

Kites in India



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India has a very ancient kite tradition. Most people believe that kites were first brought into India by the Chinese travellers, Fa Hien and Hiuen Tsang but from there the kites have taken their own



evolutionary route in India and today Indian kites are almost exclusively fighter kites. They are made of tissue paper and bamboo and almost all Indian kites have a very similar shape – a diamond shaped piece of tissue with a central spine and a single bow. The differences lie in the many patterns and colours used to make the paper sail. But the Indian kite is a superb flying machine, capable of responding to the flyers' lightest touch, extremely maneuverable and perfectly suited to its function. The generic name for a kite in India is *Patang*.

Types of Indian kites

While the basic shape of the Indian kite remains largely unchanged from the diamond, there are subtle variations – and each has its fervent supporters.

Patang – This is the most common Indian kite. The height/width ratio is generally 1:1.2. As in all Indian kites, the edges are reinforced by a thin thread along the circumference of the kite and the overlapping paper is glued back on to the sail. This is a tail-less kite. The tail is generally a small double triangular piece of tissue, pasted such that the bottom edge is flush with the level of the sail, with thin bamboo slivers along the outer edges for reinforcement.

Guddi – Almost as popular as the patang, this variation generally has a height/width ratio in reverse – 1.2 : 1. In other words, the kite is taller than it is wide. The tail in this kite is generally a small tassel of tissue paper.

Dedh Kanni – This is a little more uncommon and is generally used in lower winds – The kite is significantly broader than the regular patang and the height/width ratio tends to be close to 1:1.5. It shares the triangular patch tail with its parent patang.



Tukkal – This shape is more akin to the Malaysian *Wau* than the patang and is almost never seen in Indian skies except at Kite Festivals. In Pakistan, though, it is still a popular design. Twin double-bows make this a very “heavy” kite and not many people possess the skill to fly it. Besides, the time and energy required to make one make it a precious object, one you wouldn't like to lose by risking it in a kite battle.



Traditional Indian kites and spools

Designs

While the single colour fighter kite, made from a single sheet, remains the favourite for serious kite competitions, there are many colourful designs that are more popular among casual flyers and children. Simple geometric designs, stripes and circular or semi-circular designs in contrasting colours are quite common. At the other end you have the intricate decorative or “picture” kites made by someone like Babu Khan of Jaipur – perhaps one of the finest Indian kite makers today.

Babu Khan’s kites are elaborate applique affairs. He makes pictures of Gods and Goddesses, portraits and complex geometric designs. He can’t draw a picture, but he can reproduce a photo on his kite merely by looking at it. What is special is that there is no paper-on-paper in the sail. If an eyeball has to be made, he will cut a hole in the

main paper and then paste the black eyeball on the reverse side.

Consequently the front and back of his kites differ radically in appearance – the front looks like a delicate painting, it’s only when you turn the kite over that you realize what’s been done .. a little like cross-stitch embroidery.



Bridling techniques



The traditional Indian fighter kite flies on a two-point bridle. Cross holes are made at the top where the spine and the bow intersect. A second set of holes is made on either side of the spine at approximately two thirds of the length of the spine. One end of the bridling line is looped through the top holes and knotted tightly, effectively fixing the bow to the spine. The other end is looped through the bottom holes and knotted. You now have an inverted “V” shaped line tied to the kite at both ends.

You then pinch the twin lines between your thumb and forefinger and draw the bottom bridle out along the spine until it reaches approximately 1-1.5 inches above the top tow point (knot). You then draw the top bridle down to the bottom knot or tow point and tie a knot that fixes the relative lengths of the top and bottom bridles, leaving a little loop at the top to



which you will attach the

flying line. The top bridle needs to be shorter than the bottom to make the kite maneuverable. If the bridles are made almost equal in length, the kite will fly sluggishly and simply shake from side to side – a little like the Indian sideways head shake that foreigners seem to find so amusing!



A little fine tuning might be necessary to get your kite to fly right: too much turn and a knot at the bottom might help to steady the kite. Too sluggish? Perhaps a knot in the top bridle might be the answer. If the kite tracks too much to one side, the solution is to either add some weight to the bow on the opposite side (either by sticking on a piece of putty or knotting a bunch of string to the bow) or to bend and flex the bow a little on the opposite side.... This is best left to more experienced kite flyers, or you might snap the thin bamboo bow! And splicing a broken bow is a whole different story.



Flying line – Sadda and Manjha



There are two kinds of flying line – the plain cotton line called *Sadda* and the glass coated cutting line called *Manjha*. Most flyers will use both: the *Manjha*, about 100 yards of it, at the front and then the *Sadda* - so that you don't cut your hands during a *pench* or "tangle" as it is commonly called in the West.



Manjha making is a traditional skill which is handed down over generations and families jealously guard their secret recipes for the *manjha* paste. The basic ingredients are powdered glass (crushed tube lights are supposedly the best!), some colour and a binding agent – generally a cooked paste of wheat or rice flour. To this each *manjha* maestro adds his own secret ingredients - and everybody

claims that his *manjha* is the best! The cotton thread is strung in eight or ten strands between two poles and the *manjha* maker walks up and down the length with the paste in his hands, finely coating the threads at each pass until the desired effect is achieved. The thinner, or 6 ply thread *manjha*, is generally preferred for its suppleness over the thicker 10 ply which might be used in stronger winds.



Manjha maker in action

How does an Indian kite fly ?

Despite its simplicity – two pieces of bamboo and a scrap of tissue paper, the Indian fighter kite is a sophisticated flying machine. A complex interaction of gravity, lift and drag – the same forces that control the flight of a giant 747 – determines the flight path of your kite. One of the most maneuverable kites in the world, the Indian fighter kite is considered a masterpiece of design the world over; form follows function and it is eminently suited to its purpose – to fight with other kites in the sky.

Tie your flying line to the loop at the end of the bridle, a little bend in the spine, approximately one third of the way down, to create a dihedral and you're ready to fly.

Experienced flyers can launch their own kites and have them high up in the sky in a matter of moments. Novices need a little help, or more accurately, a helper who will walk 20 – 30 feet down-wind with the kite while the flyer gives out line. The helper holds the kite by its sides with the nose pointing up. The flyer signals he's ready; the helper lets go; a little tug, and the kite is airborne.

The technique involves getting your kite into the wind by pulling in the line and then letting it out as the kite catches the wind. The kite will move in the direction its nose is pointing. So, you let line out and the kite spins as it takes up the slack. You stop letting out line and a well-bridled, well-balanced kite will track straight up. To move the kite right or left or up or down you simply let out line to make the kite spin. When the nose is pointing in the direction you want the kite to move, either stop letting out line or pull it in and the kite should move in the desired direction.

Once you've mastered the elementary flying skills you can look at learning the complexities of *pench ladana* or kite fighting.



Spools

The traditional Indian kite spool or *charkhi* is a tube created with split pieces of bamboo stuck into two wooden discs with protruding stick handles. You reel in line by putting one handle in the crook of your elbow and quickly rotating the spool by turning the other one between your thumb and fingers. To let out line you either hold the spool loosely by both handles and let the kite take up the line or you hold the spool by one handle and let the line roll out over the side of the opposite disc. Of course having a helper to do all this is so much better!



Kites in Ancient India

There are many stories related to kite flying in ancient India. The rulers or the *nawabs* of Lucknow used to fly their kites from their palace rooftops with a small purse of gold or silver attached – an incentive for the others to try cutting down the kite to retrieve the precious prize. Of course the *nawabs* were also famous for their love of money and hated to lose any, so they would have their own men out in the street to ensure that they got their kite back, with the purse intact, in case it was cut!

Sawai Ram Singh, the king of Jaipur, was also very fond of kites and commissioned a *patang khana* or kite factory in the 16th century to specially make kites for him.



Unfortunately the fragile nature of Indian kites has prevented the survival of any of these old specimens today. We can only get a glimpse of them in the paintings of that time. There are some paintings from the 16th Century in the personal collection of H.H. Brigadier Bhawani Singh, erstwhile ruler of Jaipur, which show kites being flown in Jaipur during the visit of some Portuguese padres to the court of Sawai Ram Singh.

There are references in ancient poetry to lovers sending notes to their beloved through kites and some paintings from the Mughal era reflect this dalliance.

The Mehrangarh fort in Jodhpur has a few exquisite wall paintings depicting kites being flown during a local celebration.

What is unique that kites were popular not only with the local populace, but also with the rich and the nobility and people in poor health were sometimes advised by their physicians to take up kite flying as a means to regaining their vitality.

Indian Kite Sport

Indian kites are flown on glass coated cotton cutting line called *manjha* and the object of the sport is to cut down your opponent's kite.

These kite battles are popular all over the country and while children will come back from school and run out to fly almost everyday, the adults who practice the sport take it very seriously – weekends are set aside for inter-club matches when kites are flown at a great distance and the one-on-one matches are conducted according to very definite rules. For example, both kites have to be at an equal distance, anywhere between 500 to 800 meters, and you have to decide in advance your position of attack – above or below – normally determined by the toss of a coin. In kite tournaments there is also the restriction of staying inside your crease – a box about 5 X 5 metres – and the size and colour of kites that may be flown.

Each flyer has an assistant who holds the reel or *charkhi*, also made of wood and bamboo. A good assistant is vital and can make the difference between winning or losing as it is he who keeps the line free of tangles – letting it out when the flyer needs it and reeling it in as the flyer pulls it in so that it does not get tangled on the ground.

Once the two flyers indicate that they are ready, the referee gives the signal and the battle begins. Great skill is needed in controlling the kite at this great distance. You cut your opponent's kite through friction - either by letting out line (*dheel*) or by furiously pulling it in hand over hand (*khainch*). The *manjha* is so sharp that flyers sometimes come away with bloodied fingers! Once a kite is cut it belongs to whoever catches it – the original owner has no right on it anymore. That's how most poor children get their kites – by capturing kites that have been cut.

The ultimate pench is called a *dangal* - fought out at a great distance, maybe a mile or more, using a much larger kite called called a *dhaal* (Hindi for "shield").

Kite Festivals

Makar Sankranti is the great traditional Indian kite festival. It falls on the 14th of January – the only traditional Indian festival that falls on the same date every year. All other Indian festivals follow the lunar calendar, *Makar Sankranti* is the only one with a solar association – it marks the transition of the sun into the Northern Hemisphere and is celebrated as a festival of life and fertility. Sweets made of molasses and sesame seeds are traditionally eaten on this day and whole cities come to a halt as everybody is on the rooftops, flying kites.

On *Sankranti*, in cities like Jaipur and Ahmedabad the whole sky is filled with kites – a million or more kites at the same time – all trying to cut each other down! This goes on all day – from before sunrise to after sunset. The whole family participates - lunch, tea and snacks are all served on the terrace; nobody goes indoors until it is too dark to fly anymore. And even then some people leave a kite flying through the night bearing aloft a paper lantern with a candle burning inside.

An interesting sidelight of *Makar Sankranti* is the poorer children who roam the streets, looking for kites that have been cut. The simple rule of “Finders Keepers” applies to any kite that’s been cut and these children, too poor to afford buying even a simple paper kite, can still look forward to hours of fun with the kites they collect on *Sankranti*.

The international Desert Kite Festival is held every January in Jodhpur and Jaipur to coincide with *Makar Sankranti* and kite flyers from all over the world arrive to fly their own kites and participate in the riotous frenzy of *Makar Sankranti* by flying Indian fighter kites.

In Delhi kites are flown extensively on 26th January and 15th August - Republic Day and Independence Day.

It would be quite accurate to say that while kites are flown all over India as a part of various traditional festivals, *Makar Sankranti* is the one festival that is totally devoted to kites.



Makar Sankranti in Jaipur

Similarity in Eastern kite traditions

Though kite flying as a sport has seen tremendous progress and innovation in the Western world, kites definitely seem to have an Eastern origin and kite fighting seems to be integral to quite a few indigenous Eastern kite traditions.



The Rokkaku, a traditional six sided Japanese kite, is also a fighter kite and many rokkakus are flown in contest where the object is to knock the opponents' kites down by either cutting the line or forcing it down by ensnaring it in your line. Though no *manjha* is used in the contest, the friction between the competitors' lines is often enough to cut through the flying line. The rokkaku is a stable kite, comparatively easy to fly, and has become extremely popular with kite flyers all over the world.

The Chula (male) and Pakpao (female) kites of Thailand also fight a battle in which the larger Chula is sought to be ensnared and brought down by a number of smaller Pakpao (which, incidentally, bear a strong resemblance to the Indian Guddi.) The Chula, too, tries to capture as many Pakpao as it can and the fight is excitingly intense.

The Nagasaki hata is also very similar in construction and size to an Indian fighter kite. The notable difference is the twin tassels hanging from each bow tip.



Hong Kong, Singapore and Indonesia also have a strong fighter kite tradition where Indian-style kites are flown in kite cutting contests.



Afghanistan is another country where kite flying was an extremely popular sport, until the Taliban banned it. Kites are thankfully making a comeback in Afghanistan after the ouster of the Taliban regime. Afghani kites are similar to Indian kites in construction, but are generally much larger than the Indian version and the kite fights take place at great distance – sometimes beyond the visual range – conducted only through the sense of touch; the tension on the flying line tells the flyer if he's made contact with his opponent's line!

A surprise inclusion in the fighter kite community is Chile in South America. Indian style fighters are flown in Chile, too - on *manjha* – and the aim of the game is the same : to cut down your opponent's kite. How the fighter kite, complete with *manjha* and kite cutting contests, made it across the Atlantic seems a mystery!

Kites Connect People



The kite is a fragile creation – two pieces of bamboo and a scrap of tissue paper - yet it occupies a special place in our hearts and minds, for the kite is one of the most powerful symbols of man's desire to break free from the shackles of this Earth.

Flying high above, the kite invites you to look up into the limitless sky, to let the worries of daily existence drop away, to let your soul soar up into the blue.

In the sky there are no boundaries and it's a little easier to believe that the differences of caste, colour, religion or nationality are artificial divisions that have no real basis in the scheme of Creation.

In daily life you hardly ever see anyone looking up into the sky; we're all caught up in our mundane existence, scuttling about like ants with our eyes to the ground. At the very most we look straight ahead, or behind, or around us. The only ones who look up to the sky on a regular basis are madmen, or children ... or kite flyers. And this looking up widens your horizons, it puts you in touch with nature, with yourself. It teaches you that man is but an insignificant speck in the universe. It teaches you that "There are more things in Heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy." It teaches you humility, it teaches you respect for the fragile eco-system that we live in and take for granted. It teaches to accept that our differences are superficial and that our universal oneness is the greater truth....

Kites connect people across the boundaries of race, religion, nationality and even language.

So come, let us fly a kite.

About the author

Ajay Prakash was born in Udaipur, Rajasthan in 1955. He now lives in Bombay where he runs a travel company that specializes in off-beat tours within India.

From a director in the theatre to lecturer in English Literature to airline executive to travel agent and tour operator and now a Trustee of the Nomad Heritage Trust... he's worn a few different hats.

The Nomad Heritage Trust was established in 1999. Its aim : "The preservation of all things uniquely Indian."

The Trust has been supporting traditional Indian kite makers like Babu Khan of Jaipur and also organizes the international Desert Kite Festival which brings together kite makers from all over the country and from all over the world. The Trust also proposes to set up a Kite Museum in Rajasthan to document and preserve the Indian kite heritage. Traditional folk music and folk music instruments is another area where the Trust seeks to undertake a major initiative.



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