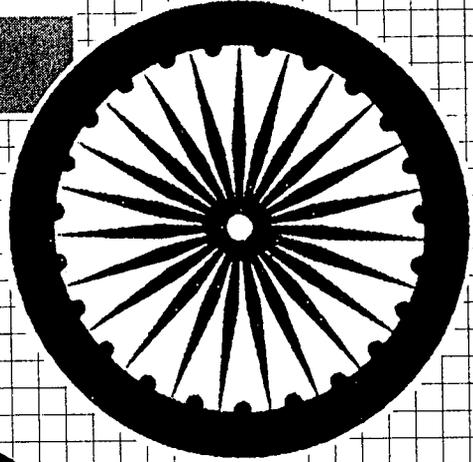
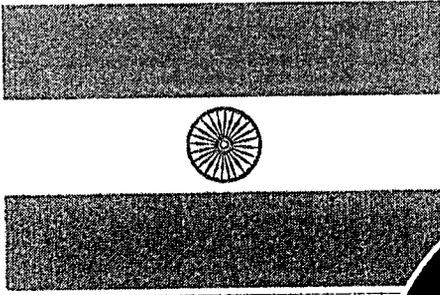
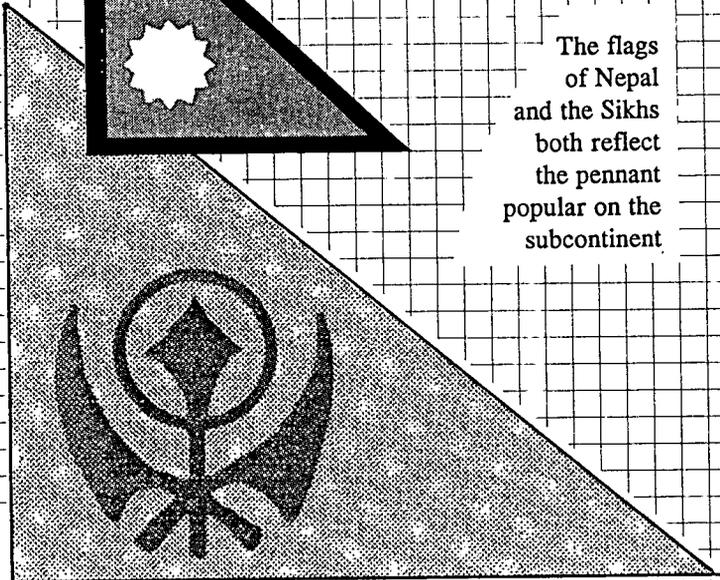
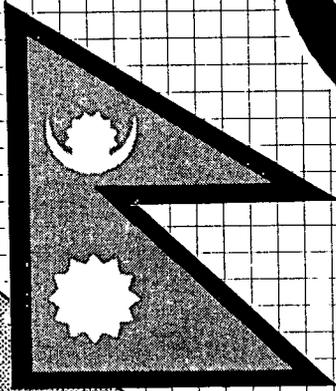


India's National Flag
featuring the Dharma Chatra



The flags
of Nepal
and the Sikhs
both reflect
the pennant
popular on the
subcontinent



FLAGS IN INDIA

Carlos Ferdinand de Espeso



(This account of Don Carlos de Espeso's presentation, given in Spanish, has been reconstructed by the editor of *Crux Australis* from audience notes, in the absence of a transcript from the author.)

India stuns those who first experience it. Not a nation, but a collection of nationalities, languages, religions, all sort of coalesced since 1947 under an official flag of an official but no less artificial nation-state.

Flags proliferate, although not for the same purposes to which the West is accustomed. Flags of various shapes and sizes are used to express aspects of popular culture and religion. Generally the appreciation of vexillological principles is low. Very little is known about the pre-British period.

To sum up, there is a plethora of popular flags of one sort or another, there are relics of vexilloids from classical times (that is, up to the 10th century CE), and above all these are the various official forms of the Indian national flag.

POPULAR FLAGS

Popular flags include improvisations, often made of paper, and for the sheer fun of it, or to convey some aspect of tradition. Very few have any political significance. Most frequently seen are small triangular pennants, streamers and ribbons, mounted on ox carts or on the collars of draught animals. It is worth noting that the origins of the world's only non-rectangular national flag, that of Nepal, developed from two such pennants.

RELIGIOUS FLAGS

Religious flags (usually found in the vicinity of temples or on days of festival) are larger and more brilliant, and often in pink or purple. Some sport a golden border or the gold swastika sun emblem.

In demonstrations, black flags are often carried, and to emphasise the indignation of the issue and the moment, participants will sometimes carry small black flags as well.

Aspects of Hindu belief are sometimes conveyed in solid allegories, commonly mistaken in the west for statues of literal representation. These will sometimes suggest the deity's influence in the form of the cosmic man Purusya, with up to 16 arms, each hand holding an object denoting an attribute of the deity. One of the hands carries a flag - not an actual flag, but indicating by ritual gesture the act of carrying a flag. India has thus discovered the invisible flag!

ANTIQUITY

The earliest evidences of Indian civilisation are found in the cities of the Indus Valley. Those sites have yielded thousands of small seals embossed with variety of sigillographs whose precise meaning is unknown. Some of those appear to indicate standard bearers carrying a variety of vexilloids, not dissimilar to standards later developed in the Middle East and Iran. These vexilloids consist in the main of a staff with a solid sacred image at the top of the pole.

Later some of these symbols appear to have been reproduced in cloth and used as military signals, where the tradition grew up of equating loss of the flag to defeat in battle - a sentiment found universally.

INDIA'S NATIONAL FLAG

The present national flag of all India is an artificial construct designed to provide a symbol for a unified nation-state - something completely foreign to much of the sub-continent's history. The prototype design appears to have evolved from the nationalist movement which started to organise in Calcutta possibly as early as 1836. This flag included a red band for Hinduism and a green band for Islam, the lower band with a portrayal of the sun and the moon (again compare with Nepal) evoking the myth of Manu the legendary first Emperor of antiquity. In the early twentieth century Gandhi added a third (white) stripe to represent other religions.

In 1931 the Congress Party of India adopted its party flag and emblem (a spinning wheel on a horizontal tricolor) and thus established formally the lines of the flag as known today, with three bands of saffron, white and green (in that order from the top).

Statesmen such as Nehru later redefined the flag in secular terms, without reference to religions, and as many of 9 different interpretations are known for the meaning of the colours. For all that, the consensus appears to be in India that it is a beautiful flag reflecting the beauty of India.

The Congress spinning wheel was replaced by the **Dharma Chatra** - the wheel of the cosmic order. It also represents the rule in society of law and order. Its endless turning reminds the beholder also of his place in the cosmic order. Time travels on, only to return.

The national flag of India is hedged about by a plethora of regulations strictly laid down by the Bureau of Standards. A special Section on **Textiles** stipulates whether and how the flag is to be made from silk, cotton, wool - all hand woven - or from nylon (which generally being more expensive, is seldom seen). The same detailed attention is given to uses of the flag in the military. For example, old flags must be buried and the grave marked.

The swastika appears often in India, where it is an ancient Aryan symbol of well-being, a harbinger always of good luck. There is no significance as to the directions of the arms, and to paint a swastika is considered a sacred rite, a holy act and a prayer. For all these reasons there was a move in 1947 to place the swastika in the centre of the flag, but the **Dharma Chatra** prevailed.

Another flag often seen is the five striped flag of the Jain religion. The Sikhs also have their own orange or saffron triangular flag with the device of their faith in black. The cross often is used, as in wedding initiation ceremonies, but it has none of connotations in the west..

CONCLUSION

Since independence the Government has discouraged the development of local or provincial flags, and in fact stopped the practice of flying governors flags. Thus, despite the popularity of a variety of symbols having to do with the rituals of daily life, the outlook for development of vexillography in the subcontinent seems tenuous.