



## AN EARLY 20<sup>th</sup> CENTURY INDIAN NATIONAL FLAG: REMEMBERING THE CONTRIBUTION OF AN IRISH LADY 110 YEARS AGO.

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When we see a flag we generally wonder about its design, colour and graphics. We think about how the flag design evolved. However, rarely do we focus on how the design first came about in flag form. Who first translated the design from a chain of thoughts on paper to a piece of cloth?

That concrete process clearly had to involve someone adept at needlework. Given the kind of artefacts that flags are, it takes meticulous skill and attention to translate an idea to physical form.

Among many masters of their craft, we acknowledge those, mainly women, who made our flags. As a result, many have been portrayed and remembered and even promoted as patriotic role models for future generations. The facts are that the name and fame of such women belong to those expert in turning fabric into tangible symbols, a skill that may elude even the inventors and designers of those symbols.

Many of these women have been celebrated and immortalized on postage stamps, banknotes, paintings and other objects, as the following examples illustrate.



### UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Betsy Ross is widely credited as the creator of the first ‘Stars and Stripes’ with the 13 stars arranged in a circle, so that no state could claim precedence over another. It emerged in 1776 during the American Revolution. Though subsequent research has attributed the design to Francis Hopkinson, Ross’s biographer Marla Miller highlighted her role, not in the design, but its realization.

**Above:** Betsy Ross shows the finished flag to Gen. George Washington, Robert Morris and George Ross, on a US postage stamp commemorating the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Betsy Ross in 1952, issued at a time when the "Betsy Ross Legend" was still strong among the American public.

### THE PHILIPPINES

**Doña Marcela Agoncillo** is regarded as the *Mother of the Philippine Flag*. In Fernando Amorsolo’s painting “*The Making of the Philippine Flag*” (right), she is depicted making the first Filipino flag, in accordance with modifications made by nationalist General Emilio Aguinaldo during his exile in Hong Kong in 1898. Doña Marcela was assisted by her daughter, Lorenza, and Delfina Herbosa.



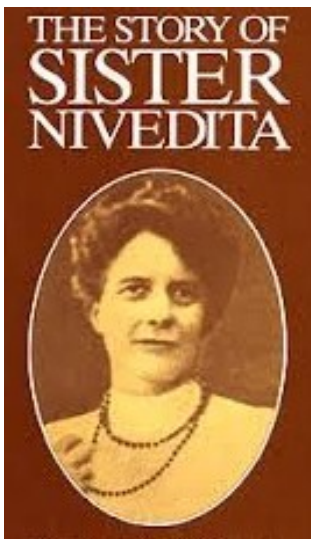
### HAITI



**Catherine Flon**, of Arcahaie, was a Haitian nurse and military strategist. She was also the maker of the first Haitian Flag, from the bi-colour design by her god-father Jean-Jacques Dessalines Sr in 1803. Catherine Flon sewing the first flag of Haiti has appeared on many Haitian banknotes, including this 10-Gourde note issued in 1988 (above).

## REPUBLIC OF CUBA

**Emilia Teurbe Tolón**, wife and cousin of the designer Miguel Teurbe Tolón, transferred the republican colours “in the required order” to linen. The model of the first flag of Cuba, known as ‘*La Estrella Solitaria*’, or ‘Lone Star Flag’ was “made with her hands” in New York City 1849. Its first public appearance in Cuba was on 19 May 1850 in the city of Cárdenas. (Source: *Introduction to Cuba*, Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, 1978, page 15). **Right:** Emilia sewing the flag, Cuban stamp of 1951.



## INDIA AN AVANT-GARDE FLAG DESIGNER

The history of flags is replete with fascinating stories of women weaving, stitching, embroidering, assembling fabrics to create tangible artefacts of national pride, underscoring that “behind every successful ‘flag design’ there was a woman”.

The list could be longer, but today’s presentation illustrates the unique contribution of a little-known Irish woman of India, who not only propagated the importance of the need of a national flag for India, her adoptive country, but also introduced a national flag envisioned by her in 1905. She was an independent thinker far ahead of her time – an avant-garde flag designer. Her contribution was as unique as her life story. **Left:** Cover of *The Story of Sister Nivedita* by Pravrajika Atmaprana, Ramakrishna Sarada Mission, Kolkata.

## THE EMERGENCE OF PAN-INDIAN NATIONALISM AND THE NEED FOR AN INDIAN NATIONAL FLAG

“There was no ancient flag whether of Hindu or Muslim times, which the Indian leaders could think of for adoption as the flag of India as a whole. India was never physically a *nation militante*, and so there was no need of a national symbol to rally round in opposition to other nations”, writes Prof. Suniti Chatterji in an article first published in *The Modern Review* in 1931.

Before the British arrived, there wasn’t really an India. The British victory in the decisive Battle of Plassey in 1757 paved the way for the formation of a United States of India. The concept of modern nation-states that dawned in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century was, however, an entirely new thing.

## AN INDIAN FLAG: FIRST ATTEMPTS

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the national leaders in India became concerned and infused with the spirit of reasserting the country’s independence from foreign rulers, they felt the need for a truly Indian National flag to unite the many states and territories.



Above: Robert Clive and Mir Jafar after the Battle of Plassey, 1757. Oil painting, Francis Hayman (c.1760), National Portrait Gallery, London.



In seeking the first steps toward the invention of a distinctive flag for India, the role played by Sister Nivedita is paramount. Born **Margaret Elizabeth Noble** at Dungannon, Northern Ireland, Sister Nivedita came to India in 1898 as an Irish disciple of Swami Vivekananda. She adopted India as her country and dedicated herself to the cause of India's national revival. She was given the name '*Nivedita*', meaning 'The Dedicated One' by her guru, Swami Vivekananda.

Sister Nivedita on an Indian Postage Stamp and her birthplace in Dungannon, Ireland.



In 1905, the British viceroy, Lord Curzon, declared the partition of Bengal, a move that rapidly proved a turning point for the Indian independence movement and led to a major political crisis for the British Empire in India. The need to unite the whole of India became critical, and along with it the first serious attempt to devise a flag to stir the nation. And it came from someone born outside the country – Sister Nivedita. "*India appears to be waking up in these days...The people are feeling their power. I think Curzon has broken the British Empire*", Nivedita wrote on 13 September 1905.

Sister Nivedita played a pivotal role in organizing the anti-partition movement and immersed herself in the *Swadeshi* Movement, aimed at attaining 'self-sufficiency'. She had already conceived her version of an Indian National flag during her visit to Bodh Gaya in 1904, in the company of J.C. Bose and Rabindranath Tagore. Her flag was inspired by the ancient sign of the *Vajra* or Thunderbolt. For Buddhists, the *Vajra* is a symbol of Lord Buddha that implies 'The Selfless Man' – the point of the image at left of Buddha holding the emblem. In the Vedas, the *Vajra* was the weapon of Lord Indra and the symbol of renunciation and service.



A *Vajra* is a ritual weapon for both Hindus and Buddhists symbolising the indestructible property of a diamond and the irresistible force of a thunderbolt.

Nivedita's flag featured the *Vajra* between the words *Bande* and *Mataram* in Bengali with 108 *gyotis* or flames along the perimeter. *Bande Mataram* (Hail to the Motherland) became the war cry of national resurgence in the turbulent days of the anti-partition movement in Bengal.



**Above:** Nivedita's flag as made by the students of her school in Calcutta (now Kolkata).



**Left:** Nivedita's flag before restoration in 2014 and **right,** afterwards.



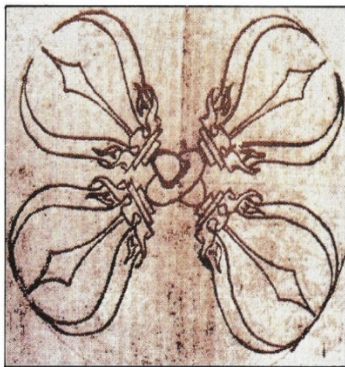
The number 108 is auspicious for Hindus, Jains and Buddhists. The traditional prayer beads have 108 beads. The number is a perfect 3-digit multiple of three, its components adding to nine, the sum of triple threes. "Three" is the "Trinity" that represents supreme balance in the form of creation, maintenance and destruction or transformation.

### SISTER NIVEDITA'S FLAG CREATION PROCESS

Using 'R.S.' as a *nom de plume*, Sister Nivedita advocated the *Vajra* as the national flag for India in an illustrated article titled "The Vajra as a National Flag" in *The Modern Review* for November 1909. It was significant since it was perhaps one of the first recorded article raising the question of a flag for the whole of India. Here is the core of her description:

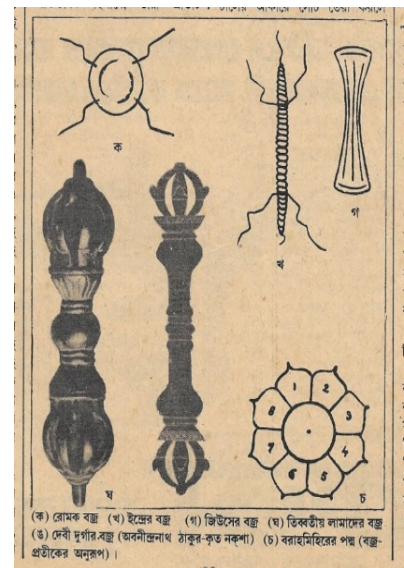
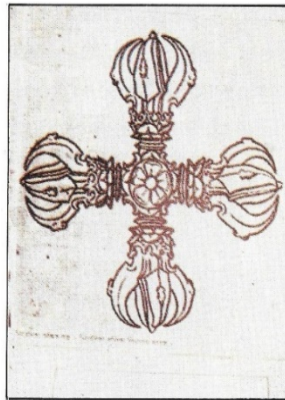
"... A BANNER, with its menace and its rallying-cry, a BANNER, with its benison and call to sacrifice, must be born within the soul of the nation, and call up a passion that none outside the Guardian-race can understand... Throughout the period before the Christian Era, the Thunderbolt as a symbol was of cosmopolitan importance. Amongst Greeks and Romans, the Eagle of Zeus carried it in his claws. For the Romans, it was a military sign, and a device in perpetual use". Nivedita continued, "**Zeus** amongst the Greeks, and **Jupiter** amongst the Romans, was the wielder of the Thunderbolt. And similarly, in India, amongst the Aryan races, **Indra** was the God of the Thunderbolt... Jupiter, Zeus and Indra, armed with the *Vajra*, speak for themselves of the past antiquity of the conception, coming, as it does, out of age when civilization of man was one, and continents had not yet attained ethnological distinctness.... Already two hundred and fifty years before the first Roman Emperor ... the Thunderbolt becomes the symbol of Buddha. In Thibet and in Burma, the thunderbolt stands for Buddha himself... Wherever there is glory, or honour, or purity, great wisdom, or great sanctity, or great energy, know that to be a fragment of the Thunderbolt...."

Drawings from Sister Nivedita's article in *The Modern Review*:

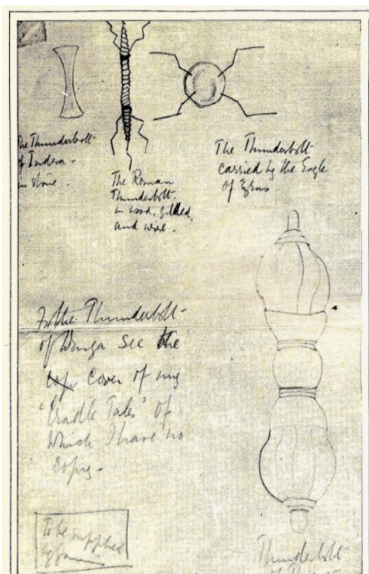


Thunderbolt and other designs

Sister Nivedita



(ক) গোমক বজ্র (খ) ইন্দ্রের বজ্র (গ) ভিউসের বজ্র (ঘ) তিব্বতীয় লামাদের বজ্র (ঙ) সেনী দুর্গার বজ্র (অবনীজনাথ ঠাকুর-কৃত নকশা) (চ) বরাহমিহিরের পদ্ম (বজ্র-প্রতীকের অনুরূপ)।



Below: a **Vajra** belonging to a Tibetan lama.







Sister Nivedita's idea for a flag of India brought together items from ancient beliefs deeply rooted in the culture of India. The people of India could relate to its symbolism and it elevated traditional beliefs ever higher by presenting them meaningfully in the national flag design. The satin flag (105cm square) was displayed to the public at the National Congress Exhibition in 1906, and is now preserved as one of the most prized exhibits in the Acharya Bhavan Museum established in Kolkata by Sir JC Bose and maintained by the Trust endowed by him. Having suffered the vagaries of climate, the *Vajra* flag was restored in 2014 by the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH), New Delhi and then returned to the Acharya Bhavan Museum.

Nivedita proposed the Vajra as the national symbol of a united India. The catch-phrase '*Bande Mataram*', (also *Vande Mataram*) from an innocent song in a 19<sup>th</sup> century novel, *Ananda Math* (Abode of Bliss) went through an amazing transformation between 1905-1911 to a revolutionary slogan, the work of Bengal youth fired by their desire for liberation from foreign rule, recognised as 'the first great wave of national struggle'. Inspired by Nivedita's example, two more flags appeared in quick succession also with the slogan '*Bande Mataram*' - the Calcutta Flag of 1906 and Madame Bhikaji Rustom Cama's of 1907.

**The Calcutta Flag** (1906) was the first tricolour Indian national flag, hoisted in Calcutta on the first anniversary of the partition of Bengal, observed as 'Boycott Day' on 7 August 1906, bearing '*Bande Mataram*' in Sanskrit.



Bhikaji Cama's Flag (1907) was a strikingly similar flag with minor deviations as to devices, colours and their order. The flag was first hoisted at the International Socialist Congress in Stuttgart, Germany by Madame Bhikaji Cama and other exiled revolutionaries on 22 August.

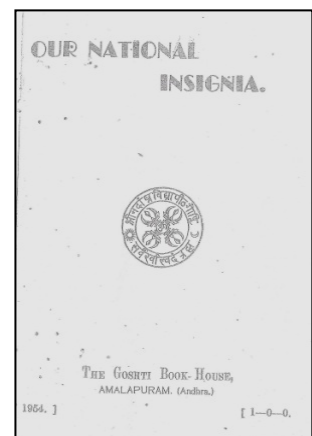


### INFLUENCE OF SISTER NIVEDITA'S FLAG ON LATER DESIGN PROPOSALS



In 1916, Pingali Venkayya, a freedom fighter and an avid flag enthusiast came up with a booklet titled **A National Flag for India**. He presented twenty-four tentative flag designs, including Sister Nivedita's Vajra flag. **Left:** The *Vajra* Flag in 4<sup>th</sup> row, middle. Later, D. Gopalakrishnayya, known as the Hero of Chirala-Perala, devised two separate flags for his *Goshti* and *Rama Dandu* as early as 1920. The main component of their symbolism was a *Vajra* echoing Sister Nivedita's pioneering concept.

**Right:** *Vajra* emblem, cover of **Our National Insignia**, Goshti Book House, 1954.



Although Sister Nivedita's flag was derived from the cultural manifestations of India, it didn't find much patronage to support it further for adoption as the national flag. With the passage of time Nivedita's flag, as well as all other flags with the inscription 'Bande Mataram' and 'Vajra' were relegated to history.

Even so, its glory doesn't fade, since this is the story of an exemplary human being, who although born in a foreign land was drawn to India, and dedicated her life to the progress and liberation of India. Her exemplary efforts inspire Indians still. She is revered by all as one of the greatest humanitarians and benefactors of India. Sister Nivedita died at Darjeeling in 1911. Her epitaph (**right**) reads, *Here repose the ashes of Sister Nivedita (Margaret E. Noble)...who gave her all to India...*



### CONCLUSION: AWAKENING A NATION



Until recently, Sister Nivedita's name was practically unheard of in her own birthplace, Dungannon in Northern Ireland. In 2011, exactly one hundred years after her death, a three-day celebration of the life of Nivedita was organised at Dungannon, with people attending from England, Ireland, America and India. Prof. Jean McGuinness was the main organiser of the events. In the exhibition held during the celebration, images included Nivedita's *Vajra* flag and the sketches of her designs. A historical docudrama, *Awakening a Nation*, was performed in Belfast by the cast of The Noble Thespians. Chris Spurr, of the Ulster History Circle, rededicated the Blue Plaque unveiled by the mayor in Scotch Street to indicate that Nivedita had been born in that street.

In her book, **Footfalls of Indian History**, p.5, Sister Nivedita wrote:

*The men who unite with energy of the Thunderbolt for the attainment of the common goal of heart and conscience, must be men accustomed to combined action and sustained co-operation...*

I believe this is one of the reasons why she put the Thunderbolt, the symbol of 'Indestructible Energy' on her flag design.

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Professor Parul Chakrabarti, member of the Sir J.C. Bose Trust, Acharya Bhavan Museum, Kolkata.



## BIOGRAPHY

**Sekhar Chakrabarti** is an internationally known thematic philatelist. His other passion is Vexillology. His collection **Flags on Stamps** has been highly appreciated in International/World stamp exhibitions held under the auspices of the *Fédération Internationale de Philatelie* (FIP).

He is the author of **The Indian National Flag unfurled through Philately**. He was a delegate to the 25<sup>th</sup> ICV at Rotterdam in 2013 where he presented the paper *The Ancient symbol of Swastika, its Adoption, Uses and Misuses*. He has curated exhibitions in India and in Egypt, sponsored by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), Ministry of External Affairs, Govt. of India. He lives in Kolkata, India.

From 2013 Sekhar has made regular posts on Facebook about Indian flags and from 2015 he has administered a dedicated Indian flag group on Facebook, now called “Flags of India – Study Centre and Library (FISCaL)”.

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