

*The Concept of Asta Mangala (bkra-sis-rtangs-brgyad) in the
Tibetan Culture According to their religious Text¹*

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The fundamental base of the concept of Asta Maṅgala in both Tibetan and Hindu Cultures is the same. However, the Tibetans use it differently. The text of a large number of sūtras of Tibetan Buddhism mDomains present some clear examples to us. Besides this, the style of the art of such emblems is also different from that of the Hindu one. Thus the main objective of this note is to know how Tibetan religion has provided special place for Asta Maṅgala.

Tibetan paintings and carvings of Asta Maṅgala emblems as well as other religious artifacts can be seen more ornamented and artistic than that of the Hindu. It is because, the art of writing of the socio-religious importance also became a compulsory task in almost every monastery of Tibet from the very beginning of the monastic culture in Tibetan Buddhism. People, specially Lamās (monks) who were endowed with artistic sense tend to clothe their religion with artistic symbols. So, profuse vast use of symbolic and ornamented art and painting can be seen in Tibetan Buddhist shrines and objects. Waddell expresses his idea of Tibetan symbolism in religious art in the following words:

"The extremely rich symbolism found in lamaism² is largely of Indian and Chinese origin. Its emblems are mainly of a conventional Hindu kind more or less modified to adopt them to their Buddhist setting. Others are derived from the Chinese, and a few only are of Tibetan origin." (Waddell 1978: 388).

The depiction of Asta Maṅgala i.e. the eight auspicious emblems is attached a great importance in the Hindu and Buddhist Cultures. It has both a religious as well as a secular significance for Tibetan Buddhists. The eight auspicious emblems can be depicted in monasteries (dGon -pa), worship rooms (Lha-khañ) of individual houses, over the gates of private houses and palaces, over the main entrance to villages and town settlements. They can also be seen painted or inscribed on stone on mani walls, stupas (mChod-rTan) and manuscripts. Likewise one may find them painted on the walls of open passages, living rooms and bedrooms of persons of higher social status. These auspicious signs are collectively called bkra-sis-rTag-brgyad in Tibetan. They are given as follows: (Das 1983: 69).

1. Rin-Chen-gdugs (རིན་ཅེན་གདུག་པ་) i.e. the precious jewelled umbrella. This in Sanskrit is called 'Chatra Ratna'.

2. gSer-gyi -ña (གསེར་གྱི་ཉ་) i.e. the golden fish and 'Svarna Matsya' in Sanskrit.
3. gTer-Chen-pohi-bum-pa (གཏེར་ཅེན་པུ་མ་པ་) i.e. the pot of treasure, called 'Dhana-Kumva' in Sanskrit.
4. Pad-ma-bzañ-po (པདྨ་བཟའ་པོ་) i.e. the excellent lotus, called 'Padma' in Sanskrit.
5. Duñ-dkar-gyas-hkhyail (དུང་དཀར་གཡས་འཁྱིལ་) i.e. the white conch-shell with whorls turning to the right. This is in sanskrit called Dakshina-varta sañkha.
6. dPal-gyi-Behu (དཔལ་གྱི་བེུ་) i.e. the auspicious mark is represented by a curled noose symbol of love and called 'srvatsa' in Sanskrit.
7. mChög-gi-rgyal-mtshan (མཚོག་གི་རྒྱལ་མཚོན་) : The chief standard of victory i.e. the symbol of royalty. This is called 'Dhvaja' in Sanskrit.
8. gSer-gyi-hkhor-lo (གསེར་གྱི་འཁོར་ལོ་) i.e. the golden wheel. In Sanskrit is called Svarna Cakra.

There is afamous legend relating to the Buddhisattva and these eight auspicious emblems, in which all the tantrik Buddhists believe sincerely. According to their legndary belief 'the Boddhisattva once explained that the people of spiritual soil (i.e. the people of the Buddhist Country or the people of the country of the god) were protected by the auspicious signs and that they should pass their lives in the practice of religion and the struggle for spiritual liberation. That's why, until this era, the eight auspicious signs (Asta Mañgala) are always placed around any spot where a ceremony is to be held. We thence, may suppose that, this was also one of the important causes for accepting the Asta Mañgala as auspicious emblems by the buddhist people.

Besides these eight marks, there can be seen other several sacred symbols in vigourous in Tibetan culture. Of them, the three emblems of longlife can found depicted together with bkra-sis-rTag-brgyad and can be seen painted in guestrooms (Tshög-Khañ), shrines (Lha-khañ) and over doors of a house. These three auspicious emblems are called Mi-tshe-riñ

(མི་ཚེ་རིང་) Bya-tshe-riñ (བྱ་ཚེ་རིང་) and Shvatshe-riñ (ཤ་ཚེ་རིང་)

respectively. Generally, they represent a long-living human being, a long-living bird and a long-loving sambhar (See Plate No. IV, below) These three 'Tshe-riñs' are said to stand for the longevity of human

life, according to popular beliefs in Tibet. Likewise, some of the important symbols of Tibetan sacred objects are as follows: (Waddell 1978: 388-418, Das 1983: 69, 1183).

- I. Dkon-mchog-gsum, i.e. the three Gems; in Sanskrit is called Tri-ratna, symbolic of the Buddhist Trinity. These three symbolic ratna are: Buddha, his word and the monastery.
- II. Rin-Ch'en-sna-bdun, i.e. the seven Gems; in Sanskrit is called Sapta-ratna. These are the attributes of the universal monarch (Cakravartī Rājā) and are: hkhor-rnam-rgyal (Wheel of victory). Nor-bu-che-ldan-gaṅ-ḅsam (the precious jewel; in skt., ratna cintāmani), blo-gros-chog-ldan-blon-po (the gem of a Minister). Yid-hoṅ-mchog-gi-tsun-mo (the jewel of a wife, is skt., strīratna) Rin-chen-stobs-ldan-glaṅ-po (the jewel of (white) elephant) rTa-chog-rlun-llhar... (the gem of a horse; in skt., Asva of Ravi) hDud-hkhrīd-puṅ-hjom-dmag-dpon (the gem of a General). Each of these seven gems must have one Royal Badge of their own called sNa-cha.
- III. Ne-wai-rin-po-ch'e-sna-bdun i.e. the seven personal gems are as follows: The sword, the snake-jewel, the Palace-jewel, the Garden-jewel, the Robes, the Bed-jewel and the Shoe-jewel.

Likewise, bkra-sis-rdsas-brgyad i.e. the eight glorious offerings, hDod-yoṅs, i.e. the five sensuous qualities, Padma (lotus), yun-druṅ i.e. the svastika etc. also can be seen depicted in different places of socio-religious importance.

Now, let us see the use of the bkra-sis-rtags-brgyad emblems. For this, we may take the explanation given in the famous religious text of Tibetan Buddhism, called mDo-maṅs (བཏོ་མཎ་ས་) i.e. the book of a large number of sūtras as mentioned above. This text clarifies the purpose and meaning of these eight symbols in the following way: (mDo-maṅs: 253-254).

1. bkra-sis-gdugs (The auspicious umbrella):

Namo! Always be protected by the auspicious or precious umbrella (Reference: Na-mo dbu-la-bkra-sis gdugs- ltar-skyobs/ རྣམ་མཁུ་ལ་བག་ཤིས་གདུགས་ལུ་རྒྱུ་བས་།) from this the purpose of precious umbrella seems to be to provide protection to human beings from rain and sun.

2. bkra-sis-rgyal-mtshan (The auspicious dhvaja):

Dhvaja stands for the imperishable emblem of royalty (victorious flag) in a human body. (Reference: sku-la-bkra-sis-mi-nub-rgyal-mtshan-mchog/ སྐུ་ལ་བག་ཤིས་མི་རུབ་རྒྱལ་མཚོན་མཚེན།)

3. bkra-sis-tshos-duñ (The auspicious conch-shell):

The conch-shell signifies the sound of religion. (Reference: gSuns-la-bkra-sis-chos-duñ-gyas-su-hkhyil/ གསུངས་ལ་ བག་ཤིས་ཚོས་རྒྱར་གཡམས་སུ་འབྲིལ་།)

4. bkra-sis-dpal-gyi-behu (The auspicious curled noose):

The curled noose is an emblem of love and is useful for the soul. (Reference: Thugs-la-bkra-sis-dpal-gyi behu gsal/ ཐུགས་ལ་བག་ཤིས་དཔལ་གྱི་བེའུ་གསལ་།)

5. bkra-sis-gser-gyi-na (The auspicious fish):

The golden fish represents the sight or eye. (Reference: sPyan-la-bkra-sis -rin-chen-gser-gyi-ña/ སྤྲན་ལ་བག་ཤིས་ རིན་ཚེན་གསེར་གྱི་ཉ།)

6. bkra-sis-Padma-bzañ-po (The auspicious excellent lotus):

The excellent lotus signifies the tongue. (Reference: lJags-la-bkra-sis-padmo-lo-hdab-rgyas/ ལྷ་གསལ་ལ་བག་ཤིས་པདྨ་ ལོ་འདབ་རྒྱུས་།)

7. bkra-sis-gter-ch'en-pohi-bum-pa (The auspicious treasure-pot):

The wheeled pot of treasure stands for the throat. (Reference: mGul-la-bkra-sis-rin-ch'en-bum-pa-khyil/ མགུལ་ལ་བག་ཤིས་ རིན་ཚེན་གུམ་པ་འབྲིལ་།)

8. bkra-sis-gser-gyi-hkhor-lo (The auspicious golden wheel):

The five auspicious golden wheels are supposed to represent the leg (Reference: Shabs -la-bkra-sis-hphrin-las-hkhor-lo-lña/

ལྷནས་ལ་ བག་ཤིས་ ལེན་ལས་ ལམ་རལ་ལྷ།

Likewise, mDomañs describes another auspicious emblem in the list of bkra-sis-rtags-brgyad- (Aṣṭa Maṅgala). It is the precious jewel. For this the mDomañs mentions as follows: Phyag-la-bkra-sis-yon-tan-nor-bu-mchog/ ཕྱག་ལ་ བག་ཤིས་ ལོན་ལྷ་ རྗེ་ལྷ་མཚོ། which means the precious jewel standing for hand. This emblem is generally placed on top of the auspicious pot of treasure; that is why, it can be seen painted separately in only a few instances of wall paintings. These separate eight auspicious emblems can also be depicted in one emblem. (Stein 1972: 173; also see below plate No. III (b)).

mDomañs further mentions that some of the prayers in the sūtras of bkra-sis-rtags-brgyad expressed in the following lines mean good fortune and long life.

Reference: bkra-sis-rdsas-brgyad-dñon-grub-dam-pahi-mchog; rDsas-mchog-brgyad-kyi-bkra-sis-gañ-yin-pa; Den-hdir-bdag-cag-rnams-la-bkra-sis-phob; bkra-sis-des-kyan-rtag-tu-bde-legs-sog/ བག་ཤིས་རྣམས་བརྒྱུད་

དངོས་གྲུབ་དམ་པའི་མཚོ། རྣམས་མཚོ་གཡུང་གི་བག་ཤིས་གང་ཡིན་པ། དེ་དཔེ་དེར་
བདག་ཕག་རྣམས་ལ་བག་ཤིས་ལོན། བག་ཤིས་དེས་གྲུང་རྩ་ལྷ་བདེ་ལེགས་ཤོགས། །།

(Oh)! eight auspicious offering of victory! How much fortune (auspiciousness) can be acquired from them, come to all of us everywhere? And also bring good fortune and auspiciousness by those Maṅgalas.

From the above, the main purpose of bkra-sis-rtag-brgyad i.e. the Aṣṭa Maṅgala and the tshe-rin-sum i.e. the three emblems signifying long life seems to be basically the same. But the bkra-sis-rtags-brgyad does not include within this tshe-rin group in general understanding: Nevertheless, the bkra-sis-rtag-brgyad and there tshe-rin emblems may be painted on room walls for the same purpose. The tshe-rin are profusely used also in the new year (Lo-gSar) greeting cards and letters. Tibetan people or those who are influenced by Tibetan Culture, believe that these tshe-rins represent the three beings who are still

alive from a very long time, and by looking at such auspicious emblems one's own life can be made very long.

Hence, in conclusion, one may say that the importance of bkra-sis-rtag-brgyad (Asta Maṅgala) is greater to the Tibetans in their culture than to the Hindus. This is only a short note on the subject. For a fuller study on it one will have to search for its origins and development in India and in the Buddhist art there. According to Sādhanaṃālā believed to be one of the most authentic Buddhist texts written sometime around 3rd century A.D in India, there already was the tradition of symbolism in buddhist religious life. Sādhanaṃālā clearly mentions about the svastika emblem.

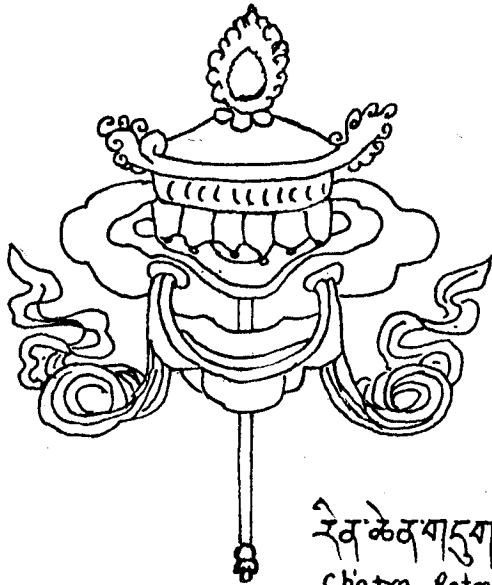
NOTES

1. In collecting and sketching the artistic emblems of Tibetan Asta Maṅgala and tshe-rin-gsum, this article has benefited from the help of sa-skya-grwa-pā wangdi (a monk pupil) of Mon-mch'od dgon-pa of Mustang, Mr Purna Das Manandhar and Udayā C. Shrestha. Similarly, Prof. Prayag Raj Sharma Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies, T.U. and Mr. Prem K. Khatri/Nepalese History and Culture Instruction Committee, T.U. made valuable suggestions and helped in editing. So I would like to express my gratefulness to them for their help.
2. Now-a-days educated Tibetan Buddhist monks do not accept the Westerner's version of Lamāism for Tibetan Buddhism.

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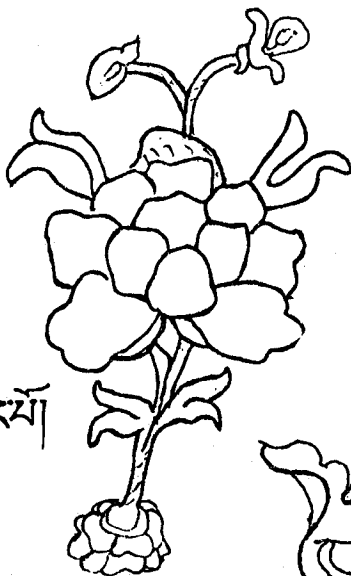
[A]

ཇེན་ལོན་གཏུག་པ་ས།
Chatra Ratna.



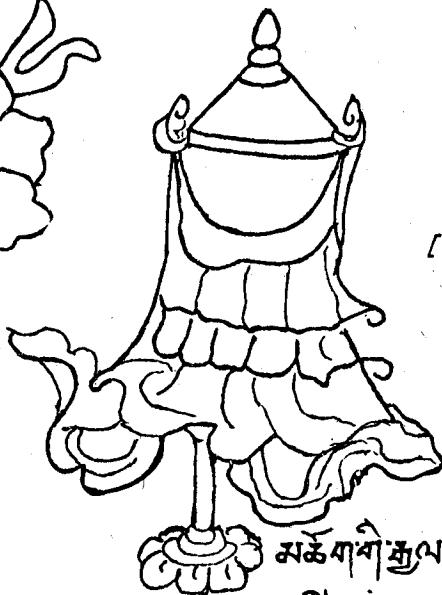
[B]

གསེར་གྲོལ།
Svarga Matsya.



[C]

པདྨ་མཁའ་ལོ།
Padma.



[D]

མཚོ་གསེར་གྲོལ་ལྷ་མོ།
Dhvaja.



[A]

धातु-कुम्भ
Dhana - Kumbha



अष्टा मंगल कुम्भ
Ashta Mangal Kumbha.

[B]



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