



## **SYMBOLS IN WEAPONS AND WEAPONS AS SYMBOLS: THE SOCIO-RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE OF DECORATION IN INDIAN WEAPONRY IN THE COLLECTION OF DR. JORGE CARAVANA.**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

When looking at bladed weapons originating in the Indian subcontinent, the researcher often comes across symbols and elements derived from the mythology surrounding Indian religions. This is particularly the case when regarding weapons which belonged to those who were members of religions native to the Indian subcontinent. Islamic bladed weapons, also very present in an area of the world where the ruling classes were for a large period of time Muslim, are less likely to portray figurative images, using instead calligraphy and abstract art to great decorative effect. The purpose of this article is, however, to explore the symbols present in weapons arising from communities of what is commonly called “Hinduism”.

The term “Hinduism” is a problematic one in itself, as it merely describes the religious beliefs and practices of the people inhabiting the area of the world beyond the river Indus. In fact, “Hinduism” can hardly be described as a unified, monolithic religion, consisting instead of a myriad of religious expressions. Vedic religion, *Śaivism*<sup>1</sup> and *Vaiṣṇavism* are, for example, distinct religious forms, and like these many others fall under the inexact term “Hinduism”. As such, it is preferable to speak of Indian Religions or religions native to the Indian subcontinent than of “Hinduism”, a term which has been clearly imposed from the outside as a way to describe religious forms which were little understood by outsiders until relatively recent history. This heading of Indian Religions also includes religious ideas originating in the Indian subcontinent, but which are usually seen as being outside of “Hinduism”, such as those of Buddhism and Jainism. However, Jainism and Buddhism are intimately related to other Indian Religions when it comes to philosophy and religious practice, having arisen in a similar social and intellectual context as the previous pre-historic religions of India.

This article seeks to not only explain the reason for the presence of symbols found frequently in Indian bladed weapons, as well as the weapons as symbols themselves, but also to contextualise these symbols in a philosophical and cultural framework which might be unfamiliar to the Western reader. The article is then divided into four main sections: the first one will attempt to shift the reader’s perspective on the significance of weapons by contextualising these in a particular cultural and religious background; only by understanding how bladed weapons can be seen not only as

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this article words of Sanskrit origin will be transliterated using the IAST (*International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration*) system of transliteration.

objects of violence and warfare but as objects of earthly and unearthly power can the reader appreciate them as objects of religious expression. The second part of the article will seek to contextualise the arts of war in a philosophical framework through the concepts of *Dharma* and the idea of *Varnas* (social orders) in Indian cultural and religious thought. The third part will more specifically look at the symbols which are often present in weapons, and how deities and symbols make sense in the context of the weapons themselves, what they bring to the weapons and what they meant to those who wielded them. The last part of the article will analyse particular artefacts from the collection of Dr. Jorge Caravana, taking into account the previous sections of the article.

#### **REALIGNING THE WESTERN PERSPECTIVE ON INDIAN WEAPONS**

Weapons, particularly when ornate, should not be seen solely as objects of war and violence, but, perhaps more importantly, as symbols of status and wealth. Very ornate weapons would often not even see use in the battlefield, being instead worn by their owners in situations where displaying their status would be advantageous, such as in ceremonies or public appearances as a symbol of power and not necessarily of violence. In a way, the modern reader might compare them to very expensive fashion accessories, such as a diamond necklace, serving to display wealth and reinforce the importance of the user.

As important as the symbols displayed on the weapons are, as we will see later, it is essential to see the weapons as symbols themselves, or at least certain types of weapons. Some ornate weapons might have been used for violence, but more often than not weapons for the express purpose of war would be simple and unadorned, for

practical reasons, as the ornaments might get in the way of the weapon's primary function, as well as the fact that in a war situation the weapons would be more liable to be damaged and worn out after use.

So we can better understand why the weapon is such a potent status symbol in Indian society, it is necessary to start off by examining the traditional social structure and order of the subcontinent. Indian society has been divided into four main hereditary classes (or *Varnas*) which are subdivided into a great number of castes. This idea of *Varnas* dates back to pre-history, being present in the *Rg-veda*, the most ancient sacred Indian text propagated orally before it was written down, being composed somewhere between 1500 and 1200 BCE (Flood, 1996, p.37). The *Rg-veda* describes the dismantling of the Cosmic Man (Puruṣa) and the creation of the *Varnas* from the several parts of his body:

The Brahman was his mouth,  
The arms were made the Prince,  
His thighs the common people,  
And from his feet the serf was born.

[*Rg-veda* X, xc in Goodall 1996, p. 14]

This verse describes the four *Varnas* and their functions succinctly; the *Brāhmaṇa* are the priests and teachers, the Princes (being the *Kṣatriya*) are the warriors, kings and administrators, while the common people (being the *Vaiśya*) are the farmers and merchants and the serfs (being the *Śudra*) would be the servants and menial workers

owning no property (Klostermaier, 1994, p.334). This clearly defined social structure survives to this day in Indian life, and such a strong sense of hierarchy gives us an idea of why symbols of status are so important in Indian society. Of the four *Varnas* described, the one that interests us more for the purpose of this article is that of the *Kṣatriya* (warriors and princes); of the four *Varnas*, this would be the one for whom weapons would be a symbol of their place in society. A *Brāhmaṇa*, *Vaiśya* or *Śudra* would not be in a social place where the use of ornamental weapons would serve as a symbol of their ancestry and social status; in reality, it would be a violation of the prevalent social structure.

The fact that this structuring of the society at its most basic level is already present in the most ancient Indian sacred text is not an accident, since social structure has been one of the strongest bases for the development of Indian religion. Society and religion are intimately related in all cultures, but the caste structure makes it particularly evident in Indian religion. A weapon is then a symbol of membership to a hereditary class of people, a symbol not only of the person who carries the weapon in this point in time, but also of their ancestry and family past. A person who owns a heavily ornamented weapon shows more than their wealth; it shows their lineage, the fact that they are of the *Dvija* or twice born, and hence not *Śudra* or servants, which then determines who they are allowed to marry, consort with or even sit at the same table with. (Klostermaier, 1994, 335) In this socio-religious context the bearer of the weapon is then divinely destined to bear that weapon, as he<sup>2</sup> was reborn into a *Kṣatriya* family due to his worth.

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<sup>2</sup> The masculine pronoun is justified in the social context we are discussing, as the warrior would invariably be male.

In the light of the social and religious importance of being a part of a certain class, it is easy to understand why such potent symbols of belonging to a certain *Varna* (class) or Jat (caste) would bear religious symbols. It should be seen not primarily as a religious apology of violence, but of a religious appointment of status. Indian weapons are themselves symbolic of a pillar of Indian society, and so seeing the weapons solely or even principally as instruments of violence is then a misguided perspective. The *Kṣatriya* is the defender of the other casts - he might resort to violence if necessary, but the important fact is that he is authorised socially and, in his belief system, divinely to do so. This is not to say that weapons do not have a component of violence; in effect, they are owned by those authorised to commit state violence, the warrior class.

Weapons in the context of Indian religion have, then, a symbolic charge which goes well beyond the symbols inscribed in them. It also goes far beyond the superficial fact that they are instruments of violence. Weapons in an Indian context are symbolic in themselves; they reinforce the bearer's social status and position in the religiously ordained order of the Universe. The weapons are borne by the same members that the *Rg-veda* describes as having given origin to the *Kṣatriya*; the arms of the *Puruṣa* or Cosmic Man, symbolic of Humanity, give origin to the class of people authorised to use the power of weapons in their own arms.

#### WAR AND INDIAN RELIGION

31. [...] consider thine own (caste-) duty (dharma),

Then too hast thou no cause to quail;

For better than a fight prescribed by duty  
Is nothing for a man of the princely class.

32. Happy the warriors indeed  
Who become involved in war-  
[A war] like this presented by pure chance  
And opening the gates of Paradise!

33. But if thou wilt not wage this war-  
Prescribed by thy (caste-) duty,  
Then, by casting off both honour and (caste-) duty  
Thou wilt bring evil on thyself.

34. Yes, this thy dishonour will become a byword  
In the mouths of men in ages yet to come;  
And dishonour in a man well-trained to honour  
[Is an ill] surpassing death.

[The *Bhagavadgītā*, Chapter 2, 31-34 in Goodall 1996. p.214]

The most famous Indian religious text in and outside of India is the *Bhagavadgītā*, a part of the much longer ancient epic the *Mahābhārata*; it describes an argument between Lord Kṛṣṇa, an avatar (earthly incarnation) of the god Viṣṇu, and Arjuna, a warrior who is about to face members of his own extended family as well as former teachers in battle. At the end of the text, Kṛṣṇa convinces Arjuna that he has to fulfil

his duty as a *Kṣatriya*, not because the death of the opponents is particularly desirable, but because Arjuna is bound to play his social and religious part as a *Kṣatriya*. The most important concept to be aware of here is that of *dharma*. *Dharma* is a complicated word to translate into English, but in the quotation above it is translated as “caste-duty” - this is not an exact translation, but in the context of that excerpt it is certainly the most adequate. It can also, however, bear the meaning of “law” or even “religion”; Indians often use the word *Dharma* to mean their own religion. (Klostermaier, 1994, p.49) *Dharma* can then be loosely defined as being:

the privileges, duties, and obligations of a man, his standard of conduct as a member of the Aryan community, as a member of one of the castes, as a person in a particular stage of life (Kane, P. V. in Klostermaier, 1996, p. 50)

The social structure and religious practice is so entwined that the words for social duty and religion are actually synonyms – therefore, for a *Kṣatriya* to wage war when such is required, is to fulfil his social and religious duties. Instruments of war are then fully justified in bearing religious symbols as they are the tools through which the *Kṣatriya* will perform his “religious” duty which is dependent on his social class. The Indian warrior would then naturally associate the tools of his social class with the god or gods of his particular devotion (*bhakti*). Just as Arjuna will bend his bow as a sign of devotion to Viṣṇu, through Kṛṣṇa, so will the *Kṣatriya* use his pāṭa, katar or bow as a sign of *bhakti*.

The concept of *bhakti* is essential to understand why an Indian warrior would feel the need to portray a divinity in one of his weapons. The word *bhakti* itself is of difficult etymology but an approximate translation would imply “love” and “devotion” (Klostermaier, 1996, p. 221) - in this case, the love and devotion which a worshipper feels for the divinity of his choice. *Bhakti* represents, therefore, the more personal relationship between the worshiper and the divinity, manifested in processions, visits to temples, festivals, offerings and prayers in a way comparable to Catholic devotion to a particular saint. This personal relationship between devotee and object of devotion has a wide appeal for the generality of followers of Indian religion, and the majority of Indians today is an adherent to some sort of *bhakti* movement. The most popular devotion is to Viṣṇu in his different forms and avatars, in which are included Kṛṣṇa and Rāma, followed by devotion to Śiva, which includes devotees of members of his family such as Gaṇeś. Finally, the third largest group of *bhaktas* consists of followers of Devi or Śakti, the Goddess in her various forms, be it Kālī, Durgā or Pārvatī. Dr. Caravana’s collection bears examples of all these major *bhakta* traditions, as will be explored in the fourth part of this article. For the moment, it is important to bear in mind that the personal relationship between devotee and divinity leads the *Kṣatriya* to choose particular divinities to depict in his weapons. The weapons become then not only a symbol of social standing, as already explored in this article, but also a way to confirm a warrior’s devotion for a particular divinity.

Weapons, when ornamented with the images or symbols of divinities, are then more than just a symbol of power and social standing, but also a symbol of personal devotion to a deity. The image of the deity would of course also serve as a blessing on the weapon and he who wore it, invoking the power of the deity to protect and justify

the actions of the owner of the weapon. Indian religion is then intimately related to the art of war, not only in the philosophy which justifies warring actions, taking into account social obligations, but also in the way that particular gods of personal devotion would be invoked for help and support in the actions of the particular *Kṣatriya* who owned a certain ornamented weapon. The notions of *Varṇa* and *bhakti* are therefore essential to understanding the idea of a weapon as a symbol itself. In the following section, it will be explored what each different god would bring to a *Kṣatriya* in particular and to the warring actions that that *Kṣatriya* would be involved in, hence explaining why those particular divinities are present in weapons. Here I will follow the three main divisions of *bhakti* explored above.

#### **SOME OF THE MOST FREQUENT DEITIES REPRESENTED IN WEAPONS**

In this section, we will briefly go through the three major *bhakta* traditions in Indian religion (Vaisnava, Śaiva and Śakta), describing the symbols which are representative of these traditions, the reasons why these particular deities would have been important to those who depicted them in the weapons, the meaning they would transmit to an audience looking at the weapons, as well as how they should be understood in our context today.

##### **1- Vaisnava representations**

The most important group of deities and supernatural beings in terms of the number of worshipers in India is that of the beings related to the god Viṣṇu. In this number are included not only the god Viṣṇu himself, but also his earthly avatars like Rāma or

Kṛṣṇa and beings associated with the mythology surrounding them such as Hanumān or Garuda. The popularity of Vaisnava worship is reflected in the frequency in which symbols specific to the Vaisnava tradition appear in bladed weapons of the Indian subcontinent. It is important to understand, however, why these beings would be considered advantageous to have represented in weapons and what they would mean to the owner and those who would look at the weapon.

Viṣṇu himself as the preserver god is seldom represented in bladed weapons when compared to the representations of his earthly avatar Rāma or Rāma's companion Hanumān. They are both characters of the *Rāmayana*, one of the most popular religious narratives, not only in India, but also in places to where Indian religion spread, such as Bali in Indonesia. We have seen above why Kṛṣṇa is an important avatar in expounding the *Kṣatriya* justification for war; however, Rāma, usually represented carrying a bow and arrow, has become symbolic of the perfect king and ruler, being therefore an ideal character for a *Kṣatriya* with ruling responsibilities to emulate and depict in an instrument representative of his power. Rāma's companion Hanumān, represented as an anthropomorphic monkey, is also often present in bladed weapons. In this case, Hanumān is not a symbol of a perfect king, but of a perfect devotee or *bhakta*, as Hanumān was the perfect companion of Rāma, who is an avatar of the god Viṣṇu. Therefore, the owner with a weapon bearing Hanumān is the perfect devotee of the god Viṣṇu, or, by extension, the perfect follower of the perfect king. The symbolism associated with the *Rāmayana* is therefore particularly potent for *Kṣatriya* rhetoric.

Also strongly represented in Indian society are the Śaivas (followers of Śiva and related deities and beings). The amount of Śaiva *bhaktas* is second only to that of Vaisnavas, and is therefore also strongly represented in Indian weapons. Unlike Vaisnava representations, focusing on avatars who are characters from popular religious narrative, Śaiva representations are more centred on Śiva himself and his immediate family.

Śiva is a god of inherent contradictions - he is a god seen as the destroyer but also a good family man with the ideal wife in Pārvatī and two sons, Skanda and Gaṇeśa. This contradiction would make him an attractive role-model for a warrior who is also a family man. Śiva is, however, more than this; although he is seen by most non-Śaivas as a destroying god, for Śaivas he plays the part of creator, maintainer, and destroyer of the universe. (Flood 1996, p.151) It is possible then to see Śiva represented in Indian weapons, often with the matted hair of an ascetic, and carrying a trident as a weapon symbolic of his power.

The sons of Śiva are also of particular interest. While Gaṇeśa is a god often used as a help to overcome obstacles (used, for example, by students during exams), Skanda is the god of warfare in traditional Indian religion. Skanda is often represented as a multi-armed god carrying a variety of weapons. Interestingly, Skanda is not often represented in Indian weapons, but Parvati the peacock, his vehicle or mount, is one of the most frequent depictions in Indian weaponry. Skanda is often, then, even if not explicitly, at least implicitly represented in Indian weapons, and some examples of these representations of Parvati can be seen in this exhibition.

### 3- Śakta Representations

Intimately related to Śaiva representations of divinities are the Śakta representations of goddesses in Indian weapons. The Śaiva and Śakta traditions are particularly connected due to the gender ambiguity present in Śaiva tradition, where the god is often represented as part man, part woman. Śakti or the goddess is also “the energy or power of Śiva” (Flood, 1996, 177). Much like Śiva, Śakti is also a goddess of contradictions - she is both the ideal consort and mother (Pārvatī, Laksmi and Sarasvati for example), the calm but warrior-like destroyer of demons (Durgā) or the violent and terrible hag garlanded with skulls and severed limbs (Kālī). Pārvatī, Durgā and Kālī are all often seen as different facets of the same being, the consort of Śiva.

It is natural that in weapons we often see representations of the last two examples of Śakti; Durgā rides a tiger or lion and carries weapons in her ten hands, and is symbolic of warring power in the cause of justice, as a destroyer of demons, being therefore a natural goddess to be represented in weapons. Kālī is, on the other hand, a fearsome goddess, who is also the destroyer of the demon Raktabija and is often represented after slaying the demon dancing on the corpses of those killed in battle. She is particularly depicted dancing on the corpse of Śiva, her consort, which represents the goddess transmitting power, or Śakti to Śiva, reinforcing the idea that she is the energy of Śiva. It is easy to understand how these goddesses, so imbued with power and killing demons for righteous causes, would inspire the owners of the weapons to use them as symbols.

We will now look at particular examples in Dr. Jorge Caravana's collection of Indian symbols in all of these traditions.

### **THREE EXAMPLES OF INDIAN RELIGIOUS SYMBOLISM IN THE COLLECTION OF DR. JORGE CARAVANA**

In this section, the previous conclusions will be put into a microcosmic perspective by analysing three particular pieces from Dr. Jorge Caravana's collection. We will examine pieces which contain elements from Indian religion but not exclusively Indian in origin, containing a Balinese Kris and an Indian Katar and Dhal (shield). In the three weapons we have examples of Vaisnava, Śaiva and Śakti worship, respectively, leading to an interesting variety of symbolism.

#### **1. Balinese Kris**

The first weapon is a Kris from Bali, an Indonesian island where the majority of the population follows Indian Religions and where, much as in India, Vaisnava worship is the prevalent devotional religion. This is a heavily ornamented weapon which depicts in its scabbard scenes from the popular epic *Rāmayana*, which is particularly popular in Bali where shadow-puppet theatre often depicts scenes from this story. The main element of focus in the representation seems to be Hanumān, which also serves as a hilt to the Kris. Hanumān is easily recognisable by his up-turned teeth rising above the upper lips.

In the scenes represented in the scabbard, Hanumān is depicted with Rāma, represented with a tall crown, and, in the top panel, with a bow and arrow. He is presented here as a companion, helping Rāma to cross water by carrying him on his back, helping revive Lakṣmaṇa (Rāma's brother who bears no crown) after a battle on the third panel from the top, and participating in a hunt with Rāma in the top panel. On the back of the Kris, the top panel depicts Hanumān carrying Lakṣmaṇa and Rāma across the sea.

This particular focus on scenes of the *Rāmayana* including Hanumān, instead of other equally important characters such as Sītā, Rāma's wife or Rāvaṇa, the villain of the story, seems to point towards a feeling of identification between the owner of the weapon and the monkey-god. The reasons for this can be varied; a possible one, particularly taking in account the battle and hunt scenes depicted in the weapon, would be that the owner of the weapon was close to the land's ruler - this would make sense considering the richness of the weapon itself. The owner of the weapon would then identify Rāma, as the ideal ruler which he came to represent, with his own ruler, and identifying himself with the tireless and endlessly devoted companion of that king. Hanumān is also, however, a symbol for great devotion in religious terms: as Hanumān is devoted to Rāma, an avatar of Viṣṇu, so should the worshipper be devoted to his god. Therefore, the reason for the existence of this weapon with this particular symbolism could simply be a way for the owner to show himself as a great religious devotee. However, the idea that this is a weapon belonging to someone close to a ruler seems to be borne out by the scenes chosen by the artist, as well as the choice of Hanumān as the god to centre the piece on.

## 2. Indian Katar

The second piece examined here is a clear example of the blurred line between Śaiva and Śakti worship. This Katar bears two representations, one of Śiva and one of Kālī, each on a different side of the Katar's blade, and taking up almost the blade's entire surface. The equal space of representation given to both beings is interesting from a religious standpoint, but it also keeps the symmetry of the weapon. The equal standing of Śiva and his consort, in her most ferocious appearance as Kālī, is understandable in that, as seen above, Śakti is the power and energy of Śiva; it is through her that he is such a potent being.

The depiction of the characters is not typical but it is instantly recognisable through several elements which are very specific to them. Śiva is dressed as an ascetic and is garlanded with snakes, both elements which define him as Śiva and not another god. Another particular element can be seen in the particular protrusion emerging from the top of his head. While it might also look like a snake, a closer look tells us that it is different from the other ones. It is not in fact a snake, but the river Ganges which is often represented as exiting from the head of Śiva in a phallic symbolism which is repeated in the worship of the Śiva Lingam (phallic shaped altar of Śiva). Kālī is also easily recognisable by the trident, which is her husband's weapon, her nudity and the severed head she carries. These characteristics, all taken together, make it impossible for her to be Durgā or Pārvatī. While Kālī is not represented as dancing on Śiva's corpse, she is in fact over him in the weapon's blade and their union in the weapon is

again a representation of the transmission of power from her to him and from both of them to the devotee who owns the weapon.

### **3. Indian Dhal**

The last piece is a Dhal (shield), where the references are specifically to Śakti worship and particularly that of Kālī. In fact, through interpretation of the symbols in the Dhal, we can even reach a geographical and chronologic conclusion: the scenes depicted are set in Bengal, particularly in Kolkata's Dakshineswar Kālī Temple, on a night with a new moon.

The fact that it is a shield of a Kālī devotee is easy to see, Kālī being represented in the outer panels holding two severed heads and, in one case, two swords. There are several hunt scenes in outer and inner panels and these are mainly for decoration with no specific symbolism. The central panel, however, gives us all other clues. The male goats in front of a temple-like building lead one to think of Kālī sacrifices, and due to the expense involved in producing such a shield this is probably an important temple. Dakshineswar Kālī Temple was built in 1855, which would be in keeping with the age of the shield, and has since become one of the most famous Kālī temples in India. As in the shield's central panel, it has three central towers and one on each side. Male goats are sacrificed in honour of Kālī in a monthly festival in the temple on the darkest night of the month (Harding, 1998, p. 117). The flags in the temple represented in the shield clearly point to a festive occasion, and the two expecting goats to those monthly sacrifices. It is not, then, difficult to conclude that the shield was owned by a Kālī devotee with a special devotion to this temple; it is even possible

that the shield was actually produced around the time of the temple's foundation as a ceremonial or celebratory shield.

## CONCLUSION

The information which can be drawn from ornamented Indian weapons in what respects the beliefs, social status and feelings of the weapon's owner, as well as what image he is trying to project to those who see him wear that same weapon, is essential to understand the weapon's importance beyond that of an instrument of war.

As seen above, through informed interpretation of the symbols depicted in weapons, the researcher may reach conclusions as to where they come from, who commissioned their manufacture and form ideas as to their age. This makes the interpretation of symbols as important to understanding a weapon's provenance as the understanding of the materials and the artistic and technical style used in the construction of the weapon.

Integrating a particular weapon in a social and religious context also permits the Western observer to better understand the importance of the objects themselves, not only for those who commissioned and used the weapons but also as historical artefacts, documenting the beliefs and practices of members of the *Kṣatriya Varna* in the past few centuries. This adds a level of importance and interest to the weapons themselves, as anthropological and historical documents which a superficial examination of the artefacts might miss if the observer is not aware of the socio-religious implications of what they are looking at.

This article has sought, then, to awaken the interest in the socio-religious aspects of Indian weapons in those who might be mainly interested in their aesthetic qualities. What this article has tried to do for weapons integrated in an Indian religious context could equally be done for Japanese, Middle Eastern or Mughal weapons, among others, all of each, much like western weapons, hold in themselves signs which better help us understand the context where they arose. An understanding of the weapons' broader importance not only deepens their fascination but reconfigures their appreciation as much more than beautiful tools of war, but as important historical artefacts which are undoubtedly a part of humanity's common heritage.

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