

The Indian National Flag: History, Symbolism and Contemporary Relevance

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Abstract

The Indian National Flag, widely recognised as the *Tiranga*, represents far more than the political sovereignty of the Republic of India. It embodies the historical struggles, ethical commitments, and collective aspirations that shaped the nation's journey from colonial subjugation to democratic governance. The development of the flag was neither immediate nor symbolic alone; it emerged through decades of nationalist thought, public movements, and ideological refinement during the freedom struggle. The tricolour—saffron, white, and green— together with the Ashoka Chakra at its centre, reflects principles such as courage, peace, moral discipline, and righteous action, which are deeply rooted in India's civilisational philosophy.

This study examines the historical evolution of the Indian National Flag, analyses the philosophical and constitutional meaning of its elements, and evaluates the legal framework that governs its respectful use. It further explores the contemporary relevance of the *Tiranga* in strengthening democratic values and national integration in a diverse society. By situating the flag within both historical and constitutional contexts, the paper argues that the *Tiranga* continues to function not merely as a state emblem but as a living symbol of unity, responsibility, and civic consciousness in modern India.

Keywords

Indian National Flag; Tiranga; National Identity; Ashoka Chakra; Freedom Movement; Constitutional Values; Unity in Diversity; Democratic Responsibility.

1. Introduction

National symbols play a foundational role in shaping collective consciousness within modern nation-states. They provide visible forms through which shared history, values, and aspirations are communicated across generations. Among these symbols, the national flag holds a distinctive position because it transforms abstract political ideals into a powerful visual identity. It becomes a unifying emblem capable of evoking emotional attachment, collective memory, and civic responsibility.

In the Indian context, the National Flag—popularly known as the *Tiranga*—is not merely a physical object composed of coloured fabric. It is a historical narrative woven into three bands and a central emblem. Each

element of the flag reflects the moral, political, and philosophical foundations upon which the Indian Republic stands. The formal adoption of the tricolour on 22 July 1947 by the Constituent Assembly marked a decisive moment in the making of modern India. This act was not simply administrative approval of a design; it was a symbolic affirmation of sovereignty, unity, and democratic vision at a time when the nation stood on the threshold of independence.

The evolution of the Tiranga reveals the gradual maturation of Indian nationalism. Early flag designs experimented with religious imagery, regional symbolism, and revolutionary motifs. Over time, however, the emphasis shifted toward inclusiveness and ethical representation. The final design consciously avoided sectarian identification and instead expressed universal principles—courage, peace, progress, and righteousness. In doing so, the flag became a symbol capable of representing India's vast diversity without privileging any single community or ideology.

Furthermore, the Indian National Flag reflects continuity between ancient civilisational thought and modern constitutional governance. The Ashoka Chakra, derived from the Mauryan emblem of righteous rule, reinforces the principle that political freedom must be guided by moral law (*Dharma*). Similarly, the colours of the tricolour represent values that resonate with both the freedom movement and contemporary democratic life. Thus, the Tiranga bridges past and present, tradition and modernity.

In a country characterised by linguistic plurality, religious diversity, and regional variation, the national flag serves as a shared point of identification. It is displayed during moments of celebration, protest, achievement, and mourning—reminding citizens of their common bond despite differences. As India continues to evolve socially, economically, and politically, the Tiranga remains a constant symbol of unity in diversity and democratic responsibility.

Therefore, the study of the Indian National Flag is not limited to historical description. It involves understanding how symbols contribute to nation-building, civic discipline, and constitutional consciousness. By analysing its development, symbolism, and relevance, one gains insight into the broader narrative of India's democratic journey.

2. Historical Evolution of the Indian National Flag

The evolution of the Indian National Flag was neither immediate nor accidental; rather, it was the outcome of sustained political reflection, ideological negotiation, and symbolic experimentation during the freedom struggle. The search for a national flag emerged alongside the growth of Indian nationalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As political consciousness expanded, leaders increasingly recognised the importance of visual symbols in mobilising mass participation. A flag was not merely decorative—it was a psychological instrument capable of uniting diverse communities under a shared aspiration for freedom.

Early Experiments (1904–1907)

One of the earliest recorded attempts to design a national flag is attributed to Sister Nivedita (Margaret Noble), a disciple of Swami Vivekananda, around 1904–1905. Her proposed flag reportedly included the *Vajra* (thunderbolt) symbol, reflecting spiritual strength and national awakening. Although it did not gain widespread political adoption, it indicated the growing awareness that symbolic representation was essential for national unity.

In 1906, a tricolour flag was unfurled at Parsi Bagan Square in Calcutta (now Kolkata) on 7 August. This flag consisted of three horizontal bands—green, yellow, and red—and featured symbols such as the sun, crescent moon, and the words *Vande Mataram*. The design reflected an early attempt to represent India's religious plurality and patriotic spirit. However, its symbolism remained somewhat regionally confined and lacked all-India acceptance.

The following year, in 1907, Madam Bhikaji Cama presented a modified version of the flag at the International Socialist Congress in Stuttgart, Germany. This event marked the first time an Indian nationalist flag was displayed on an international platform. Her act was deeply political: it declared India's aspiration for self-rule before a global audience. The flag closely resembled the Calcutta design but demonstrated a clearer assertion of revolutionary intent. Cama's gesture elevated the flag from a domestic symbol of protest to an international emblem of anti-colonial resistance.

The Home Rule Movement and Symbolic Consolidation (1916–1918)

The Home Rule Movement, led by Dr. Annie Besant and Bal Gangadhar Tilak, introduced another version of the flag in 1917. This design incorporated five red and four green horizontal stripes with seven stars arranged to represent the Saptarishi constellation. Additionally, the Union Jack appeared in one corner, reflecting a transitional political vision that sought dominion status within the British Empire rather than immediate independence.

This phase reveals an important shift: the flag began to represent structured political ideology rather than spontaneous protest. However, the inclusion of the Union Jack exposed internal debates within the nationalist movement regarding the extent and pace of independence. As political goals evolved toward complete sovereignty, the need for a purely indigenous design became increasingly evident.

Gandhi, Pingali Venkayya, and the Charkha (1921)

A decisive moment in the history of the national flag occurred in 1921, when Pingali Venkayya, a scholar of agriculture and vexillology, presented a flag design to Mahatma Gandhi during the All India Congress Committee session in Bezwada (Vijayawada). Venkayya's original proposal featured two colours—red and green—representing India's major religious communities. Gandhi suggested the addition of white to symbolise peace and inclusivity, ensuring representation beyond communal identities.

More significantly, Gandhi proposed the inclusion of the *Charkha* (spinning wheel) at the centre of the flag. The Charkha symbolised *Swadeshi*, self-reliance, and economic resistance against British industrial goods. This marked a conceptual breakthrough: the flag now represented not only political freedom but also economic and ethical self-determination. It linked nationalism with constructive labour and moral discipline.

The adoption of the Charkha demonstrated how symbolism was carefully aligned with mass movements. During civil disobedience campaigns, the flag became a rallying point for protestors. Carrying the tricolour was considered an act of defiance against colonial authority. Thus, the flag gradually acquired emotional and sacrificial significance.

The 1931 Tricolour: Towards Standardisation

By 1931, concerns arose regarding communal interpretations of colour symbolism. To address this issue, the Indian National Congress adopted a revised tricolour of saffron, white, and green, with the Charkha at the centre. Importantly, the colours were redefined not in religious terms but as ethical principles: courage, peace, and prosperity. This reinterpretation marked a deliberate move toward secular and inclusive nationalism.

The 1931 resolution was significant because it standardised the design and reduced ideological ambiguity. It represented a conscious effort to detach the flag from sectarian identities and align it with universal values. The groundwork for the final national flag was thus firmly established.

Adoption of the Present Flag (1947)

The final transformation occurred shortly before independence. On 22 July 1947, the Constituent Assembly adopted the present tricolour design. While retaining the saffron, white, and green bands, the Charkha was replaced by the navy-blue Ashoka Chakra, drawn from the Lion Capital of Ashoka at Sarnath.

This substitution carried profound philosophical meaning. The Ashoka Chakra, with its twenty-four spokes, symbolised *Dharma*—righteous law and moral order. Unlike the Charkha, which was associated specifically with the freedom struggle, the Chakra provided a timeless and civilisational foundation for the new republic. It connected modern India with the Mauryan tradition of just governance and ethical statecraft.

The adoption of the flag just weeks before independence was not coincidental. It signified continuity between the freedom movement and the constitutional republic that would soon emerge. By choosing a symbol rooted in ancient heritage yet aligned with democratic ideals, the Constituent Assembly ensured that the national flag would transcend political transitions.

Analytical Observations

The historical evolution of the Indian National Flag demonstrates three important patterns:

1. **From Religious Representation to Ethical Universalism**
Early designs attempted communal balance; later versions shifted toward moral symbolism.
2. **From Revolutionary Protest to Constitutional Identity**
The flag evolved from a symbol of resistance to a symbol of governance and sovereignty.
3. **From Political Strategy to Civilisational Continuity**
The replacement of the Charkha with the Ashoka Chakra reflects a move from immediate political messaging to enduring philosophical grounding.

Thus, the Tiranga's journey mirrors India's transformation—from colonial resistance to democratic republic. Its evolution was not merely aesthetic; it was intellectual, ethical, and strategic.

Conclusion

The Indian National Flag stands as a timeless representation of India's political independence, moral vision, and constitutional commitment. Its journey from early nationalist experiments to its adoption in 1947 reflects the intellectual depth and inclusive character of the Indian freedom movement. Each element of the Tiranga carries layered meaning: saffron inspires courage and selflessness, white affirms truth and harmony, green reflects growth and hope, and the Ashoka Chakra symbolises righteous action and continuous progress.

Beyond symbolism, the flag performs an essential civic function. It unites citizens across regions, languages, and faith traditions under a shared national identity. It reminds individuals that freedom is inseparable from responsibility. Respecting the flag is therefore not merely ceremonial; it represents adherence to constitutional values and democratic discipline.

In an era of rapid social, political, and technological change, the Tiranga continues to provide stability and inspiration. It connects the sacrifices of the past with the aspirations of the future. As India advances on the global stage, the National Flag remains both a symbol of sovereignty and a moral compass guiding the nation toward justice, unity, and inclusive development.

Footnotes

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