



## Book review: Sadan Jha, Reverence, Resistance and Politics of Seeing the Indian National Flag

Arundhati Virmani

### ► To cite this version:

Arundhati Virmani. Book review: Sadan Jha, Reverence, Resistance and Politics of Seeing the Indian National Flag. Indian Economic and Social History Review, 2019, 56 (4), pp.522-524. 10.1177/0019464619877536 . hal-02532836

**HAL Id: hal-02532836**

**<https://hal.science/hal-02532836>**

Submitted on 29 Jul 2020

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

In the closing chapters, Sen traces the course of Mandal's political life in post-colonial India, and demonstrates how the caste question gradually 'disappeared' in Bengal. This, he suggests, points to the persistence of a politics of misrecognition and its adoption by the Left as well. The upper caste nature of Left leadership has incensed Dalit activists and thinkers across India, given the latter's lofty—and theoretical—disinterest in conceptualising the caste question. But it is yet to be made an object of reasoned critique—and Sen's work is a decisive first step in that direction.

**Geetha V.**

Independent Scholar

SADAN JHA, *Reverence, Resistance and Politics of Seeing the Indian National Flag*, New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2016, 268 pp.

DOI: 10.1177/0019464619877536

Devoted to the Indian tricolour, Sadan Jha's monograph participates in the exploration of the major political symbols that have been the object of attention of a large international historiography since several decades. Amongst the first historians, Maurice Agulhon, demonstrated in the 1960s the fundamental role of symbols in the politicisation of traditional societies and the constitution of a new political culture turned towards democracy. Subsequent studies examined the case of independent nations as well as colonial situations (South Africa, Algeria, Morocco, etc.). Jha's book is structured around seven chapters that present a political diachronic analysis of the flag while intersecting it with synchronic thematic focuses. The author mobilises the classical tools of sociology and social anthropology such as rituals, gender or totem while integrating them within theoretical frameworks provided by postmodern critiques.

The book's account of the emergence and political development of this national symbol draws upon a now well-researched history (Bhagwan Josh, "Asoka, The Historical Discourse and the Post-Colonial State," in Patrick Olivelle, et al., *Reimagining Asoka*. Delhi, 2012, pp. 394–408; Srirupa Roy, "A Symbol of Freedom", *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 65, 2006, pp. 495–527; Arundhati Virmani, *A National Flag for India*. Delhi, 2008).

Building on these contributions, Jha recalls the initial sporadic appearances of the flag at the end of the nineteenth century, the successive models in the early twentieth century, the political and public debates around its design or colours, which sharpened with the Home Rule movement and the political protests during the 1920s. During these years, the positions and stakes around the flag evolved in relation to the growing role of Indian political parties in the colonial period. One of the preoccupations of the study is to give Indian roots to the new national symbolic system by tracing them back to the ancient period since the days of Harappan culture

(p. 13), by quoting ancient Hindu texts and by referring to the uses of the flag in Indian political traditions, economic spaces or the religious field, as a symbol of power and an identity marker. The author emphasises this robust culture of flags in successive political regimes from the thirteenth century to the advent of the British Raj. From this point onwards, the work deals principally with modern India since the consolidation of British control in the 1860s to contemporary India.

Jha provides a detailed, empirically grounded, illustrated narrative of the flag's progress in the political and social landscape as a tool for affirming citizenship in the nation, but equally for challenging caste hierarchy or power structures by affirming the right to hoist the flag (pp. 219–20).

Thus, even if the political trajectory of the flag occupies a major part of the book underlining, for example, the key role of satyagrahas in the 1920s (pp. 93–110), Jha considers his main contribution lies in examining the flag as 'essentially a visual symbol' and 'not a by-product of nationalist politics' (pp. 17, 90). To anchor viewing practices in the Indian tradition of darshan, he mobilises Partho Chatterjee's division of the colonial imagination into the outer and inner domains, the former shaped by Western thoughts and discourses, the latter by intimate, in this case spiritual understandings or practices. Darshan is approached from the perspective of visual studies (Eck, Babb, Uberoi). Jha's analysis confirms some of the directions sketched in Virmani's work indicating the depth of a popular politicisation of the symbol since the colonial period. However, this focus on 'darshan' ignores other modes of appropriating the flag linked to religious diversity, political affiliations, social hierarchies or non-sacred ways of understanding and relating to this national symbol. Jha himself recognises for example the limits of this approach.

Consequently, the monograph is caught in a tension between the inevitable political nature of the flag with its national dimension and a not always convincing ambition to maintain a distance from a strictly political approach in order to locate the flag, to quote the very terms used by Jha, 'in a complex process of in-betweenness where meaning acquires post-structural fluidity, thus privileging processes over meaning structures' (p. 18).

The next chapters follow the development of the flag as a site of daily plebiscite and banal nationalism (chapter 3), notions borrowed from the philosopher Ernest Renan and Michael Billig's work in social psychology. It responds to Benedict Anderson's invitation to include everyday practices in understanding the spread of nationalism. Jha devotes a chapter to the colours of the flag, with a specific examination of saffron (chapter 4). This reflects the perception of colours through cultural knowledge and practices as suggested by the numerous books and articles of the medievalist Michel Pastoureau in a European context over a very long term. Jha's analysis of saffron from a social and symbolic perspective unfolds the layers of political interventions that fixed its political meanings. Equal attention is paid (chapter 5) to the positions on the flag taken by major political parties (Indian National Congress, Muslim League, RSS, etc.) in the 1930s followed by an inquiry

into the debates of the Constituent Assembly debates which sought to visualise ‘an ideal political order’. The last two chapters deal with independent India when the flag acquired a sacred dimension while inviting resistance and protest (chapter 6). Finally, the book deals with the uses of the flag in contemporary India, going into the recent juridical battles as well as the spilling over of the symbol into a larger social, mediatic space.

The work is the result of a long and scholarly inquiry based in the National Archives Delhi, the India office in the British Library and the Nehru Memorial and Museum Library, Delhi; research that had given rise to several publications between 2008 and 2014. In this monograph, the author has added a significant, rich iconographic corpus (35 images), assembled from English and some Hindi newspapers and magazines: These include less familiar images from the The Asiatic Society of Mumbai or Maratha Kesari Museum and Library, Pune.

Undoubtedly, the book contributes to the field of the history of nation-making. The author’s decision to privilege indigenous socio-cultural belief systems and practices of imagining the nation and perceiving the flag through the lens of post-colonial notions is understandable. Yet this intention leads him to underplay the ruptures in the flag’s long trajectory or the complex interactions that were operating in a country subjected to colonial domination but aspiring to be recognised as a nation at the very time when the League of Nations was being instituted. In doing so, curiously, the work thus comes close to official narratives of independent India (*Our Flag* 1950) that seek to present the flag as a purely indigenous and linear project produced in Indian contexts by Indian actors. Still, this is a serious, well-researched, stimulating work that invites further investigation of the national symbolic system, particularly in princely India and in larger vernacular traditions in order to understand the varying shades and depths of politicisation.

It is to be regretted that hasty proofreading has led to typographical errors, grammatical mistakes or inconsistencies in typeface. Nor does too short an index helps the reader to take account of the multiplicity of actors and places involved. It would surely not be the case of a Cambridge University publication destined for a European market.

**Arundhati Virmani**  
EHESS, Marseille  
France