

Introduction

Impression

‘A flag is a necessity for all nations. Millions have died for it. It is no doubt a kind of idolatry, which it would be a sin to destroy. For a flag represents an ideal.’¹

Overtures

Nations are historically formed and so are the markers associated with them. Memories, narratives, maps, symbols, icons, museums and memorials are few such markers. The relationship between a nation and these markers seem to be so complete that we either ignore the complexities of this dynamics or take them for granted. We quite frequently assume individual memories, fragments of intimate experience or symbols circulating in every day life as bearing the prefix ‘national’.² By such acts of conflation and through these relationships the nation marks its presence in the everyday life of its inhabitants. Disseminated through modern technologies, like print these markers, create solidarities and perpetuate ties to provide the shape of a community look ‘larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact’ and nation turns into an ‘imagined community’,

¹ Mahatma Gandhi, “The National Flag”, *Young India*, 13-04-1921, *CWMG* 19(Delhi: Publication Division, 1966):561-562.

² Fredric Jameson has argued, Third-world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic-necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: ‘the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society’. Fredric Jameson, “Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism”, 69.

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to borrow the phrase from Benedict Anderson.³ However, these memories, narratives, maps and symbols also come before us as sites of intense conflict. History informs us that these markers are both pious and contested, shared yet fractured, adored and aspired but also deeply debated and resisted. Historical processes which have shaped the colours and contours of these markers then leave us wondering about the innocent prefix, i.e. national. The narratives which inform us about these sites and symbols also call for a close scrutiny of the completeness and assumed equation between the nation and its markers. This is one such study.

In India, the process of nation making coincided with the resistance against the colonial regime and witnessed a wide range of political, social and cultural movements. Through symbolic practices these movements and ideologies have expressed their ideals and principles of new or envisioned order in colonial as well as post colonial milieus. Indian national flag is a crucial component of this symbolic assemblage.

This book is a study of the national flag of India, delineating history and ways of seeing this symbol. An attempt has been made to understand the politics that go into making of such ways of seeing the *tricolour flag* as, probably, the most revered among the symbols, icons and markers associated with nation and nationalism in twentieth century India. The flag has shared a unique camaraderie with other such markers (i.e. the map, the icon of mother India and the spinning wheel). Caressed like a beloved, adored like a mother and worshiped with offerings of supreme sacrifices—a distinction not availed by any of the other markers—the flag has enjoyed an enamouring that is unparallel in the hierarchy of signs and symbols in India.⁴ The question is how to study this history of fascination, of reverence and of processes that transform a piece of cloth into a sacred symbol.

Being a product of the historical and social processes, the national flag is also a political symbol and not merely an object of veneration in the eyes of the citizens. These processes make it pertinent to examine the symbolic space of the flag as a contested field and to get an analysis of the cultural practices addressing political questions in colonial and post-colonial India. At this level, history reveals that the flag does not merely act as an entry point in unearthing

³ For a brief discussion on the concept of ‘imagined community’ of Benedict Anderson see ‘Preface’.

⁴ We come across a number of references when both in literary as well as pictorial registers, citizens are shown offering their lives to *Bhārat Mātā* (Mother India). However, outside narratives and semiotic circuit, we don’t have examples when someone actually sacrificed the life for the icon of *Bhārat Mātā*.

meanings of political cultural practices but also becomes a site where claims of nationhood and citizenship are made, resisted and negotiated. The dynamics of this resistance has been approached through a number of events and debates—colonial as well as post colonial—revealing multifaceted dimension of the conflict.

At one level, the contest has semiotic dimension. The question of colour and the difference of opinion over the design in 1931 (when after much debate and discussion over the Swaraj Flag, Indian National Congress officially adopted its flag) and in 1947 (when the Constituent Assembly of India adopted the final design of the flag of the future nation) are two such examples, discussed later in detail. At another level it is the fight over what may be termed as the 'hierarchical order of cultural symbolic constitution' encompassing a whole range of issues, i.e. world views, ideologies, rituals, ideas of past and history, mannerisms of display and practices of viewing it that defied regulatory regimes and rules of etiquettes associated with the flag.⁵ The focus is at this second level.

Here at this level, we shall observe that the multilayered field is fraught with conflict between the colonial state and nationalist position; between dominant and dominated positions within nationalist domain; between state defined rituals of 'flag code' and popular practices and between dominant caste and dalit *sarpanchs* in post-colonial India, to name a few. The narratives coming from different historical junctures reveal shades of this multilayered field of contestation and also help us understand the close yet complicated relation between ways of seeing this symbol and the dominant structures of time. Here, the question of the symbolic politics is closely tied with the dynamics of seeing (a linkage we keep revisiting in the course of this study).

The Symbolic Field: Making Meanings and Deciphering Secrets

There has been no dearth of academic literature on the idea of the symbolic. A large part of this corpus is fundamentally interdisciplinary in more than singular ways. In their engagements, not merely the object of enquiry mobilizes different disciplines and is approached from multiple vantage points but the core questions raised in many cases demonstrate the potential to blur and dislocate disciplinary boundaries. For Victor Turner, writing in 1975, this was a 'liminal space', 'the interface of hitherto unconnected or only weakly connected disciplines'.⁶

⁵ For a discussion of Bernard Cohn's use of this term see the section 'Visual Nationalism since Late Nineteenth Century' in Chapter Two.

⁶ Victor Turner, 'Symbolic Studies', 150.

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In anthropology, we have a long and rich tradition of engaging with the idea of the symbolic. Symbols are recognized as a ‘key’ to the internal organizational dynamics or a guide to cultural meanings. At another level, they act as nodes in the wider circuit around which people and communities practice and orient their lives. The approaches, however, vary widely and we have different scholarly traditions.

In the writings on the national flag, the tendency has often been to pre-assume the category of the nation and claim that the flag represents the nation, its ethos and its ideals. Without denying this relation, I question the settled nature of this equation between the nation and its flag by emphasizing the disjuncture between nation and its marker. In the *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Emile Durkheim writes, ‘The soldier who dies for his flag, dies for his country; but as a matter of fact, in his own consciousness, it is the flag that has the first place’. This is about privileging the narratives of the flag over the history of the nation. To speak of the flag is to speak of a symbol. To speak of dying for one’s flag or offering life sacrifices for the flag or for the spinning wheel, as we come across from a number of popular visual registers from colonial period of Indian history, is to speak of symbolic action. Thus, the potency of symbols rests not simply in their ability to represent, but in their ability to instigate action.⁷ In Steven Lukes’s terms, symbols are part of ‘the mobilization of bias’ that works to advance and defend the interests of the powerful and privileged. In this manner, they appear as a means of domination, furthering the divisions within society.⁸ In psychological writings, symbols are disguised representations for the latent thoughts and wishes of the unconscious. In this tradition, political symbols behave as screens projecting unconscious psychological processes. The study of symbols occupies considerable space in art history and in history of religion (or religious cultures) too. The study of metaphors and symbols also constitutes a large share of the fields of linguists or literary historians. Yet, in all these exercises the dominant trend has been to reconstruct the ‘multilayered meaning structures associated with symbols’. In other words, in the dominant discourse, the obsession is largely to decipher—what symbols mean.⁹

⁷ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 251; Rebecca E Klatch, ‘Of Meanings & Masters: Political Symbolism & Symbolic Action’, *Polity*, 137–54.

⁸ See, Steven Lukes, ‘Political Ritual and Social Integration’, *Sociology*, 289–308.

⁹ G B Medison sums up, ‘Indeed, it could be said that one of the principal tasks of contemporary phenomenological hermeneutics continues to consist, on the one hand, in “depsychologizing” or “desubjectivizing” the notion of meaning (rejecting thereby an emphatic notion of understanding) and, on the other hand, and correlatively,

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Symbols have strange lives and secrets too. They are not merely reflections of the historical context that produce them. Similarly, they do not simply represent ideological tasks assigned to them. They often transgress the assigned, the official and the rigid to acquire functions not assigned and tasks not anticipated. They wrap themselves in the garb of meanings and practices forbidden by authorities and institutions that claim to be makers and promoters of such symbols or icons. By doing such transgressions, these symbols shed their rigidity and become fluid. To me the question is how to write an account of this transgression and this mobility between unexpected and assigned meanings. This is about exuviations of freeze leading to fluidity and ambivalence embedded in the historical construction of symbols. This book is about such narratives and historical trajectories of one specific symbol of reverence in India—the Indian national flag.

In the context of the colonial period of India, works of Ranajit Guha and Bernard Cohn are particularly noteworthy for opening up the field of the symbolic as an arena for the conflict over power and knowledge mediated through colonial structures. These works heavily draw upon the symbolic by stretching the boundary of both history as well as anthropology. In his path-breaking work on peasant insurgency, Guha has shown that peasant rebellions were marked by inversion of codes and symbols of authority leading to new constellation of the political.¹⁰ Just as Guha opened up new vistas of the political, Bernard Cohn has shown us that ‘colonialism was itself a cultural project of control’ (to borrow the words of Nicholas Dirks).¹¹ Bernard Cohn argued for an anthropological history where an event becomes a marker within the cultural system.¹²

in attempting to specify the particular sense in which (or the degree to which) it can properly be said that human sciences are indeed “explanatory”. G B Medison, ‘Hermeneutics’, 293. On the historians’ engagement with Symbol (from historical perspective) see an excellent work by Malcolm Quinn, *The Swastika*. For a fascinating study in Indian context, see Sumathi Ramaswamy, *The Goddess and the Nation*.

¹⁰ Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*. This new constellation of the political acquired the dimension of a multi-headed hydra in the works carried out under the banner of Subaltern Studies enabling us with new vistas to look at the idea of the symbolic as well as the political in very many ways.

¹¹ Nicholas B Dirks, ‘Forward’, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge*, iv–xxii.

¹² Bernard Cohn, ‘History and Anthropology’, 45. He further wrote, ‘What occurred in India cannot be understood in temporal or spatial terms because it was representational or cultural. The units of study in anthropological history should be cultural and culturally derived: honour, power, authority, exchange, reciprocity, codes of conduct, systems of

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The scholars writing under the banner of *Subaltern Studies* derived a lot on the idea of the symbolic from Guha and Cohn. Following Guha and Cohn, these writings demonstrated the manner in which cultural practices were closely knit together, in fact inseparable from the political processes of authority formation and resistance. More than this culture–power twining, these writings have shown that peculiarities of political resistance during colonial regime depended inevitably upon the cultural logic of their context rather than governed by any universalistic conception of the political. This privileging of the particular cultural frame over the universal notion of power also opened up the analytical frame to multiple readings. At empirical level this meant shift of focus away from colonial policies and regulations to the manners in which they were practiced, negotiated and resisted upon by different sections of the societies. This shift of focus inherently implied de-centring the dominant meanings of politics as well as its knowledge. The idea of symbolic gained immense significance in this framework.

The Indian National Flag

The flag as a symbol of national stature evolved with the progress of the freedom movement against the British rule in the first half of the twentieth century. In a technical legal sense of the term one may argue that there was no national flag before 22 July 1947 when the design of the *Tricolour* was finalized and approved unanimously in the Constituent Assembly of India.¹³ Yet, various flags were in circulation in the political arena during colonial period. Based on their political allegiance and cultural moorings different sections of the society endowed meanings and national stature to different flags in this period. These flags at times acted as rallying points and as catalysts for the anti-colonial movement mobilizing, organizing, solidifying and giving orientation to the collective psyche. There were flags recognized formally through processes of

social classification, the construction of time and space, rituals'. Ibid., p. 47. Among other writings his two articles, 'Representing Authority in Victorian India' and 'Cloth, Clothes and Colonialism: India in the Nineteenth Century' reveal 'the semiotics of imperialism' with rare insights and have direct bearings on the study undertaken here. Bernard Cohn, *An Anthropologist Among the Historians and Other Essays*, 632–82; *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge*, 106–62. The phrase is used by Ranajit Guha while commenting on Cohn's essay 'Representing Authority...' Ranajit Guha, 'Introduction' to *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays*, Bernard Cohn Omnibus, xxi.

¹³ 'Motion Re National Flag', 737–61.

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detail deliberation over design and ideology by political parties. Along with these ideologically tailored ones, we also have examples when responding to specific events and occasions we come across large orchestrations of public sentiments around the issue of the flag and its prestige (the National Flag Satyagraha of 1922–3 and events of Mysore in 1931 are such examples that we shall be paying close attention to later in the book).

At times, detail deliberation on the question of the flag took place outside the decision-making ambit of political parties and designs seeped into mainstream politics by way of individual efforts. Sections of this book substantially elaborate upon these historical contexts and narratives in and through which these various flags acquired political significance, became rallying points of resistance and jostled to make claims of nationhood. These contestations took place between 1920s and 1947 over a wide range of issues including design, meanings and colours.

In this book, we shall be dealing with these different levels through which the flag comes down to the present. As a point of departure, I merely wish to outline the multiplicity of these flags coming into display through different trajectories, having different historical as well as political contexts yet circulated in a number of formats ranging from match box labels, book covers, letterheads, stamps and propaganda leaflets. Thus, the flag was not merely made out of cloth. In these *avatars*, even ideologically tailored flags traversed the boundaries of the mainstream politics and entered the inner chambers of homes sometimes in the kitchen, sometimes as an innocuous figure on envelopes.

With the constituent Assembly's resolution in 1947, an incessant need was recognized to re-order these multiple plains, standardize the design and come up with a single flag for the nation. Currently even a minor modification pertaining with the design and other particulars of the flag is governed by a set of rules, *Indian Standard*.¹⁴ This standard was first published in 1951 and was subsequently revised in 1964 and 1968. The governance demanded precision and control over nuances. Hence, this dossier tells us about the requirements for bunting and its characteristics, count of yarn for warp and weft, the variety of sewing threads used for machine stitching, colour fastness to light and pH value for the bunting. Further, these rules also prescribe requirements of hemp cordage, wooden toggies and add that lock stitches shall be used for stitching

¹⁴ *Specification for the National Flag of India (Cotton Khadi)*, (second Revision) (Incorporating Amendments nos. 1 and 2) (Reaffirmed 1987) UDC 929 (540): 677, 21.064, IS 1:1968.

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raw edges, attaching the panels, sleeve and corner pieces to the flag. We are also reminded that 'the number of stitches shall be not less than 4 per centimetre'.¹⁵

Like these particulars, there also exists an elaborate set of codes for the display of the national flag which is known as the Flag Code of India.¹⁶ In many ways, these guidelines and regulatory arrangements made by the state and the judiciary function like rituals and govern mannerism for its display. I term them rituals as we will see in one of the later chapters that these seemingly de-sacralized regulations and norms operate within a wider circuit of the sacred (values, norms and practices) and are primarily oriented to protect the sanctity of the flag as a symbol of sovereignty. To comprehend the making of such a field of rituals, it is proposed to explore the intersecting narratives of ways of seeing this symbol of the flag which criss cross different spheres i.e. social, religious and cultural. Alongside these codes, we also come face-to-face with heterogeneous modes of engaging with the flag in which the flag continued to be visualized outside the realm of these state strictures.

At one level this history appears as a contest over a representation of the sovereignty between the state and the people and yet, at another level, this is about projection of people's aspiration, reverence and the spirit of resistance on the screen called the national flag. I argue that these qualities of the flag are not merely a product of the colonial period or an outcome of an encounter with the western heraldic traditions. This history attempts to unravel longer trajectories of past practices and traditions of seeing, of reverence and about the politics of the symbol.

Pre-assumed Category of the Nation in the Writings on the Flag

Unlike the case of the symbolic, we do not have a good number of researches on the history of political symbols in Indian history. It may be ironical that despite the immense popularity enjoyed by the national flag, the number of studies on the subject can be counted on the finger tips. Vexillology, the branch that studies flags is highly under nourished and the little that we have is under the shadow of nationalist historiography, at times hagiographies of Indian nation in the name of the history of her flag. Such a historiography has presumed the flag as endowed with the prefix of the national. It is here that

¹⁵ *Specification*, 10.

¹⁶ *The Flag Code of India, 2002*, <http://mha.nic.in/pdfs/flagcodeofindia.pdf>, accessed 27 October 2010.

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the history of the national flag enters into a close dialogue with the nationalist constructs of the country's pasts inculcating a sense of deep-rooted genesis of its symbols through narratives of tradition and myths. This is where the nationalist history, one specific way of dealing with the past (which is also essentially western colonial mode of rendering) acquires the shape of what Hobsbawm has termed as a 'suitably tailored discourse'.¹⁷ While discussing the role of 'national history' in the making of the modern 'nation' he warns not to be misled by 'a curious, but understandable, paradox: modern nations and all their impediments generally claim to be opposite of the novel, namely rooted in the remotest antiquity' requiring no definition but only a self-assertion. He terms this national phenomenon as 'invented tradition' implying 'a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past'.¹⁸

An influential book *Our National Flag* written by Lt Cdr K V Singh and published by Publication division, Government of India is one such example of this 'suitably tailored discourse'.¹⁹ After tracing the existence of various mythological flags and commenting on the significance of western nationalism and modern western values in the minds of social reformers of the nineteenth century, *Our National Flag* describes the importance of various flags during the 1857 movement. Flags with lotus and *chapatis*, the *Hanuman banner* of Rani of Jhansi are few examples to cite here. 1857 has been described in the booklet as the beginning of a quest for the national flag. The author says, 'though the war was fought under several flags, there was only one common flag song and that speaks volumes for our growing sense of nationalism'.²⁰

To show how the national flag and the culture of nationalism evolved in a systematic linear manner, he further cites evidence for the growth of Indian

¹⁷ For my use of the history as western mode of dealing with the past see Ashis Nandy, 'History's Forgotten Doubles', *History and Theory*, 44–66; For history as a 'suitably tailored discourse' see Eric Hobsbawm, 'Introduction: Inventing Traditions', in *The Invention of Tradition*, 4.

¹⁸ Hobsbawm, *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁹ Lt Cdr K V Singh, *Our National Flag*.

²⁰ He writes, 'But our national consciousness was still not powerful enough to express itself into a national flag of our own, though there had been an abortive effort to adopt one during our first war of independence... Nevertheless, the uprising of 1857 intensified the spirit of nationalism in the people of India. The song was, *Hindu, Musalman, Sikh hamara / Bhai Bhai Pyara/ Yeh hai jhanda azadi ka/ Ise salam hamara*', Lt. Cdr. K.V. Singh, *Our National Flag*, 18–19.

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national flag in the post 1857 period. In this list we find entries of the flags designed or displayed by prominent nationalist leaders like Srish Chandra Bose in Lahore in 1883, Sister Nivedita's flag, the flag of Swadeshi movement, Madam Cama's flag down to the present version of Indian national flag.

The difficulty in accepting the framework rests not in its linear chronological understanding of the growth of consciousness but also in the fact that this consciousness stops with the attainment of India's freedom.²¹ This systematic chronological account with a beginning and a definite end seems enforcing the claim that though the nation existed since time immemorial but the national consciousness had a definite origin, it had its growth in a systematic fashion and this came to a logical culmination with the Independence. The implicit argument, here, also appears that the revolutionary character of the flag must seize its very existence with the end of political freedom. Along with a survey of historical evolution of the national flag, *Our National Flag* also provides an account of the 'specifications for the National Flag of India', the Flag Code of India, songs related to the national flag and 'procedure for *Dhvaja Vandan* (salutation to the flag)'. In its orientation, it is a complete and concise information handbook on the national flag.²²

A critical appraisal to Singh's book must not be seen as demeaning its contribution in the study of Indian national flag. The painstaking research that has gone into this book is a sign of his genuine historical inquisitiveness and has worked as a guiding force for almost all the subsequent writings on the subject including the current exercise. Singh's booklet also precedes a number of such attempts to write and disseminate information related to the country's flag mostly carried out by amateur scholars and professional columnists.²³ The

²¹ Although he gives some examples of the post-Independence period, but these examples remain exceptions to the rule. For example he writes, 'Interestingly the in charge of the light house at Minicoy in the Lakshadweep was ignorant of the transfer of power from British to Indian hands and kept on flying the Union Jack till 1953-54'. Ibid., 72-73; With his recent book, *The Indian Tricolour*, Singh has though extended the time frame and also included some recent events pertaining to the flag. K V Singh, *The Indian Tricolour*.

²² For an early example of such booklets see N S Hardikar, *The National Flag* (Printer's line not available). According to its author, this book was first published in Marathi, and then translated in Hindi, Gujarati and Kannad before its publication in English from Hubli in 1937. See, *All India Congress Committee Papers*, microfilm no. R.8590; also see, Neelam Kalra, *Rashtriya Dhvaj ki Gaurav Gatha*.

²³ For an exception in this category see Suniti Kumar Chatterji, 'The National Flag', 1-12. Soon after the Independence, we find a number of publications on the national flag