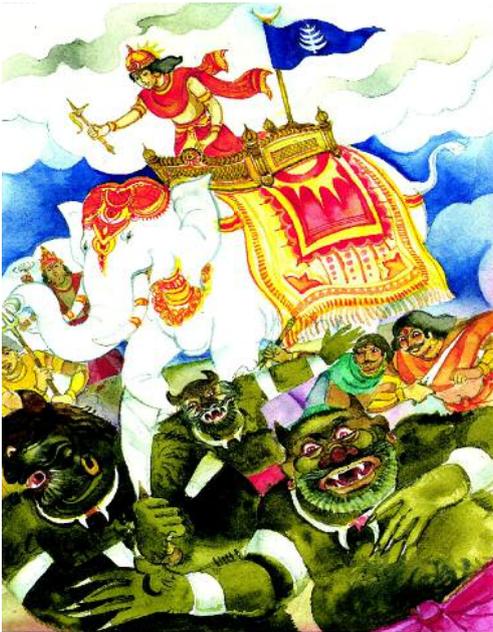


# Flags of Ancient & Epic India

by KV Singh



The shiny blue personal standard of Lord Indra as mentioned in the Rig Veda.



The demon king Ravana of the epic Ramayana had a personal standard in black bearing a human skull called 'Kapaal Dhvaj'.

The imperial ensign of the demon king Ravana displays the musical instrument Veena denoting the wealth and prosperity he enjoyed.



In India, the first mention of a flag, which in Sanskrit is called 'Dhvaja', is made in the Rig Veda which is regarded as the oldest book of the world. The Book dates back to 5000 to 4000 BC. The Text has been recognized as the first literary document in the history of human kind by UNESCO in its "Memory of the World Register" in 2007. There is a clear mention of Indra-dhvaja that belonged to the king of the Aryan-gods. This flag of Indra was a triangular in shiny blue (1). While on war his flag was mounted on a white elephant named Airavata.

The ancient Indian synonym for a flag is 'dhvaja' and for a banner, *Ketu*. A dhvaja has been defined as a symbol of an army or of a king, carried on a staff. According to the Ramayana, a dhvaja was attached to a yasti (pole) and then fixed on the chariot. However, in the strict sense of the word, the term *dhvaja* implies three things, namely, the pataka (the piece of cloth or any other substance that floats in the air), the Ketu (the crest or the emblem made on the pataka), and the yasti (the pole or staff that carries the pataka).

Most Indian scholars, epigraphists and numismatists use the terms *dhvaja* and pataka (a small triangular flag) as synonyms. However, there is a difference between the two, the most important being that the former invariably carries an insignia, whereas the latter does not. The dhvaja consisted of an adorned piece of cloth mounted on a pole or a staff bearing a crest. There is yet another difference. The, dhvaja is rectangular in shape, while the *pataka* is triangular (2). Patakas were made in various plain colours such as red, yellow, white and black, and at times even bore figures of the sun, moon or the stars. In the great Indian epics the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, the patakas are described as having been used by charioteers, elephant riders and the cavalry as their personal standard.

An analytical study of ancient literature shows that a "dhvaja" essentially belonged to a kingdom or a dynasty, while a "pataka" to an individual warrior. A dhvaja was flown on forts and palaces, whereas a pataka was carried on chariots and elephants, etc. by individual warriors. In most cases, especially during the epic era, a pataka was synonymous with its bearer. The demon king Ravana of Ramayana is said to have two flags, one bearing a *veena* (a musical instrument) as its device and the other a human skull. The demon king had the veena on the dhvaja of his kingdom, Lanka, to denote his wisdom and wealth; and displayed the figure of a human skull (3) on his personal standard to cause awe and fear in the hearts of his opponents during a battle. Kautilya (Chankya the Great) in his *Arthashastra* also treats the dhvaja and pataka as two different heraldic devices. In the works of Kalidasa, (the Indian Shakespeare) an army is referred to as *patakani*.

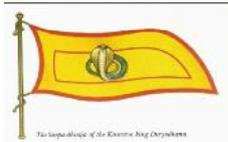




Interestingly, in ancient Indian astronomy and astrology, the headless planet god with a fish as his lower body, Ketu, is known as the ruler of flags. He holds a flag of self-glory in one of his four hands with 'Aum' on its field.



The triangular flag of Dronacharya, the commander-in-chief of the Kauravas showing a bow and a water vessel (made of a hollowed pumpkin).



The flag of the Kaurava king Duryodhana showing a coiled serpent denoting anger and vengeance.



The famous 'Kapi Dhvaja' of the Pandava prince Arjuna depicting the monkey king Hanuman in his ferocious form.

In Indian mythology, astrology and astronomy the planet Ketu, depicted as a headless human torso with a fish-body called the dragon's tail, is the ruler of flags and described as holding a flag of self-glory in one of his four hands, with 'Aum' inscribed in the centre.

In other words, a flag-bearer has always been held in high esteem and for this reason, all puranic (from the Puranas) heroes and warriors had their own flags.

In the *Vedas*, war banners of distinguished warriors were designated as *ketus*. The term *ketu* also means a crest or an insignia used on the *dhvaja*. In the *Mahabharata*, the term has been used in its true meaning such as the *vanara-ketu* for Arjuna (the Pandava Prince), *sarpa-ketu* for Duryodhana (the Kaurava Prince) and the *hastikashyamaharketu* for Karna (4). The Atharva-Veda describes the armies of the gods as *surya-ketu* (sun-bannered) and in the *Mahabharata* an army is referred to as *dhvajani*.

In ancient days, a four-day festival called *dhvaja-mahotsava* or the *Indra-dhvaja-mahotsava*, named after Lord Indra; the Vedic God of War, was celebrated. During the celebrations, the *Indra-yasti* (flag mast) was worshipped and the *Indradhvaja* was held aloft with a cord. It concluded with the lowering of the *dhvaja* (as is done these days at the end of the Olympics and Asian Games). The celebration was performed at the end of a successful military campaign by kings. With the passage of time, the ceremony became more elaborate and ritualistic. In the *Ramayana*, it is clearly stated that the *Indradhvaja* was held aloft on a pole with the help of a cord at the time of the *Mahotsava*. The ceremony lasted for four five days commencing on *Duvadasi* (twelfth day of the Hindu month) and concluded on *Puranmasi* (full moon day). Lord Indra was the War God of the Aryans.

According to a description in the *Mahabharata*, the *Indra-dhvaja* was shiny dark blue and beautiful like a blue lotus. The war standards of the subsequent periods of Indian history had their origin in the *Indra-dhvaja*. If a king desired to conquer his enemies and also wished to acquire fame he was advised to display the *Indra-dhvaja* on all important buildings of his kingdom. For this reason, the *Indra-dhvaja* later acquired another name – *Vajjanta*, meaning the harbinger of victory.

In a war, flags were the first objects of attack in India in ancient times. In 'Raghavansha', a well known work of Kalidasa it is narrated that while engaged in a duel with lord Indra, King Raghu, at once stage of the battle, shot an arrow fitted with peacock features which sliced off Lord Indra's flag staff bearing his blue *dhvaja* (flag). According to the Manusmiti, a text of Codes by Manu, any damage to a *dhvaja* (flag) was considered highly sacrilegious (5).

The Aryan practice of worshipping a *dhvaja* to seek divine blessing for victory before launching military expeditions led to the practice of erecting *dhvaja-stambhas* (pillars) in the temple premises. In the *Raghuvamsa*, there is a reference to the erection of *jaya-dhvaja* by King Raghu after the successful completion of his military expedition. Originally, a *yasti* (flag pole) was made of perishable material like bamboo, Salwood, etc. Later, when *dhvaja* worship became a permanent part of the temple rituals, *yastis* were covered with gold, silver, etc., which lent them durability as well as beauty. *Yastis* erected in temples were known as *dhvaja-stambhas*. These *stambhas*,

in the later period were crowned with figures associated with the chief deity of the temple. Temple flags on ornamental flag masts can still be seen in temples of modern India. Interestingly, even churches in south of India have started installing ornamental flag masts within the church premises.

Besides dhvaja-stambhas, the Vedic people erected wooden *sthunas* at their burial mounds as memorial columns. In the history of the later Vedic period there are references to *yupa-stambhas* (posts) erected by kings and their chiefs in commemoration of their having performed various Vedic functions. Emperor Ashoka (3rd BC) was perhaps the first person to crown *yupa-stambhas* with images of sacred objects, such as the elephant, bull and the horse. The later Brahmanical period saw the *garuda-stambhas*, *vrishbha-stambhas*, and the *makar-stambhas* representing the *vahanas* of Lord Vishnu, Lord Siva and the River Goddess Ganga. Though *sthunas*, *stambhas*, *yupas*, etc., were closely associated with flag ceremonies, they were at no stage of history deemed to be the *dhvaj*as themselves. In the scheme of ancient flags, only the *ketu* held an important position and not the *yasti* or *yupa*.



In the epic era, one of the customs related to flags in prominent duels was that the warrior first destroyed his adversary's flag before slaying him to mark his absolute victory.



Most Indian flags from the Epic times were triangular in shape as against the square or rectangle standards and banners of the western world.

The ancient Indian flags were meticulously decorated with tassels, frills, tiny bells and garlands. Those of the reputed warriors were even embroidered with gold and studded with precious stones. The famous *kapi-dhvaja* of Arjuna was adorned with *patakas* of rainbow colours and studded with jewels (6). Since all flags were closely linked with faith and religion of the people, the motifs or designs used on them invariably bore figures of religious objects. Because of their religious sanctity and people's faith in their protective power, the flags commanded great reverence. The very presence of a *dhvaja* indicated existence of a shrine. The *dhvaja* was a vital feature of an ancient temple complex and continues till the modern times.

According to the old Hindu scriptures, Lord Siva had Nandi (the humped bull) on his *dhvaja*, (flag) while Lord Vishnu bore the figure of *garuda* (the king of eagles). Kamadeva, the God of Love, had the fish as his device on his *pataka*, whereas Yama, the God of Death, exhibited *bhainsa* (a buffalo) on his flag. King Janaka, the father of Sita, (Spouse of Lord Rama of the Ramayana) is said to bear the figure of *seeta* (a plough) on his *dhvaja*.

Certain customs and rituals were associated with these ancient flags :

- The warriors themselves mounted their flags onto their chariots before marching to the battlefield (7).
- Before raising their flag, they circumambulated their chariot thrice.
- Prior to raising their flags, it was properly consecrated.
- A flag bearing an inauspicious symbol was held in such contempt that warriors of repute could refuse to fight it's bearer (8).

### Ancient dhvaja symbols

In ancient times, each of the principal Hindu gods was associated with a specific animal or an object, which would represent him symbolically. The *garuda*, (eagle) *sesanaga* (giant serpent with five heads) or the *salagrama* (a special stone) would represent Lord Vishnu. Lord Siva would be symbolized by the *vrashabha* (humped bull), the *trishula* (trident), the *naga* (serpent), and so on. The consorts of the gods, too, had their symbols: the trident or the skull for Kali, the lotus or the swan for Saraswati, the Goddess of Learning. The sun and moon were represented by the disc

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and crescent respectively. Amongst the planets, *Buddha* (Mercury) was symbolised by a bow, *Mangala* (Mars) by a triangle, *Brahaspati* (Jupiter) by a lotus, *Sani* (Saturn) by a scimitar, *Rahu* by a snake and *Ketu* by a fish.

People of the Vedic era made use of symbols to invoke their revered deities for success in life or in the battlefield. A brief review of the dhvaja motifs shows that they were related to the religion of the people. The dhvaja motifs can be classified into five heads, namely - animals and birds, plants and flowers, objects of nature, sacred objects, and weapons.

## Conclusion

From the details that we find in Hindu Epics it is amply established that elaborate customs, rituals, etiquettes, protocols were in vogue in India during the Vedic and Epic days. It is also evident from the descriptions of flags, that the epic princes and warriors choose symbols after great deliberations and in according to their qualifications religion, faith and mental inclinations.



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## References

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- 2 Vacaspatyam, p. 422:12
- 3 Ramayana, Yudha 100.14
- 4 Mahabharata, Dronaparva, 23.84
- 5 Manusmiti IX. 265
- 6 Mahabharata, Dronaparva, 23.84
- 7 Kalpataru & Suta-Samita
- 8 Mahabharata, Bheeshmaparva, 103.78

## About the author

Born in 1938, **Cdr. KV Singh**(Retd.) was a commissioned Officer and served the Indian Armed Forces for nearly thirty years. He was briefly with the West Bengal Civil Service as Deputy Collector and Magistrate.

Cdr. Singh was the first person in India to author a book on the Indian national flag, the Tiranga.

He has also authored books in English on varied subjects like the National Flag, flags in general, coins, precious stones from around the world, India (in quiz form), and Indian rites and rituals among others.

He is widely travelled within the country and abroad, and over the years has been featured in various newspapers and on television.

