many references to the *dhvaja* in ancient literature. It was also included in *aṣṭamaṅgala* symbols. From the evidences of Sanchi and Udaygiri-Khandagiri caves it is clear that this symbol is one of the most sacred symbols in all traditions. The depiction of *dhvaja* (triangle headed standard) in numismatics also suggests its importance in political and social traditions. Taking into account the view of Agrawala, that symbol on *ayāgapatṭa* is *Indra-yaṣṭi*, there is a possibility that the symbol on *ayāgapatṭa*, which is identified as *bhadrāsana* or *sthāpanā* by many of the scholars, may actually be the symbolic representation of the *dhvaja*.



Figure 4.1: Triangle headed standard



Figure 4.2: Kuninda coin

(<http://www.worldofcoins.eu/forum/index.php/topic,29917.msg190890.html#msg190890>)



Figure 4.3: Coin of the Satavahana king Satakarni I, 100 BC

<http://www.worldofcoins.eu/forum/index.php?topic=44562.0>



Figure 4.4: Eran coin

(<http://coinindia.com/eran482.jpg>)

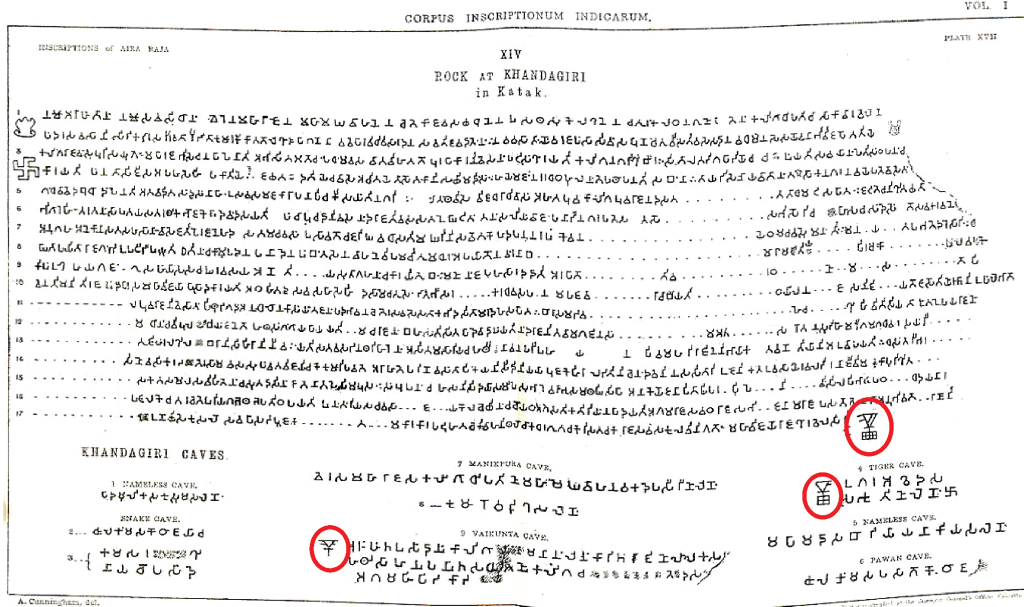


Figure 4.5: Inscriptions from Hathigumpha, Tiger and Vaikuntha caves



Figure 4.6: Ananta cave

<https://kevinstandagephotography.wordpress.com/2020/03/17/khandagiri-caves-bhubaneswar-odisha-orissa/#jp-carousel-18970>

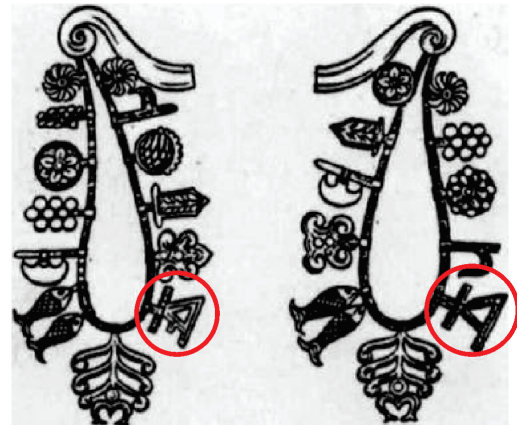


Figure 4.7: Aṣṭamaṅgalaka hāra from Sanchi Agrawala 1953, Plate 16

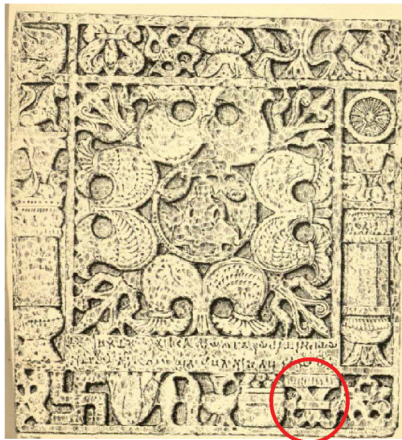


Figure 4.8: Ayāgapaṭṭa by Acalā, wife of Bhadrānandi Smith, Plate XI

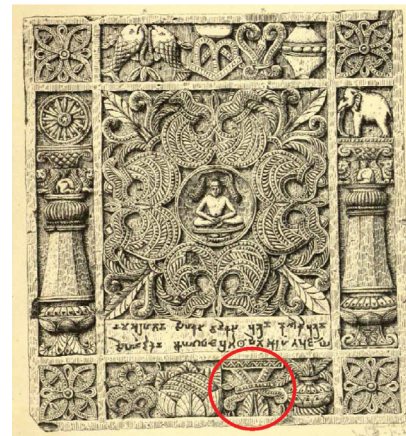


Figure 4.9: Ayāgapaṭṭa by Śihanādika Smith, Plate VII

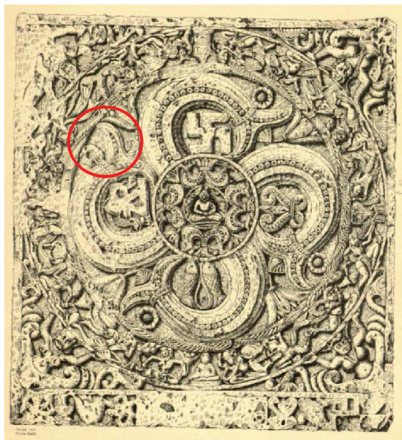


Fig.4.10 Ayāgapaṭṭa by unknown donor Smith, Plate IX

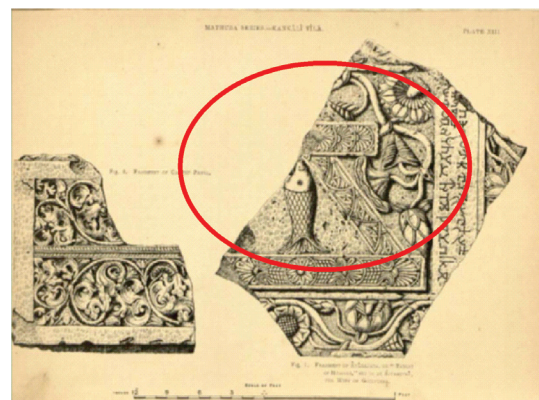


Figure 4.11: Ayāgapaṭṭa by Śivamitra Smith, Plate XIII

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