

HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF SYMBOLS AND GRAPHIC REPRESENTATION IN ANCIENT INDIAN FLAGS

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Abstract

The flag a sacred symbol has played a significant role in the life of a man since earliest times. Flag was basically an object of faith. The symbol and graphic invested in it with sanctity and supernatural aura. The aim of this paper is to explore the various symbols and graphic representations on ancient Indian flags; Research would also like to explore the evolution, meaning and significance of those symbols on the flags. Flag had a much older tradition in India is clearly borne out by the Indus seals. The people of Indus valley used flag in third millennium B C. The Vedic Aryans carried flag in the battlefield and in every effort was made to pull down flag of the enem. Many scholars believed in flag evolved from the totem. It assumed the form of portable standard when carried to the battlefield. Flag further assumed the form of Permanent flag post with flag [dhvaja-stambha] when worshipped in a temple. Later the primary position of dhvaja-stambha was usurped by the anthropomorphic deity and it was relegated to a secondary position and allotted some space outside the temple. Ancient India, we find that there was no common flag in the sense in which we understand today the term national. There were a number of flags with numerous symbols and variety of graphics and number of depended upon the number of heroes or leaders in war. Every leader had his own insignia to distinguish one division from the other. The device avoided confusion in the ranks both during the march of an army and in action in battlefield. It is in the light of these observations that the use of symbols in religion and for that matter in ancient Indian flags has to be viewed. Detail review of the symbols and graphic representations on flags during various phases and dynasties of ancient India will be the main focus of the present research paper. In many cases symbols originally represented natural objects like hills, plants, animals, rivers and several other phenomena. All these representations might be having pictographic effect, may be with some mythic or cosmological background. The symbols most widely used a flag emblems may be classified under the headings of Animals and birds, Plants and flowers like, Objects of nature, Secret objects and Weapons. The need for a symbol among the primitive societies to express their identity and unity and the use of tribal totem to that end seems to have led to the birth of the flag. The study of symbols and graphic representation on ancient flags leads to some interesting conclusions. It has been established that origin of flag lies in the totem. Secondly in the scheme of flag symbols held an important position and not the shape of the flag. It is notable in ancient Indian flags that excepting for the epics that flags are nowhere spoken of in relation to the individuals. Symbols on the flags are connected with the faith of the bearer and therefore we could trace many religious symbols, e. g eagle, circle, monkey, lion, bull etc. In face almost all the symbols can be explained in relation to religion. Religious connection on symbols of flags evoked highest degree of devotion indeed. Thus flag has been treated as sacred object all over the world from earliest times. The symbols and graphic representations on flags speak in volumes depending on the interpretation of the researcher.

Keywords: Ancient, Indian, flags, symbols

1. INTRODUCTION

Flag, a piece of cloth, bunting, or similar material displaying the insignia of a community, an armed force, an office, or an individual. Originally used mainly in warfare, flags were, and to some extent remain, insignia of

leadership, serving for the identification of friend or foe and as rallying points dual. Flags recognizable as such were the invention, almost certainly, of the ancient Indians or the Chinese. It is said that the founder of the Chou dynasty in China (c. 1122 BC) had a white flag carried before him, and it is known that in AD 660 a minor prince was punished for failing to lower his standard before his superior.

1.1 Ancient Indian Flags

Flags had equal importance in ancient India, being carried on chariots and elephants. The flag was the first object of attack in battle, and its fall would mean confusion if not defeat. Indian flags were often triangular in shape and scarlet or green in colour, with a figure embroidered in gold and a gold fringe. Indian and Chinese usage spread to Burma, Siam, and southeastern Asia. Flags with a background of white, yellow, or black silk are mentioned, with devices (an elephant, a bull, or a water hen, for example) embroidered on them in gold. A Siamese treatise on war gives the impression that the flags were unfurled as the march began.

There are numerous references in ancient Indian literature about the flag. Spoken Sanskrit dictionary gives more than 18 words for flags in Sanskrit like *Pataka*, *Kadali*, *Jayanti*, *Vaijayanti*, *Vaijaynatika*, *Kenu*, *Kamdala*, *Ketu*, *Drapsa*, *Dhvajapata*, *Patakin*, *Pratinaha*, *Vaijayanta*, *Shula*, *Patakamzuka*, *Lalam*, *Lalaman* and *Dhvaja*. Since earlier times man was under some kind of emblem or standard. Dhvaja had a much older tradition in India is clearly borne out by the Indus seals. Further, to trace its origin to the Vedic *sthuna* or *Yupastambha* is also to ignore the fact that the dhvaja in its fully evolved form was known and used by Vedic Aryans. (Thapliyal, 2011, p. 5)

1.2 Origin Of Flags In India

According to U. P. Thapiyal, the origin of dhvaja in India has to be traced beyond Aryan, Indo Aryan themselves were a member of a race which spread over wide region of the world from central Asia....Indeed, among all these people the origin of dhvaja has to be explained in a like manner.

[i] Dhvaja evolved from the toem.

[ii] It assumed the form of portable standard when carried to the battlefield.

[iii] It assumed the form of dhvaja-stambha when worshipped in a temple.

[iv] Later the primary position of dhvaja-stambha was usurped by the anthropomorphic diety and it was relegated to a secondary position and allotted some space outside the temple. (Thapliyal, 2011, p. 7)

Indians made use of symbols and graphics to invoke their revered deities for success in the battlefield. Symbols cannot be said to be just meaningless marks scratched at one's whim not they simple conventional signs or representations of some apparent object, idea or process. Each of them has a deeper meaning, sometime even invested with certain magico-religious properties, each of them have "specific connotations in addition to its conventional and obvious meaning." (Jung 1968, P. 20)

Every ancient nation. E.g. the Egyptians, Assyrian, Greek and Roman, had its own standards in different colours and devices. Every modern nation possesses its own flag. Britain is proud of her Union Jack and is prepared to stake it all for keeping it unimpaired throughout the British empire. Turning to ancient India we find that there was no common flag in the sense in which we understand today the term national. There were a number of flags with numerous symbols and variety of graphics and number of depended upon the number of heroes or leaders in war. Every leader had his own insignia to distinguish one division from the other. The device avoided confusion in the ranks both during the march of an army and in action in battlefield. (Hopkins 1889, p. 243) It is in the light of these observations that the use of symbols in religion and for that matter in ancient Indian flags has to be viewed.

In Brhmanic religion each god or goddess is associated with some animal, bird or object which represents it symbolically. For e.g. God Vishnu is represented by *Garuda*, *sesanaga*, *srivasta* mark, God Siva is symbolized by *vrusabha*, *trisula*, *chandrardha*, *naga* and so on. The consort of God is also represented by symbols. (Thapliyal, 2011, p. 62)

Another research into Vahanas and Flags show that the Vahanas or Mounts of Gods and Goddesses came from their flags. For instance Lord Skanda had peacock and Sanaiswara had Kaka (crow) in their flags first.

When the sculptors wanted to make the sculptures or idols it became easier for them to show as Vahanas instead of flags. If we accept this theory, it becomes logical that Lord Ganesh had mouse as flag first and then it was made in to Vahana. Another proof for this theory is the oldest Ganesh statues are found in South East Asian countries like Indonesia and Laos. They did not have mouse (Mushika) as vahana. But we see the oldest Vahanas in Babylonia where most of the gods had lion as their vahanas. Deer and bull also figure as Vahanas in the Middle East.

Generally in ancient India the flag besides being worshipped at the temple as stambha served as distinguishing mark of the Commander, symbol of the royalty and rallying point for the armies. The real importance of flag, however, lay in its potential to inspire the armies and to serve as rallying point in war. Being a symbol of faith it served as a moral booster to the men who fought under it. In Mahabharata Gods are also described as bearing flag. In Ramayana there is a reference to gold made Ketu of Ananta [Sesnaga] comprising a three branched tala tree raised over the alter. (Thapliyal, 2011, p. 51)

2. SYMBOLS ON THE FLAGS

The earliest evidence of flag in ancient India pertains to proto-historic period as represented by Kulli culture. On A Kulli were a bull ties to a pillar with a cord is represented. The pillar comprises a shaft, a bulbous pot and circular object with twelve spokes, put one above another. (Thapliyal, 2011, p. 9) The whole combination is surmounted by a four corned rectangular frame. (Piggot, 1950, p. 102) Though the symbolism of these standards is not clear, it is certain that the old toemic symbols had now assumed the shape of portable standard. (Piggot, 1950, p. 102) We get prominent evidences of symbolism on flags from harappan age. The most popular dhvaja or flag with the people of Mohenjo-daro comprised a staff, a bowl like receptacle and a cage. The principal motif of flag looks like cage, according to John Marchall it held bird. (Marshall, 1931, pp.383-84) On another seal of Indus valley, we could see the process with flags, it means standards served as the rallying point for the people in war as well as in peace.[Pl. 1 and 2] Three of them are depicted as holding standards with stretched hands. The symbols on two standards are clear, i. e. the unicorn and the bowl and cage symbols.

During vedic period there are references of flag in Rigveda. Many scholars have interpreted the Vedic dhvaja as a flag or banner. The Vedic Aryan carried a dhavaja particularly when going to the battlefield. It is characteristic of Vedic fighting that references is made to arrows being discharged and failing on banners. (Mac Donner and Kaith, 1912, p.406) This flags, symbolic of Indra, was beseeched to great victories in wars, big or small. At times flag was addressed as Indra itself. (Thapliyal, 2011, p.11)

During the epic times the flag figures mainly in association with the chariot corps. These flags were made of gold and looked like golden mountains, were adorned in various colours and were surrounded by other flags on all the sides adding to the décor of the flags. In the Drona parva (Roy P.C., 1888) of the Mahabharata a question asked by Dhrtarastra, Sanjaya reports about the various flags and banners employed by Kurus and Pandavas. One full chapter is devoted to it. (Dikshit Ramchandra,2004, p.105)

Let us analyses it under the following heads-

Arjuna--The Kapidhvaja or the with the figure of Hanuman [monkey] with monkeys face and a long tail, creating terror in the rank and file of the enemy.

Asvatthama --Simhalangulum or the flag with the figure of the tail of a lion, radiating, golden in colour, and affording delight to Kurus.

Karna Hastikaksaya---golden and adorned with festoon and garlands flying aloft in the air

Krpa---Govrsa—a representation of the bull. This is the device also of siva.

Vrsasena--- Mayura—the device of peacock. This is also a emblem of god Subrahmanva.

Salya. King of Madras---Sitadhvaja, auspicious and radiant.

Jayadratha or Sindhuraja---Varaha or the boar emblem, white in color. In the chariot adorned with this silvery flag, Jayadratha shone like Pusan of old in the Devasura wars.

Bhurisravas, the son of Somadatta --The Yupa flag—shone like the sun with the moon therein. It looked just the yupa in the Rajasuya sacrifice.

Sala --The elephant standard white in colour—resplendent just like the flag of Indra, the king of gods.

Duryadhana --The serpent [naga] flag set with gold or gems.

Bhisma ---Taladhvaja: Cognisance of a Palmyra tree.

Other reference to flags of equality great heroes who took part in the Great Wars are found here and there.

Ghatotkaca ---Cakradhvaja or the device of chariot wheel.(Roy P.C., 1888,23.76) Later on the emblem of eagle is said to have been his standard (Roy P.C., 1888, p. 91)

Dronacarya ---His was a representation of Kamandalu covered by deer skin (Roy P.C., 1888, p.83)

Bhimsena --- Simhadhvaja or the lion standard. The eyes were set with diamonds (Roy P.C., 1888, p.84)

Yudhisthira... The Soma device—the moon resplendent with all stars and planets (Roy P.C., 1888, p.85)

Nakula...Sarabhadhvaja..its back being gold but Terrie in appearance (Roy P.C., 1888, p.87)

Sahadeva...The Hamsa or swan emblem with bells and festoons terrifying the enemy (Roy P.C., 1888, p.87)

Abhimanyu.... Sarngapaksi dhvaja—golden in colour (Roy P.C., 1888, p.90)

Thus flag played important role in Epic war and no warrior of recognition joined the battle without displaying his flag on the chariot.

In the sixth century BC symbols and mark were used by federations as their distinguishing feature. (Vasu S.C.,1962, 4.3.127) The symbols denoted the heraldic symbol or mark of federation, which was borne on coins, seals, banners etc. The symbols of the federation might have been borne on the flag of the federation. Records of the Greek historian also supports the same. They have recorded that in the army of Poros, the Indian adversary of Alexander, “ an image of Heracles was borne in front of the line of infantry, and this acted as the strongest of all incentives to make soldiers fight well.” (M'Crindle J.W.,1969, pp. 208-209) The Nanda and Maurya armies might also have carried some kind of flag to the battlefield lie army of Poros. (Thapliyal, p.14) In arthasastra there is definite evidence that dhvaja [flag] and pataka [banner]were put to military use. Secret agent of the king carried weapons to the enemy fort hidden with image of God and flag. Even flag was used to give signals to army to form up when halting, marching or attacking. (Thapliyal, p.14)

During Post Maurya period representation of symbols on the flag can be traced from the archaeological sources. The flags are widely met with in the art of Sunga –Satvahana period. The symbols on the flags were associated with the status of a person. As triratna and Cakra were sacred Buddhist symbols these were used by Buddhist rulers as their flag emblem. The earliest representation of the triratna-dhvaja is seen at Bhaja and Sanchi relief.[See plates 3,4,5] The punch marked coins from Kausambi, taxila, Ujjian, Eran etc depict some symbols identified as jaya-dhvaja, matsys-dvaja and nandipada-dvaja.. (Thapliyal, p.14) Flags are also depicted in the Buddhist art of Amravati and also at Bharahut.

Gupta period is known as the golden period in the Indian history mainly because of flourishing art and architecture. Large number of coins were issued by Gupta rulers and also the archaeological remains has depicted various kind of symbols on the flags like eagle, God Visnu, wheel, circle, crescent etc.

On some of the ancient flag , initially the emblem was borne on staff itself but gradually there emblem imprinted on the flag only. All the dynasties in ancient India used a flag, which bore a symbol of their faith on it. The Pallavas, Pandyas and Eastern Chalukyas who rule over southern India patronized – abha—dhvaja, matsa-dhvaja and varaha-dhvaja respectively. (Thapliyal, p.17) [see palte 06]. Further some flags bore symbols whereas others did not. Probably rulers and generals used the flag imprinted with their personal symbols.

Present research paper is about symbols and graphic representation occurring in ancient Indian flags. A symbol need not be a conventionalized picture. In many cases symbols originally represented natural objects like hills, plants, animals, rivers and several other phenomena. All these representations might be having pictographic effect, may be with some mythic or cosmological background. The symbols most widely used a flag emblems may be classified under the following heads (Thapliyal, p.63)

Animals and birds like eagle, Monkey , Boar, Bull, Elephant, Lion, Swan, Serpent, Peacock, Crocodile, Cock, Horse, Vulture etc.

Plants and flowers like Palm tree, grass, Lotus, Lotus stalk and flowers of different shapes.

Objects of nature like Fire, cloud, Moon, Sun etc

Secret objects like Drum, Skull, Ladle, Wooden ladle, Vessel, Sacred Book, Conch, Horn, smoke, three jewels, etc.

Weapons like Wheel, Bow, Club, arrow, sword, Thunderbolt

3. CONCLUSION

The institution of flag evolved among all communities of the world under similar circumstances and with similar objective. The need for a symbol among the primitive societies to express their identity and unity and the use of tribal totem to that end seems to have led to the birth of the flag. (Thapliyal, p.26) The study of symbols and graphic representation on ancient flags leads to some interesting conclusions,

It has been established that origin of flag lies in the totem.

Secondly in the scheme of flag symbols held an important position and not the shape of the flag.

It is notable in ancient Indian flags that excepting for the epics that flags are no where spoken of in relation to the individuals.

Thirdly symbols on the flags are connected with the faith of the bearer and therefore we could trace many religious symbols, e. g eagle, circle, monkey, lion, bull etc. In fact almost all the symbols can be explained in relation to religion. Religious connection on symbols of flags evoked highest degree of devotion indeed. Thus flag has been treated as sacred object all over the world from earliest times. The Vedic Aryans revered it almost a deity. Indians sought protection in this holy symbol in war as well as in peace. (Thapliyal, p.26)

PLATE 1 AND 2

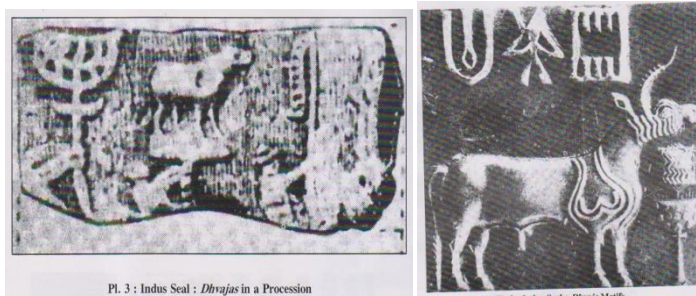
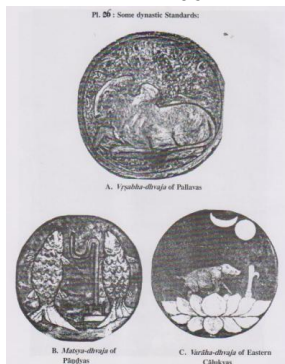


PLATE 3, 4 AND 5



PLATE 06



Reference of plates from Military Flags of India, U. P. Thapliyal

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