

The Indian National Flag as a Site of Daily Plebiscite

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This paper attempts to understand the politics that go into the making of various discourses and ways of looking at one representational site, the tricolour. It also addresses the question of how to read this symbolic space as a contested field and analyses the “cultural practices” underlying political questions in colonial and post-colonial India. The author explores three historical periods in the history of the national flag – the flag satyagraha (1922–23), the constituent assembly debate on the design of the flag and the period between 1997 and 2002 when important decisions regarding the use of the tricolour were taken.

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And this big flag and lathi...and the flag was used for gathering chutki

...Naujadi, wife of Rameshwar Pashi of Dumri village, in Shahid Amin, *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura, 1922–92*. The stripping of Mishri Devi, scheduled caste woman sarpanch in Rajasthan’s Thikri village, on independence day for daring to unfurl the national flag has had one positive outcome – it exposed the hollowness of the official rhetoric.

– ‘The Flag at Half Mast’, *Indian Express*, August 21, 1998.

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 sin to destroy. For a flag represents an ideal.

– Mahatma Gandhi, *Young India*, April 13, 1921.

The Flag of ‘A Mere Nobody’

In the fight at Nagpur there is certainly a national principle at stake”, wrote “a mere nobody” to the editor of the *Hitvada*, the leading English weekly from Nagpur (Central Provinces) on May 30, 1923. He further wrote, “The point at issue at Nagpur is not whether a particular piece of cloth can be called the national flag but whether India as a nation has a right to have her own distinct national flag even though she may remain a partner in the empire of Great Britain”.

The anonymity of the author of this letter to the editor, at first instance appears as the mark of its subalternity. The citizen subject is invisible. However, anonymity has been desired and not imposed (at least not directly) upon the author of this letter. The anonymous author expands the field of play for the text of the national flag enormously. By choosing not to associate the name of the author with any particular individual name/body, the letter in fact offers a possibility to include an entire nation as scripting this letter. The author is nameless and faceless and hence anyone of the readers can be its author. This totalising possibility also erases the definitional boundaries of the other of this text. Just as anyone can become the author of this textual field anyone one can also be the “other” of this field. The other acquires a mythic position. It is not merely a question of making claims over the representational space. The letter is directly addressing and claiming over the space of visualising the nation. In its extended role of engaging its readers to take up the position of the text’s imagined partner, this anonymous letter is not just scripting the text of the flag but reorganising and reordering the gaze of its citizen.

The historical context of this letter is the “low-key affair” of the national flag satyagraha of 1922–23. The All India Congress Working Committee had already decided (in the famous Bardoli resolution) not to launch any civil disobedience movement. Mahatma Gandhi, the man behind the non-cooperation-khilafat movement was quite frustrated following the “Chauri Chaura event”. He was convinced that the nation was not mature

enough for swaraj. At this vulnerable national moment first Jubblepore (Jabalpur) and then Nagpur witnessed a prolonged civil disobedience movement, started by the local Congress committee which was fought over the issue of the flag – a flag which had no official acceptance by the Indian National Congress (it was officially adopted as the Congress flag only in 1931). The significance of this satyagraha also lies in its non-violent character. It was marked by the absence of any major incidence of violence (from the participants), a rare aspect as all major non-violent mass movements had to face unavoidable violence at one or another level. Despite the prolonged and non-violent nature of the satyagraha and its crucial timing, the flag satyagraha has not attracted much response from historians. For many of them it remained “a low-key affair” [Baker 1979: 76-77] or “a rather tamed affair” [Sarkar 1983: 228].

A different kind of register, however, points to another direction. A Hindi novel, *Baba Batesarnath* by Nagarjuna [Baidyanath Mishra *Yatri*], located against the backdrop of a rural landscape of north Bihar, narrates, “The news of the flag satyagraha (‘jhandā andolan’) was spreading like a fire in the jungle of dry grass. Gandhiji was in the prison. People were much excited. *Birbhadra*’s brother used to subscribe *aaj* from Banaras. Small and middle strata of peasants (‘chote aur majhole kisan’) gathered in the noon and early in the night. This was the same ‘chaupal’ of Tarkpanchanan mahashaya about which I have already told you. Earlier, there happened to be recitations of (*parayan*) *bhagwat* and *bramhbaibarta Puraana*, *Ramayana* of Britibas and *Mahabharata* of Kashiraamdasji, later on *Sukhsagar-Premasagar* and *Ramcharitmanas*. Now, it was the number of Banarasi daily, *aaj*. The news of non-cooperation and satyagraha were being printed in very provocative language. Peasants listened to (this being read out aloud) quite seriously” [Nagarjuna 92-93; translation mine].

The letter to the editor, mentioned in the beginning, appeared as a response to the editor’s invitation for a dialogue with readers and asking for suggestions from local citizens as “a way out of the *difficulty*” (emphasis mine). The official bias gets reflected at various points and particularly in the way it had covered the affair of the flag satyagraha. However, readers were given ample space to criticise the position of the weekly, making the news weekly’s political position a complex one demanding more analytical space.

Introduction

The design of the Indian national flag was finalised and approved unanimously in the constituent assembly on July 22, 1947 [‘Motion Re National Flag’, 737-761]. My study of this popular political symbol does not attempt to search the historical origin of this symbol. The temptation to search the origin myth often appears to be so strong that scholars quite often fall into this trap. For example, the article written by Arundhati Virmani, on the Nagpur flag satyagraha, begins by cautioning its readers, “questions about the origins of the flag – ‘which attract people, fascinate the curious and are as much an occasion for erudite quarrels’ – do not in fact constitute the central problem.” Here, she draws insights from the work of Maurice Agulhon. But, in its

elaboration, the article fails to live up to this demand of the author. Part 1 of the essay starts with a line stating in an authoritative and objective fashion, “The British were the first to give India a specific flag in accordance with western heraldic standards” [Virmani 1999: 172]. The essay argues that the political consciousness about symbolic space was not only an outcome of colonial policies or colonial situations but the significance which this symbolic space acquired in later years of colonial rule was nothing but an expression of a borrowed mentality. She writes, “Indeed, the success of the national flag was related to British colonial practices and immediate reactions. Their use of the Union Jack to mark their sovereignty, and of Empire Day as the imperial ritual of displaying allegiance to the British empire, made the flag a necessary attribute to nationhood” [Virmani 1999: 197].

The National Flag Satyagraha 1922-23

The flag satyagraha had its origin in 1922 in a civic reception ceremony, which was organised by the municipal committee of Jubblepore in honour of the visiting Civil Disobedience Inquiry Committee (*The Hitvada*, July 12, 1922). The local municipal committee meeting which was held on July 4, 1922, resolved “to organise a welcome ceremony”, “to present an address of welcome to the president, Hakim Ajmal Khan and other members of the Inquiry Committee” and, “to hoist the national flag”, as approved by the Indian National Congress, on all the municipal buildings. The second part of the resolution (regarding the hoisting of the “national flag”) was opened up for the discussion by Khan Bahadur. Three amendments to this proposal were moved (i) that no flag to be raised at all, (ii) that the Union Jack be hoisted above the “national flag”, and (iii) that the Union Jack and the “national flag” be hoisted side by side. All these three amendments were rejected. The original proposal was opposed only by the official and nominated members and two elected members and the resolution was also passed by a majority.

The Civil Disobedience Inquiry Committee arrived on schedule on July 9, 1922 and received a warm welcome. “To damp[en] the enthusiasm”, the railway officials stopped issuing platform tickets from the previous night when distinguished guests were arriving. This colonial move was highlighted as a part of colonial strategy to crush the nationalist spirit in an undignified and improper manner.

In this charged environment, the function at the Town Hall went off smoothly. The national flag was hoisted on the Town Hall and over the municipal buildings as was resolved by the committee. A correspondent wrote in the *Statesman* (July 13) that the minister of local self-government considered the hoisting of the “national flag” as objectionable but that the whole affair did not attract much public attention. The satyagraha was still far away. Meanwhile the affair did not go unnoticed at the official level. The governor of the central provinces, Frank Salai, was in the city during this whole affair and he bitterly criticised the local administration for this episode (*Prabha*, special issue 1923). The question was also raised in the British parliament and the administration had to assure that no further act of this kind would recur

(*The Hitvada*, June 6, 1923). However, at this stage, the hoisting of the flag remained a low-key affair and did not receive much publicity.

The issue was revived again, a year later, on the occasion of Rajgopalachari's visit to the city. The Jubblepore municipal committee again passed a resolution to hoist the "National Flag" on official buildings (*The Hitvada*, March 21, 1923). But this time, some prominent pro-official members lodged their protest with the deputy commissioner. The president was asked to call an emergency meeting of the committee to discuss the issue again, which he was reported to have ruled out as illegal for want of sufficient reason (*The Hitvada*, March 21, 1923).

The Congress Working Committee was expected to arrive in the city on the evening of March 9, 1923 but did not arrive till the 11th. This time, the administration was well prepared. Section 144 criminal procedure code (CPC) and section 30, Police Act, were imposed by the district magistrate prohibiting procession or assembly of people going along the road to Town Hall, the venue of the meeting. The venue was shifted and the procession changed its route to the Congress office. A public meeting was held at Alaf Khan Talaiya. On March 12, the Congress Working Committee deputation left Jubblepore. On March 18 the anniversary of Gandhi's imprisonment, there was a partial hartal in the city and in the afternoon it was decided to have a procession carrying the national flag through the civil lines and cantonment. They refused to be dissuaded by the city superintendent of police. The procession was met by the assistant superintendent of police with an order under Section 30 of the Police Act that no procession could be taken to the civil lines and cantonment without licence (prior permission). The leaders agreed to take a licence provided that they were allowed to carry their flag. This was disallowed. Sunderlal (a prominent local Congressman and a very influential personality of the Hindi belt of the central province), Nathuram Modi (a lawyer) and Subhadra Kumari Chauhan (poetess), with a batch of volunteers, took out the procession carrying the national flag, defied the orders of district administration and were arrested.

They were released the next day but the act of defiance and arrests started the flag satyagraha. Sunderlal took a leading role in the preparation for the launching of a mass movement over the issue of the flag. On the day of his release a meeting took place in which 2,000 persons participated and appeals for funds and volunteers were made. The movement proceeded with 14 members of the municipal committee resigning their posts, the re-arrest of Sunderlal and the formation of subcommittees to carry out different organisational tasks of the flag satyagraha. Earlier, on the request of a provincial Congressman, Sunderlal initiated a correspondence with the All India Congress Working Committee on the issue, but till his arrest he was unable to elicit any response from the Congress Working Committee. The idea of the flag disseminated very quickly elsewhere in the central provinces.

The national flag was hoisted over Bilaspur Town Hall on March 27, 1923, during the 20th annual session of the Provincial Rajput Conference (*The Hitvada*, April 4, 1923).¹ Very soon, the Congress flag became a symbol of prestige as well as a

matter of showing community strength in various other caste conferences.

After the arrest of Sunderlal the leadership of the movement passed into the hands of Mahatma Bhagwandin, a local personality of some repute. Bhagwandin's popular base was in Nagpur city and thus the venue of the movement shifted from Jubblepore to Nagpur. On April 13 (the anniversary of the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre), the Nagpur city congress committee organised a flag procession. But they were denied entry into the Civil Lines area. There was an exchange of hot words followed by a lathi charge and arrests were made. The local administration and the Congress came up with different explanations for the incident and the issue received wide publicity (Editorial, *The Hitvada*, April 18, 1923). The administration claimed that the police were acting on a complaint made by the European resident of the Civil Lines area, while the police justified their activity on the ground that the carrying of the national flag might have led to a clash between the two groups (*The Hitvada*, May 2, 1923).

The arrests were glorified and propagated through various stories in the nationalist press. The administration was equally vociferous in countering nationalist claims through press communiqués and by writings in the press. In a government clarification of the sequence of events, district magistrate Mathias traced the criminal background of "mahatma" Bhagwandin. He wrote that not only was the flag movement well planned, "the Civil Disobedience and the flag has been used both as a pretext for lawlessness and as an object of false appeal" (*The Hitvada*, July 4, 1923).

The responses over the flag satyagraha were varied and often contradictory (even within the so-called nationalist sphere). Commenting on the government's stand, *The Leader* wrote, "The policy towards the national flag agitation is on the whole a wise one and consistent with the law of the land." Motilal Nehru criticised, "I confess I don't appreciate either the appropriateness or the utilities of these undertakings" (*The Hitvada*, May 9, 1923). Even *Young India* wrote, "...Of what is the use, shouting for his victory (Mahatma Gandhi ki jai) when they trample on his order" (*The Hitvada*, May 16, 1923). The Swaraj Party kept silent over the flag satyagraha and later refused to pass a resolution congratulating and sympathising with the arrested volunteers. The flag satyagraha received a hostile response in the Marathi press and the press owned by Maharashtrians in general. V J Patel was not allowed to move the resolution expressing sympathy with the satyagrahis of Nagpur. The leaders of the Marathi-speaking people of the central province kept themselves out of the whole affair and they also bitterly criticised the satyagraha.² It is also interesting to note that the Congress sent Jamunalal Bajaj to organise and supervise the movement, when it had already rejected the plan for launching the civil disobedience movement at Bardoli. The movement lasted for more than three months with a batch of 10 volunteers offering to be arrested by defying the government order each day in a non-violent fashion. The movement came to an end in a rather unusual manner. The section 144 imposed earlier lapsed on August 16 and the district administration did not reimpose

the order. Thus on August 17, 1923, volunteers were allowed to pass through the Civil Lines along with the flag. It was hailed as a victory and success of the satyagraha by nationalists, while the district authority claimed that lifting of the ban was the outcome of a compromise between the Congress and the district administration.³

Throughout the satyagraha, the press was used as a platform to champion voices and claims regarding both the flag as well as people involved in the satyagraha. The *Hitvada* reported that among those who were arrested was a young woman with an infant suckling in her arm. She was quickly discharged by the police (*Hitvada*, May 9, 1923). In another instance, the *Hitvada* wrote that a man who had come to see Baba Tajuddin (a local saint) could not afford the railway fare from Patna to Nagpur and took the opportunity offered by the Congress to join the list of volunteers (*Hitvada*, July 15, 1923). The attempt in these reports was to establish a proximity with the body of the people by proclaiming that people who were involved in the satyagraha had nothing to do with the flag. What is also significant is that in the discourse of the movement we always find a third party (besides nationalist and colonialist official voices). This is the category of “citizens” who were projected by the *Hitvada* as neutral people for whom peace of the city and the law and order problems were far more important than any ideological issue. For me, the question is not to recover or relocate this space of “citizens” in the history of the flag satyagraha but to analyse the ways in which this body of citizenry gets represented, around the issue of the flag, in one particular news-weekly. The *Hitvada* championed this category (citizen) as neutral and chose to dwell on the problems faced by these citizens because of the flag satyagraha.

The Hitvada wrote in an editorial, “We fail to see why the people of Jubblepore and some other districts in the north, whip themselves up into a fury over the national flag affair”? The editorial ends with, “We appeal to our friends at Jubblepore to concentrate their energies on some more solid and more tangible and useful activity on behalf of our motherland which is crying in need of constructive works” (*The Hitvada*, April 11, 1923).

The Hitvada continuously emphasised that these citizens had nothing to do with the satyagraha yet they were paying for it. The *Hitvada* also published a poem titled ‘Swaraj’, which is a satire on the flag satyagraha.

Harp no more on the Punjab sore
The string has lost its tune
The Khilafat question affords no more
A cry opportune,
The crore! The crore! Was it a crore?
The blooming crore is gone
The charkha’s music pleases no more
Pray, leave the khaddar alone.

Swaraj! Swaraj! Who wants Swaraj?
O! there is an easy way to fetch
March with flags amidst cries of jai
And the goal of Swaraj is reached! (*The Hitvada*, May 16, 1923)

The editor of *Hitvada* invited its readers to suggest “the way out of this difficulty”. In fact, the use of this space – “readers column” – does not only reflect various positions regarding the

flag movement and ideologies working behind the movement. The column also featured voices from different positions articulated on the basis of rationality, reason, law, ethics and well-being of the ordinary people. Each piece of this column laid claim only after putting common people at the central stage of the argument. It was the proximity to the body public, which was the legitimising agency for their article. The significance of this space can further be analysed by the fact that a locally well known barrister, D K Mehta (of Seoni) was arrested soon after his longish article appeared in this column of the *Hitvada* (“a curious arrest”, *The Hitvada*, June 13, 1923).⁴ This arrest led to the publication of a series of anonymous letters. They wrote as “a mere nobody” or as “a commoner” as if speaking on behalf of the whole community. While the official version stated that the issue was not the flag but the “law and order problem” (‘DM’s Column’, *Hitvada*, June 20, 1923), “a mere nobody” wrote, “the government feel it as national flag and therefore it will cause annoyance”.⁵

There appeared a column as “the plea of taxpayers” (*Hitvada*, June 20, 1923). In this letter, the author criticised the government for feeding jail goers and the fact that the burden of all these ultimately falls on the shoulders of ordinary taxpayers. Even in the post-satyagraha period, the act of making claims and counter-claims continued for quite some time.

Shifting my own engagement, the question for me is how to expand the field of play of this symbol when the history of this symbol remains not merely another history of the event that produces it.

The Tricolour: A Site of ‘Daily Plebiscite’

Writing on the symbolism of flags Raymond Firth gives an interesting ethnographic observation from Suye Mura tradition. He writes, “In Suye Mura flags were not only set up for holidays, boy’s ceremonies and completion of house framework – they also marked funerals and memorial services for the dead. They also indicated the drafting of young men into army. Before the war when a youth was selected to serve as a soldier, a tall bamboo was cut and stripped to a topknot of leaves. Below this leaf cluster a national flag was fastened and the flag pole was erected in the house yard. The flag was left in position while the son of the house was away in the army, and those houses which had soldiers in training or overseas could be told by the location of the flags” [Firth 1973: 33].

The national flag travels a long distance in this ethnographic account. It seems to be occupying everyday moments: from holidays to funeral services. It identifies the absence of soldiers from their homes and informs about their presence at the national border. The power of the flag empties houses and nationalises the gaze. However, I would like to argue that the power of the semiotic field, the national flag, should not be merely seen in the act of its occupancy over empty houses or over holidays or over funeral services. In the scopic regimes of the nation, it is not merely a case of houses getting transformed into the nation (by the presence or absence of the national flag) but the reverse process of identification equally deserves attention: the body of the nation because of the presence of the national

flag gets transformed into bodies of everyday life and empty houses. In this way, we need to move ahead from the history of the flag as it appeared in the context of an “event” – the national flag satyagraha, to the history of flag to more dispersed locations and moments.

Construction of a Field of Political Struggle

Naujadi, widow of Rameshwar Pashi of Chauri-Chaura recalls, “And this big flag and lathi... And the flag was used for gathering chutki”. Naujadi describes the community of ‘otiyars’ (volunteers) “...jhanda rahal, gulabi-kurta rahal –garua rang; dhori rahal, topi rahal, aa jhanda rahal” (“They had flags, pinks, long shirts (kurta), caps, flags”). “In Naujadi’s mind chutki, bhik, geru clothes together distinguished the otiyars of Chauri-Chaura” [Amin 1995: 184-85]. These markers constituted the defining contours of the body resisting colonial scopic regimes.

Throughout the colonial period the hoisting of the Congress flag on government buildings was a matter of serious concern both for the colonial government as well as for the nationalists. In nationalist circles, the presence of the Union Jack was considered (and condemned) as an emphatic reminder of the country’s subjugation. In the first week of February 1922 an industrial exhibition was organised in Bhagalpur. There a contractor had used the “national flag” (the Congress flag) for decorative purposes which “aroused considerable local feeling and attracted more than local notice”. Officials, especially local European officials strongly objected to it. The commissioner with the help of an executive member, S Sinha, who was on a visit to Bhagalpur at that time made a kind of compromise so that the Union Jack would remain higher than the national flag. The *Searchlight* commented that there was a great resentment among the masses and this step was considered as derogatory in the nationalist flank. The Bhagalpur incidence was received in equally critical way in official circle and questions were raised in British parliament [Dutt 1975, Vol 1, pp 418-19]. The co-hoisting of the Congress flag and the Union Jack was unanimously rejected during the freedom struggle. In the language of Ronald Inden it was a fight over the hierarchical order of the cultural symbolic constitution.⁶ In a personal and confidential response Linlithgow wrote, “I think there should be no difficulty in holding that an order to hoist the Congress flag on the government building would also be an order – ‘affecting the sovereignty, dominion or the suzerainty of the Crown in any part of the India’ – for the purpose of section 110(b)(I) of the act. From either point of view, therefore, an order to hoist the Congress flag would transgress the executive authority of the province and the governor could not use this executive authority to give effect to it”.⁷

In this conflict over the domination in the symbolic space, Mahatma Gandhi had a unique position that further complicates the field of contestation over this semiotic space. One of the designs that Gandhiji had suggested for the “national flag” of independent India contained a miniature Union Jack in the corner of the flag. Answering a question at a prayer meeting at New Delhi, Mahatma Gandhi said, “But what is wrong with having the Union Jack in a corner of our flag? If harm has been

done to us by the British it has not been done by their flag and we must also take note of the virtues of the British. They are voluntarily withdrawing from India, leaving power in our hands... It pains me that the Congress leaders could not show this generosity... If I had the power that I once had I would have taken the people to task for it. After all, why should we give up our humanity” [Gandhi 1976, Vol 88: 375-76].

The hoisting of the national flag, throughout the colonial period, had the status of a political ritual putting its own demands. This political ritual often demanded sacrifices, sometimes non-violent, sometimes of blood and lives. To die for the national flag was to die for the nation – a popular way to martyrdom. In 1942 seven students (all but one were schoolgoing boys) were shot dead in an attempt to hoist the flag over the Patna secretariat building [Dutt 1975, Vol 3: 41-43].

The hoisting of the flag symbolised an act of defiance as well as a kind of statement of freedom. In these acts of symbolic violence, participants visualised the ideal political order of the future. They actually performed the “rehearsals of future”. Numerous stories were created and became part of the school pedagogy. A huge monolithic monument reminds us about their sacrifice.⁸

It is through these rituals of sacrifices that the text of the Indian national flag comes down to us. These rituals were the sites where the rehearsal of the future India took various shapes. In the context of the Quit India Movement of 1942, following the Congress instructions on “How to Make This War for Independence Successful” martyrs of freedom saw a dream, a dream of free India [Dutt 1975, Vol 3: 38-40]. The hoisting of the flag over official buildings was considered as the realisation of this dream in real life. This was a kind of proclamation of freedom. Thus even when freedom fighters already knew that their attempts were bound to fail, the unfurling of the flag remained a source of courage and sacrifice. In the narratives of these heroic acts, while the flag acts as the source of authority (because of its sacred nature and its automatic equation with the image of nation), on the other hand these sacrifices themselves act as legitimising authority of the flag.

While in the colonial period the contest was primarily between the Union Jack and various flags claiming the status of national flag, in independent India the aspiration of the state became oriented towards reordering, fixing and thus controlling the gaze of citizenship. An aspiration to have a homogeneous gaze that has been a hallmark of the modernist state can also be seen in the constituent assembly debate over the design of the national flag.

The Struggle Within: Semiotic Contest

After the samples of the national flag were prepared by the ad hoc committee (constituted to draft the final design of the flag) and were placed before the constituent assembly on July 22, 1947 for its approval, Jawaharlal Nehru moved the following resolution: “Resolved that the national flag of India shall be horizontal tricolour of deep saffron (kesari), white and dark green in equal proportions. In the centre of the white band, there shall be a wheel in navy blue to represent the charkha.

The design of the wheel shall be that of the wheel which appears on the abacus of the Sarnath Lion Capital of Ashoka”.

After his long speech he presented two flags to the assembly, one made of khadi-silk and the other of cotton-khadi. The resolution was carried unanimously.

Thus while the basic format of the popular Congress flag remained more or less the same, the spinning wheel vanished from the centre space. Speaking on the philosophy behind the semiotics of the national flag Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan said, “Ashokan wheel represents to us the wheel of law, the wheel of Dharma”. He said that the perpetually revolving wheel indicates that there is death in stagnation [‘Motion Re’: 746]. The spinning wheel was a metaphor for the attainment of swaraj and swaraj obviously meant much more than political freedom but that dream was kept aside by the “makers” of independent India. The problem becomes a bit more complex in the speech of Jawaharlal Nehru. Moving the resolution for the adoption of the final design of the national flag, he justified the replacement of the charkha with the Ashokan wheel. He said “...In the white, previously there was the charkha, which symbolised *common man in India*, which symbolised their industry, and which came to us from the message which Mahatma Gandhi delivered. Now, this particular charkha symbol has been slightly varied in this flag, not taken away at all. Why has it been varied? Normally speaking, the symbol on one side of the flag should be exactly the same as on the other side otherwise, there is a difficulty which goes *against the conventions*. Now the charkha as it appeared previously on this flag had the wheel on one side and the spindle on the other. If you see the other side of the flag, the spindle comes the other way and the wheels comes this way. There was this *practical difficulty*. Therefore, after considerable thought, we were convinced that this great symbol which enthused the people should continue in a slightly different form, that the wheel should be there and not the rest of the charkha, i e, the *spindle and the string which created this confusion*. The essential part of the charkha should be there, that is the wheel. So the old tradition continues in regard to the Charkha and the wheel” (italics mine).

Thus for the sake of “practical difficulty” and to avoid the “confusion” the wheel was removed from the spindle and the string. However, it should be kept in mind that even at this stage when “History” replaced the “common men” at the level of representation, these “common men” and their sacrifices remained alive at the level of narrative. Moving the resolution of the flag Nehru said, “In a sense this flag was adopted not by a formal resolution, but by popular acclaim and usage, adopted much more by the sacrifice that surrounded it in the past few decades. We are in a sense only ratifying the popular adoption”. On the practical relevance of Gandhian model of swaraj and economic planning, based on charkha ideology, Nehru wrote in a historic reply to Gandhi, “It is many years since I read Hind Swaraj and I have only a vague picture in my mind. But even when I read it 20 or more years ago it seemed to me completely unreal”. On October 5, 1945, Gandhi wrote to his heir, Nehru, “... I have said that I still stand by the system of government envisaged in Hind Swaraj. These

are not mere words. All the experience gained by me since 1909 when I wrote the booklet has confirmed the truth of my belief...I am convinced that if India is to attain true freedom, through India the world also, then sooner or later the fact must be recognised that people will have to live in villages, not in towns; in huts, not in palaces. Crores of people will never be able to live at peace with each other in towns and palaces...” On October 9, 1945, the heir writes back to Gandhi from Anand Bhavan, “...A village, normally speaking, is backward intellectually and culturally and no progress can be made from a backward environment. Narrow-minded people are much more likely to be untruthful and violent...It is many years since I read Hind Swaraj and I have only a vague picture in my mind. But even when I read it 20 or more years ago it seemed to me completely unreal. In your writings and speeches since then I have found much that seemed to me an advance on that old position and an appreciation of modern trends. I was, therefore, surprised when you told us that the old picture still remains intact in your mind” [Akbar 1988: 469-70].

The common man vanished from the agenda and the “magnificent name” of Ashoka acquired that space. The nation established its lineage by placing this historic personality at its semiotic centre.⁹ Gandhi once said, “I believe in the saying that a nation is happy that has no history” (on Mahatma Gandhi’s view about history see, Khilnani). A particular discourse of history ultimately triumphed.

The removal of the charkha did not go unchallenged outside the constituent assembly. One correspondent from Hyderabad wrote, “Gandhiji is being buried alive”. Referring to some of the speeches of the constituent assembly debate, he further wrote, “The new wheel or Ashokan chakra has no connection with Gandhi’s wheel; wheel is the sign of ‘non-violent economy’ while the new one represents the Sudarshan chakra, which represents violence” [Gandhi 1976, Vol 89, 2].

In the beginning, Gandhiji had himself reacted bitterly over the issue of the removal of spinning wheel from “the flag”. He wrote, “... I must say that if the flag of Indian Union will not contain the emblem of the charkha I will refuse to salute that flag...” Gradually he came to believe that the chakra (wheel) of the flag was Ashokan Chakra (Ashokan Wheel) and had nothing to do with Sudarshan Chakra. He also accepted that the popular meaning of the Sudarshan Chakra as a symbol of violence was wrong (‘Letter from Radha Kumud Mukherji, August 31, 1947’ [Gandhi 1976, Vol 89: 120].) He further wrote, “if we neglect the charkha...we will be acting like a man who remembers God in sorrow and forgets him when he showers happiness” [Gandhi 1976, Vol 89, 484].

Gandhiji was also worried about the existing stock of one lakh flags with charkha at the centre. He said, “The Charkha Sangh has a stock of old tricolour flags valued at Rs 2 lakh. The Charkha Sangh is an organisation of very poor people. I am its president. The people working in that organisation are paid very little. They want to know what they are to do with the flags. There is not much difference between the new and the old except that the old

one was a little more elegant. The old flag had the charkha. The new one the wheel but not the spindle and the mal. The new flag does not render the old flag redundant. Even after the king is dead, the kingdom remains and old coins are not discarded for the new ones. When the new coins are issued old coins do not suffer any depreciation of value. Therefore, so long as there is even one old flag in stock at the Gandhi Ashram the two flags will have the same value. People who have old flags should not tear them up and if they want to buy more flags they should buy the same flags from the Gandhi Ashram so that Rs 2 lakh worth of goods are not wasted. Of course, in future the Charkha Sangh will make flags only of the new design" [Gandhi 1976, Vol 88, 416]. Earlier he had suggested the design of the tricolour with the little Union Jack in the corner of the flag. He said that this would represent our humble gesture toward our own past ruler [Gandhi 1976, Vol 88, 375].

Scholars have pointed out that the systematic attempt to put Gandhi into the backyard by the mainstream top leadership of Congress began soon after the 1942 revolution. By 1945, when independence was not a distant affair any more, "many a time he was the cause of anger and irritation for the people engaged in the negotiation of power (both for country and for themselves)". They found Gandhi's style slightly anachronistic and Gandhi somewhat unmanageable [Sarkar 1983: 453; Nandy 1980: 88-90].

Thus the replacement of charkha with the wheel, and the life of "common men" with a particular discourse of "history" cannot be analysed in isolation from the outgoing tensions and threats which Gandhian model and Gandhi himself had been experiencing in those days. What seems to be a minor act of the replacement of symbols in fact reveals deep structures of the politics of the period. The national flag, the charkha, the Ashokan wheel all acted as a space where political claims were negated and counter claims were established. But, this was not going to be the end of the story.

The Indian state also codified and made rules, a set of prescriptions allowing and prohibiting individual and collective actions has been laid down for the "imagination". "Apart from non-statutory instructions issued by the government from time to time, the display of the national flag is governed by the provisions of the Emblems and Names (Prevention and Improper Use) Act, 1950 (No 12 of 1950) and the Prevention of Insults to National Honour Act, 1971 (No 69 of 1971). The Flag Code of India, 2002 is an attempt to bring together all such laws, conventions, practices and instructions for the guidance and benefit of all concerned" [The Flag Code 1]. The flag code of India prescribes a set of "dos and don'ts" regarding the use of the flag and provides model instructions for the hoisting, for ways of saluting and taking a pledge before the flag in schools and other places. It says, "There is universal affection and respect for, and loyalty to, the national flag. Yet, a perceptible lack of awareness is often noticed, not only amongst people but also in the organisations/agencies of the government, in regard to laws, practices and conventions that apply to the display of the National Flag" [The Flag Code 1].

A model set of instructions for guidance points out, "The school will assemble in open square formation with pupils forming the three sides and the flagstaff at the centre of the fourth side. The headmaster, the pupil leader and the person unfurling the flag (if other than the headmaster) will stand three paces behind the flagstaff." Another model instruction is "the distance between each row should be at least one pace (30 inches); and the space between Form and Form should be the same" [The Flag Code 7].

However, in the popular viewing practices, the wheel and colours acquired very quickly and swiftly different religious (often communal) positions. The wheel, for example was hailed as Sudarshan Chakra, a popular weapon associated with lord Vishnu of the Hindu religion [Constituent Assembly Debates 1947]. Apart from this equation of Ashokan wheel as Sudarshan Chakra, we have various interesting and religious interpretations (primarily coming from Hindu majoritarian world views) of the flag. Speaking in the constituent assembly itself, Lakshmi Narayan Sahu (from Orissa) said, "when I see the three colours on this flag, I am reminded also of the three images inside the temple of Jagannath. Lord Jagannath represents the blue colour, Balaram represents the white and Subhadra Devi represents the yellow colour, with lord Jagannath and Balaram on either side of Subhadra Devi, in a way defending the womenfolk" [ibid].

Despite the codification by the nation state, the national flag continued (despite the official claims) to address the imagination and memories of the nation at various plains. The ordering of this gaze ultimately had to respond to these other more popular "scopic regimes" of the national flag. The return of the repressed came after 50 years.

Responding to a six-year long legal case involving a big businessman, Navin Jindal, in April 2001, the government of India announced its decision to liberalise the use of the national flag. The Shenoy Committee, looking at the matter suggested, "ordinary citizens be allowed to liberally fly the national flag 'to express their love and patriotism on all days' subject to conditions laid down in the flag code" [Hazra 2001: 2].¹⁰

Representational Invasion

The year 1997-98, when I started working on this theme, was a year full of national celebration and jubilation in India, the golden jubilee year of Indian independence. The streets of the nation were flooded with nationalist icons and there was every attempt made to nationalise the gaze of the Indian people. The Indian national flag was obviously at the centre of the frame. Yet, the media was sensitive to its own responsibilities and there was a consciousness on its part to distance itself from the task of glorifying the achievements of the last 50 years. The weaknesses, failures, grey areas of the democratic state all were highlighted and in this way progressive citizens discharged their responsibilities.

On independence day 1998, tribals in some pockets of Orissa saw the tricolour for the first time in their lives and hoisted it to invoke the rain gods for a good harvest. A local organisation of a neighbouring town, Paschim Orissa Krusigivi Sangh, brought the idea of the nation-in-celebration into these

non-nationalised pockets of a backward state. Braja Bandhu Bhoi, a kandha tribal of Kurlubhata village in Bolangir district (Orissa), like his other clan members knew little about the independence day and the national flag. He hoisted the flag by breaking a coconut at the base of the flag and performed worship rituals. “*The rain gods may now grant one some harvest from two and half acre plot*”, he muttered (emphasis mine). At Jamgaon village in Nanpada district, infamous for starvation deaths, a 45-year-old harijan woman Sapur Beg hoisted the flag. In another case, the oldest man of Burkani village near Kalahandi district, 55-year-old Sadanand Majhi of the gonda tribe, appeared quite bewildered when he was led up to hoist the flag. As flower petals fluttered down he asked “will it give us food or bring rain?”

Mundakani is a remote village where no one has ever seen a high ranking police officer or a minister and the usual visitors are low ranking forest or police officials who go there to extort money. Social activists of the Paschim Orissa Krusigivi Sangh told villagers about the independence day function. The villagers agreed to observe it as a memorial to official harassment. Srihari Nag, who had recently lost an eye after being tortured by the police, unfurled the flag. The flag hoisting meant a new ritual for tribals which they performed to bring rain and good harvest.

One may read these examples as a part of the history of a democratic nation state. The reading may also be arranged in terms of the role of the media in expanding the boundary of the nation state (and the national flag is the carrier of this nationalist project) by bringing the “left out” citizens within the scopic regime of the nation.

These narratives need to be placed along with other markers, i.e., 50 years of India’s independence, backwardness of Orissa, lack of literacy (total absence of political education) and last but not least the flag as a metaphor of joy and desire, not of the nation and a national citizenry but in their own terms, in forms of rain gods and good harvest.

The story does not stop here. What is also required is to bring those agencies into focus, through which the nation comes to know about these innocent and hidden people and their tragic conditions. These agencies and their narratives transform the national flag from its role as primary signifier, signifying the nation at one place (when it is before the eyes of tribal people), to its role as a secondary signifier, which places those “tribal” and their “backwardness”, the absence of national culture before a researcher. Acting as central theme, the unfurling of the national flag eventually brings hitherto untouched subjects to the attention of the nation. By accomplishing this national task the nature of the national flag transforms from a passive agency of reflecting the nation to an active player in the discourse of the nation and nationalism.

On a different terrain, in the music album, ‘Vande Matram’ (the national song of India) musician, A R Rahman, the spectacle becomes a bit more complex. There are two specific music videos (‘Vande Mataram’ and ‘Ma Tujhe Salam’) in this album that I wish to read here without going into the details. Both of these came on

the occasion of India’s 50 years of independence and became quite famous.¹¹

The national flag is the focal point of both these videos. The frames are absorbing: snout-nosed children giggling in the vast barren landscapes of Ladakh, a long line of Rajasthani villages, the rapidly changing pitch of the voice, fast music, quickly moving picture frames, rural men and women holding the tricolour, a group of horse riders galloping and holding the tricolour in their hands in ‘Vande Mataram’. More than 20 people are struggling to lift the huge 70-foot long flag-post on the flat landscape outside Jaisalmer in ‘Ma Tujhe Salam’ and people from neighbouring areas join them. Rural women, attired in their regional traditional dress, appear with joyful faces, forming an integral part of the whole ceremonial process. Faces that are behind the veils and faces that look straight into the camera. Women of various age groups are depicted as holding the tricolour. Their cheerful faces, the joyous look, their number all suggest that the frame is their space, their nation. But again, at the end of the video, when hoisting the huge tricolour and the task of upholding the flag post comes near, it remains an all-male affair. In the same music album but in a different number (‘Vande Mataram’ by Lata Mangeshkar) this denial of women’s active role becomes more apparent. Here, a group of horse riders move with tricolours in their hands across the length of the frame of the video. The landscapes keep on changing.

For Bharat Bala, the producer of ‘Vande Mataram’, it was “an attempt to do something for the vast majority of *unknown freedom fighters*” (like his father, V Ganapathy, a close associate of K Kamraj) “who have passed *unsung*” [Manral, 3, emphasis mine]. Thus it was this personal attachment with the pain of anonymity, which forced this filmmaker to redefine or extend the mapping of nation and portray anonymous faces and marginalised citizens as constituting the nation.

However, this story does not tell us about those bewildered faces of women and children, faces only of onlookers. These faces are happy to see themselves as a part of this nation-building process, but denied their active share in this Herculean task.¹² This is about the silence that is the life spirit of male public sphere, gendered symbol and patriarchal nation [Sharp 2000, Davis 1997]. If someone dares to alter this equation she receives grave consequences. She has to parade naked in the broad daylight.

Regimes of Resistance and Countermoves

The case of Mishri Devi is one such. The *Indian Express* writes in its editorial, “The stripping of Mishri Devi, scheduled caste woman *sarpanch* (an important post in the village level political units having constitutional backing) in Rajasthan’s Thikri village, on independence day for daring to unfurl the national flag has had *one positive outcome* – it exposed the hollowness of the official rhetoric” (*The Indian Express*, September 6, 1998, 8, emphasis mine). Thus the stripping of Mishri Devi becomes a paradigm to judge the validity of government claims regarding social justice and women’s empowerment. In this contemporary post-colonial situation, a terrain marked by intense social conflict,

contestation over appropriation of this representational national space has taken a new dimension. In different discourse and for different political ends, those who were earlier treated as “others” and “marginals” strive for their own say, their own subject position. It is about making overt claims over this space of the nation by socially and sexually marginalised citizen subjects.

In the case of Gondia Bai, sarpanch of Tikamgarh district the recovery of the claim over this representational national space is mediated through the state intervention. A woman and a scheduled caste, Gondia Bai was prevented by the upper caste vice chairman and his colleagues in her village from hoisting the national flag over a school building on independence day. She was abused and insulted publicly. When news of this was received in the state headquarters, the chief minister of the state announced that on the next independence day she would hoist the national flag at the official function in the police parade ground at the district headquarters which was effectively done [Das 1999].

In another case, the contest is not even mediated through state action but directly and systematically articulated and actualised by the “other”. In this case of Amarnath Sardar, a ‘tanti’ (basket weaving caste) sharecropper of Nariyar panchayat (in Saharsa district of Bihar), caste hierarchy is challenged, political authority is regained and the right to have active participation in national ceremony is successfully and directly asserted.

Pitted against the political group of Mahadeo Singh, a member of the dominant rajput caste, Amarnath Sardar, however, managed to have a place in the block education committee. “A place in the committee did not guarantee dignity. The most humiliating experience came at the celebration of the Republic day on January 26, 2000. He recounts, “We were invited for the flag hoisting in the Nariyar Madhya School. However, we were stopped outside the gate of the school by the muscle-men and were allowed to enter only after the hoisting was over” [Sharma 2001].

A counter move was planned for this humiliation. Nothing could have been a more fitting reply than something done on August 15, at the same place, and at the same event. “There was the flag hoisting ceremony in the school. The flag, the place, the tent, all were in right position. We, the people, went early, hoisted the flag on our own and started celebrating the independence day”, says Amarnath, who was there all along at the centre of this planning (ibid). In some ways, this was an uncheduled flag ceremony before the “official time”. But was the rest of the nation present in the village watching and cheering the tanti sardar of Nariyar panchayat? In media reports, by state intervention and through individual acts, the other asserts its claims over the imagined “supra community” and the nation invents its internal boundaries. The myth goes on, the contest continues.

NOTES

- 1 This was reported to the *Hitvada* by the secretary Congress Working Committee. The editorial of the *Hitvada*, April 18, 1923, wrote, “Nagpur Flags [it refers to the ‘Swaraj Flag’ of the Nagpur Flag Satyagraha] were floating at Bilaspur, Chindwara and Seoni”. It seems interesting to me that despite the patriotic claims of the secretary, Congress Working Committee no mention of the hoisting of the flag is there in the small report on this rajput conference, which is just below this secretary’s communiqué. Does this lapse on the part of the reporter indicate that the hoisting of the flag was not a big enough news item for him?
- 2 *The Hitvada* wrote that local leaders like Cholkar, Moonje, Abhyankar and others did not visit the scene on even a single day and it is reported that they were strongly opposed to this agitation. “The struggle is more or less a struggle between Marathi and Hindi districts. The northern districts contributed the largest number of volunteers (*The Hitvada*, June 6, 1923). D E U Baker in his study of the central provinces, has also viewed this satyagraha as a “dramatic form of agitation” mounted by Jamunalal Bajaj to ‘widen his base and counter the *Tilkites*’ plan to contest the elections to the provincial legislature’. On the basis of home political files, correspondences between Mathais and secretary, home department (Gol) and other official sources, Baker writes, “When they (Bajaj and other organisers of satyagraha) could no longer secure volunteers Bajaj hired large numbers of labourers, most of them illiterate mahars or aboriginals, who were brought or sent to Nagpur by politicians from Hindi region” [Baker 1979: 76].
- 3 *The Hitvada*, September 12, 1923. Rajendra Prashad writes in his autobiography, “When Jamunalal was arrested, Sardar Patel took over the leadership; When it appeared that he too would be arrested I hastened to Nagpur after organising a volunteer force in Bihar. Vitthalbhai Patel, a pro-changer, also came to Nagpur to

help his brother. The authorities *took advantage of his presence* and opened negotiations with him to put an end to the Satyagrah. As a result, the flag procession was allowed to march into the civil lines for one day and *after this the Satyagrah was withdrawn*” [Prasad 1957, 199 emphasis mine].

- 4 D K Mehta wrote, “It is not a flag set up by the Congress, by any of its resolution as a challenge to the Union Jack. It is a sign of unity, goodwill, love towards all... that it is not a flag of independence follows from the fact, that the Ahmadabad Congress threw out Maulana Hasarat Mohani’s resolution demanding a declaration of independence and a consequent change in the creed of the Congress.” Citing the law of the constitution of Dicey, he further wrote that the law makes no allowance for the susceptibilities of the hypersensitive – *lex non-favet votis delicatorem*. “A meeting which is not otherwise illegal doesn’t become unlawful assembly, solely because it will excite violent and unlawful opposition and thus may indirectly lead to a breach of peace” [Dicey: 369]. It is not the victim but the author of the breach who is the culprit. “The law in India isn’t different from that in England” (*The Hitvada* May 30, 1923).
- 5 “National Flag” (A reply) by “a mere nobody”, ibid, June 27, 1923. The home member of central provinces said, “Well I am not prepared to call it a rag...it may not be a national flag for some, but it is a national flag to some others. I assume they (the people) attach importance to it. If it is a mere rag why should every urchin hold the flag being hoisted. Every second shop in Sitabuldi (the prohibited area – Ed *Prabha*) is hoisting this flag. It is called a national flag being taken everywhere” (*Prabha*, October 1923: 332).
- 6 In his study of the Imperial Darbar of 1876, Bernard S Cohn has focussed on the British construction of authority and its representation. He writes, “the elements within a cultural symbolic constitution are not a mere assemblage of items or things but are ordered into a

pattern which asserts the relationship of the elements to each other and constructs their value” [Cohn 1983: 172].

- 7 ‘Viceroy to Governors on the hoisting of Congress flag on government buildings’, Linlithgow papers [Chopra 1985, Vol 1: 284-86]; also see various correspondences regarding the hoisting the Congress flag on official buildings [Chopra, Vol 1, 893-94, 936-37, 1024-27, 1070-71 and Chatterji, part 1, 958-88] and Mahatma Gandhi’s response to Mysore Flag Satyagraha [Gandhi 1983, Vol 67, 44-45].
- 8 This refers to Devi Prashad Rouchoudhury’s sculpture at Patna (Bihar). Benedict Anderson emphasises the significance of memorials and tombs of dead soldiers and their significance in shaping the imagination of the national citizenry [Anderson 1983: 187-206].
- 9 One may question, whether this “practical difficulty” was not there in the past when there was a prolonged debate and intense discussion on various draft proposals for first flag of Congress in 1920-21 or before Congress leadership in 1931 when Congress adopted its official flag for the first time and that too after a prolonged debate. But at that time nobody had shown any kind of hesitation for the inclusion of charkha at the central space.
- 10 *The Tribune* reports, “The changes in the flag code were in accordance with the recommendations of a high-level committee of the home ministry headed by then additional secretary P D Shenoy. High court and Supreme Court judges are now permitted to fly the Tricolour on their car. The high court had also passed certain orders on the issue of the national flag in 2001, but home ministry sources said the government had initiated action in October, 2000, when the Shenoy Committee was set up...The centre had also included in the new flag code stringent punishment and penalty of fine for deliberate insult, as recommended by the Shenoy Committee in its report in April, 2001. ‘Nod to jail term for insulting Tricolour’, *Tribune News Service* and *UNI*, Delhi, January 22, 2003,

- <http://www.tribuneindia.com/2003/20030122/main1.htm>.
- 11 Both these music videos are by Bharat Bala Productions. A R Rahman has given the music. While the famous Indian singer, Lata Mangeshkar has sung the *Vande Mataram*, 'Ma Tujhe Salam' is sung by A R Rahman. Sony Music claimed that they sold five lakh cassettes in the first week of its release (*India Today*, September 1, 1997: 76).
- 12 However, contrary to these sites of representations, which reveal conspicuous absence of active woman citizens, we have various examples where women are projected as active participants in the nation making process. The recognition of woman as the source of power has a cultural and philosophical genealogy. Without going deep into these structures it would be worthwhile to look at the origin myth of the Indian national flag. In the history of the Indian national flag, madam Cama's role has been highlighted in peculiar ways. She has been recognised as someone who presented this nation, its first flag at international level. "She was the first Indian to have raised an Indian flag on foreign soil and announced to the world of our political fight with the British for the country's independence". She presented this flag in the Second International Socialist Congress at Stuttgart, Germany in 1907. This pedagogic treatment of associating madam Cama's name with the first flag and the first open proclamation of representational nationhood is certainly an attempt to derive the authority of mother nation from an act of a woman. This popular origin myth then leads us to look into the simple equation between images of female nation and male citizen as much more complex.

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