

# A Different Freedom



A Different Freedom:  
Kite Flying in Western India;  
Culture and Tradition

By

Nikita Desai

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P U B L I S H I N G

A Different Freedom: Kite Flying in Western India; Culture and Tradition,  
by Nikita Desai

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To each one of you, my warmest, and heartfelt thank you.



## PREFACE

My journey into the world of kites began at an early age. I must have been no older than seven or eight but I still cherish memories of flying a blue kite on blue *manjha* in suburban Bombay (It was yet to change its name to Mumbai). This was before the multinational companies (MNCs) and call centres occupied the urban landscape to drag my generation to work on ‘lesser holidays’ like Uttarayan. With a decline in interest in the festival, today many Gujaratis prefer to leave this mega city to return to hometowns across Gujarat to enjoy the pleasures of kite flying and Uttarayan.

For me a move to Vadodara meant that every Uttarayan has been noisier than the last. Here the day still begins with the blast of music from the terrace of our apartment. The kite battles can never begin soon enough for some and 9 a.m. is considered a late start to the day. Never fond of getting cut with the lethal *manjha*<sup>1</sup>, I have always preferred to handle the *firki* or spool of kite line...a typical *sahel lena*<sup>2</sup>, who is content to let others do the actual flying. As my friends tugged at their kite lines, manoeuvring their kites into tangles, I would often sit in the relative comfort of a shady wall, spool in hand, watching the battles unfold in the sky above. Even today, I spend the festival watching the kites soar through the sky, and occasionally, just occasionally, taking on the actual flying and winning of a tangle. Some things never change!!

I began researching the cultures of kite fighting in my senior year as a post-graduate student of design. As my project on visual culture progressed, I fell in love with the kite once more. No longer just a spool handler who came to the terrace to enjoy the thumpa thump of the gigantic speakers, I was transformed now into a camera wielding tourist in my own backyard!! In the past I had attended *kinnah* (kite bridle) tying parties and rooftop dances but for the first time I now set foot into the midnight kite markets I had heard so much about. The aim of my project at that time was to highlight not just the festival and its celebrations in the state, but also the pace and preparations that take place in the run up to this day.

My researches lead me to find many a reference in books, websites, newspapers and kiting magazines. The Ahmedabad Kite Museum, and its founder and ex-curator Mr. Bhanu Shah gave me valuable insights into kiting history, and interacting with participants at the International Kite Festival

brought together many stories and shared experiences. Conversations with kite makers, *manjha* dancers<sup>3</sup> and kite sellers helped in piecing together a mosaic of people and economics that take place behind the scenes of the festival. And as I waded deeper into this sea of kites there emerged several distinct yet overlapping cultures of a single festival.

The first of these is the culture of flying and fighting kites, its history, politics and language. The commerce that governs the daily and festive life of the state's merchants, traders and businessmen provides another layer to this narrative, as Gujarat's history, marked by the influx of merchants and traders has over the centuries lead to the development of its distinct commercial identity. From the Harappan docks of Lothal, to Surat and Khambhat during Mughal times and more recently Mundra, Okha among others, there have been numerous port cities in this region that have risen and fallen from prominence over the centuries.

Kite flying and kite making are part of this seamless blend of culture and commerce that characterises Gujarat, a state which sees people travelling to its cities in the run up this festival to engage in the commercial opportunities it brings. As cultural expression and commercial innovation entwine from the past into the present, they have been the forces shaping how the festival has come to be celebrated in its current form. These interactions have inspired literature, poetry and film (both new and old). Their influence is also felt not only in the promotional communications like hoardings and packaging of products related to kites but also in the way the State Government seeks to promote the region via the celebration of the International Kite Festival and Vibrant Gujarat<sup>4</sup>.

The subtext of religion and commercialization also affect subtle shifts and changes in the festival with every passing year. One may chose to follow the kite's journey across India through history by picking up its traces in literature, art, and the observations made in books, journals, court chronicles, historical works and kiting websites; but it is in the folklore and shared memories of the region that one discovers what the festival means, brings and signifies. It is into these very layers of meanings and memories that I invite you to join me, into 'A Different Freedom', defined by the tugs and jumps of the restless spirit of Gujarat and its fighter kites.



Flying and collecting cut kites on the Kalabhavan rooftop  
Vadodara, 14<sup>th</sup> January 2006



A Japanese kite on display at the International Kite Festival  
Ahmedabad, 12<sup>th</sup> January 2006

## I

## THE HISTORY OF THE KITE

Growing up in Gujarat, one never questioned the existence of the kite or sought to know its history. As children, we were more concerned with the presence or absence of wind, its direction and whose kite we would attack next rather than the symbolic meanings of kite flying. To better understand the cultural connotations associated with the celebration of festivals such as Uttarayan, I began to look at the history of kiting, its emergence and growth in the Indian subcontinent. Like most students today, my first stop was the internet, which obliged with a treasure of information and references, and endless possibilities to follow... My feelings at this point oscillated between those of a dog on the scent, and a child in a candy shop, determined yet confused at the same time.

That kiting was an ancient sport that emerged out of Asia came as no surprise. Many countries in this region have unique traditions, festivals and ritual celebration associated with the kite. Reading about each of these festivals was fascinating, and did indeed divert my attention from the *patang*<sup>5</sup> for a while. The kites themselves were widely different ranging from the simple fighters of the Indian subcontinent to the elaborate ceremonial kites of Indonesia and China. A mental map of sorts began forming in my mind, with kites having, quite literally, travelled the world, both as ceremonial and scientific devices. That Thailand and Japan also had a history of kite fighting was a point that arrested my attention, demanding further investigation...

The exact origin of kiting is uncertain; many believe that kites were first flown in China nearly 2,800 years ago. Leaf kites made and flown in various parts of Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia may also well have been the first kites made by man<sup>6</sup>. Alternatively, it may have been the Malaysians or Indonesians who independently invented kites. All these countries have long histories of kite flying, with leaf kites still in use for kite fishing in Oceania<sup>7</sup>.

Whatever the real story is, the kite has come a long way from the colourful tales of how a Chinese farmer tied his hat to a string to prevent it from blowing away. While the hat blowing along attached to the string in his



An 18<sup>th</sup> century Japanese painting  
The Kite Museum, Ahmedabad

hand may have given him the idea of making the first kite, today this little device has moved from being a piece of paper stretched over a bamboo frame, to nylon sails and a complex geometry of spurs, as it takes on many a shape and use.

Chinese legends speak of kites being used to lift fireworks into the sky to scare opposing armies. Documented evidence suggests that in 200 B.C. Huein Tsang flew a kite at night to overawe the army of Liu Pang of Han dynasty in China<sup>8</sup>. In 169 B.C. General Han Hsin of the Han Dynasty is said to have used a kite to measure the distance required to dig a tunnel into a palace to end a siege by mounting a sneak attack on the enemy. An ingenious bit of mathematics there. However, they did not stop at that, but progressed onto making kites which could lift a person into the air.

The earliest reference to the kite in Japanese literature is the use of the word *Shiroshi*. ‘*Shi*’ means paper and

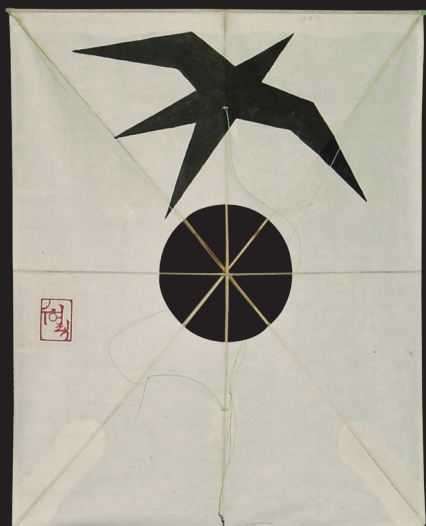
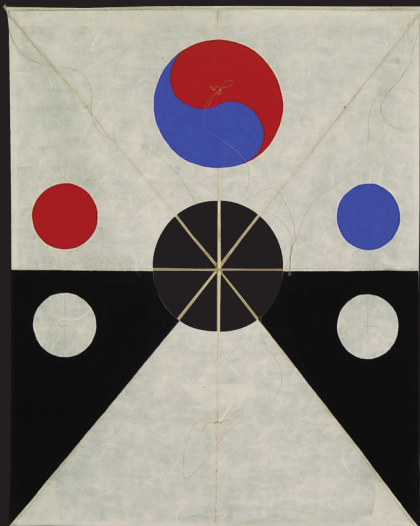
‘*Roshi*’ stands for a Chinese bird, quite literally; a paper bird from China. It is believed that Buddhist missionaries brought kites to Japan from China in the 7<sup>th</sup> century and from here they spread throughout the Pacific region, carried by Japanese traders and explorers. It is possible that the design of the man-lifting kite travelled with these missionaries to Japan for there is a Japanese legend that tells of a thief, Kakinkoki Kinsuke who tried to steal the golden scales off the statue of the *shachihoko* on the roof of Nagoya Castle. He used a kite to lift him over the walls and on to the roof without alerting the guards, but sadly was captured in the attempt. Punishment was harsh in those times and he and his family were put to death by being boiled in oil<sup>9</sup>...

The Buddhist missionaries are believed to have taken kites with them to the rest of South-East Asia and the Indian subcontinent. Following the Silk Route these paper birds then journeyed further into Arabia, North Africa and Europe. There is a difference of opinion regarding who actually brought the kite to these regions; some say the kites came with the explorers of the Dutch East India Company while others maintain that the sport was brought over by Ghengis Khan and the Mongolian warriors who invaded and ruled much of central Europe and Asia.

In Europe the cultural makeup of the kite changed. Stripped of ritual belief and celebration it was viewed as no more than children's amusement. Later it was to become a tool for scientific experimentation. One of the most well known kite experiments was carried out by Benjamin Franklin, who flew a kite into storm clouds to demonstrate his findings on lightening and static electricity.

The wars of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century saw a revival in the military use of kites as they were employed to spy on the enemy, for target practice and to fly lethal explosives against aircraft. Today kites are used for professional aerial photography, surveillance duty and to conduct surveys besides sports like kite surfing and trick flying.

Korean kites on display at the International Kite Festival  
Ahmedabad, 12<sup>th</sup> January 2006





In the Indian subcontinent, the practice of kite flying was gradually replaced by the sport of kite fighting with the coming of Mughal rule. The translated works of Maulana Adul Halim Sharar in *Lucknow: The Last Phase of an Oriental Culture* (London: Elek Books Limited. 1975) talks not only about the life of the nobility of Awadh<sup>10</sup>, but also goes into details of their many pastimes, one of which is kite fighting. In his works, I found confirmation that interest in the pastime of flying kites first grew among the noblemen of the courts of Delhi during the reign of King Shah Alam I (1702 - 1712). Not surprisingly, it was in the time during and immediately following the Mughal period, that the design of the kite underwent many changes to enhance its fighting ability.

Maulana Sharar describes the earliest form of the kite in this period, as composed of two *tukkals*; joined together back to front so as to form something similar to a triangular Chinese lantern. This kite was meant to be flown at night with a ball of cloth soaked in oil hung inside it so as to give the impression of a lantern in the sky.

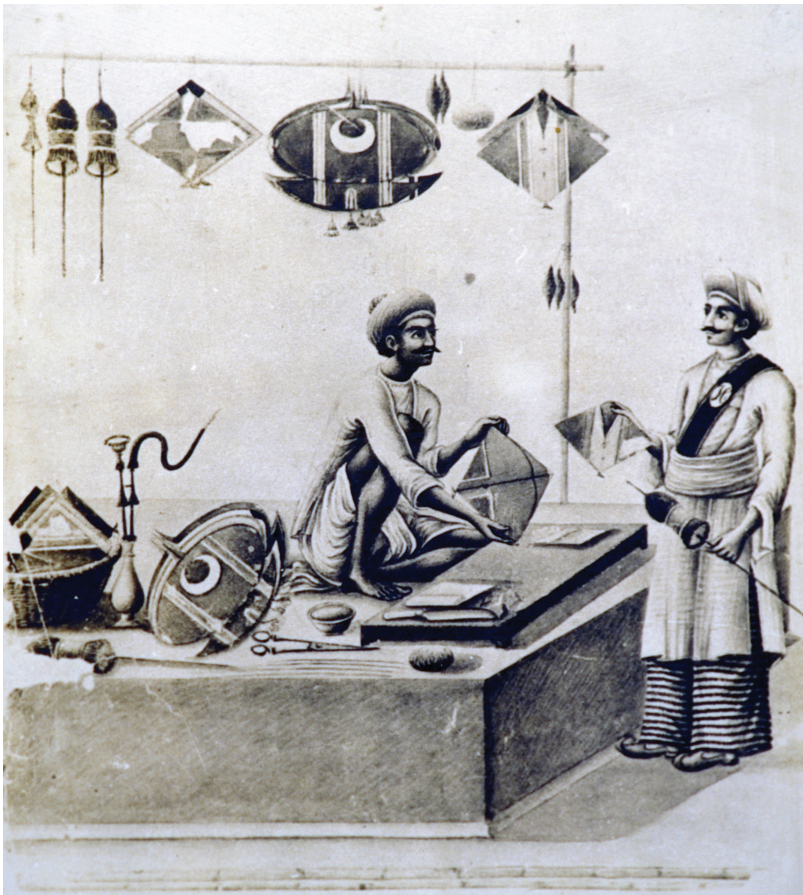
Maulana Sharar's writings also tell of how the people of Delhi would fly effigies of human beings and how this may have led to the invention of *chaggs*<sup>11</sup>. The *chaggs* were kites, equal in length and breadth and easier to fly. The emergence of kite fighting as a Muslim sport as opposed to the Hindu pass-time of kite flying may be traced back to this period, when the *chagg* was of greater interest to the Hindus due in part to its lantern bearing capabilities<sup>12</sup>. While this may have been true of an earlier time, today lanterns are sent up with kites, more as a demonstration of skill, than for any lingering religious feelings.

Both these types of kite, the *chagg* and *tukkal* are still popular in north India to this day. While today's *chagg* more closely resembles the *patang*, the *tukkal* itself is a heavy three bow kite, flown only by the most experienced flyers and mostly seen in the Punjab region and Pakistan. This kite is made up of a frame of wood, consisting of a centre stick or *thaddi*, and two curved bows called *kamps*. The kite has three rounded edges and a wingspan of 22 inches.

Facing page: Lord Krishna flies a square *patang*  
Late 18<sup>th</sup> century painting of the Bikaner School  
The Kite Museum, Ahmedabad

The *tukkals* were favoured as fighting kites in the 18<sup>th</sup> century as they were easier to manoeuvre. Initially this was a sport of the wealthy who lavished money on the purchase of kites and line. The word *patang* emerged to denote the best type of *tukkals*, costing a princely sum of one hundred and seven rupees, a small fortune in that time<sup>13</sup>. Such was the sway of the *tukkal*, that it appeared in paintings and illustrations of the Murshidabad region in West Bengal, at the furthest end of the Mughal empire.

A Kite Seller, Company school illustration, 1850  
The Kite Museum, Ahmedabad



The patrons of kite fighting in Delhi brought the sport to the courts of Lucknow, where it flourished under the patronage of the Nawabs of Awadh. To this day, the people of Lucknow still recount how the Nawab Asaf ud Daula's (1758 - 1797) *tukkals* were decorated with five rupees worth of gold and silver fringes<sup>14</sup>. Whoever retrieved such a cut kite could return it to the Nawab and claim a reward of five rupees, or sell it in the market for the same amount.

Further developments of the Indian fighter kite include the *guddi*<sup>15</sup>; a paper kite in the shape of an upright diamond, with only one bow instead of two. This kite is said to have been invented in the time of Amjad Ali Shah, the fourth king of Awadh (1842 - 1847), and is what I believe to be the beginning of the *patang* as we know it today.

During Wajid Ali Shah's reign (1847 - 1856), kites with one and a half bows and a tassel tail like the *tukkal* were made. These were called *dehr kana*. Later the *kankavas*, kites with a paper triangle or *patta* as a tail also appeared. With the British takeover of Awadh and the removal of the Nawab and his family to Matiya Burj<sup>16</sup> near present day Kolkata, the sport of kite flying and the other noble pastimes of Awadh followed him there.

Maulana Sharar names Mir Amdul, Khawja Mathan and Shaikh Imdad and later Mir Vilayat Ali, Ilahi Baksh Tundey and Lamdur as experts in the sport, people who are still remembered for their skill by the present kite flyers of Lucknow. He also makes special note of a weaver whose skill in the art of kite fighting was such that he was received with respect by the elegant kite flyers of the time. The courtly sport had thus caught the imagination of the common man as well during this time. Such was the craze for kites in Lucknow that stories abound of how people brought ruin upon themselves by spending on the sport, but succeeded in achieving prominence and respect for their skill in the kite flying circles of the time.

With the establishment of Dutch trading posts in the Malabar, and present day Bangladesh (once a part of the Bengal) in the 1650s and 60s, the sport of kite fighting is believed to have travelled with the Dutch traders to Nagasaki. Nagasaki remains perhaps the only place in Japan to have a fighter kite tradition. The rest of Japan still considers kite flying and kite making as an art rather than a sport. The Nagasaki fighters are called *Hata* or flag kites, and sport graphic designs in red, white and blue, the colours incidentally of the Dutch flag. They also bear an uncanny resemblance to the Indian fighter



Kite fighting in an 18<sup>th</sup> century illustration, Murshidabad, West Bengal  
The Kite Museum, Ahmedabad

kites in form and construction<sup>17</sup>.

The growing popularity of kite fighting and its wealthy patronage in the courts of Delhi and Awadh led to its spread to the provincial courts like Ahmedabad, a move fuelled in later years by the migration of skilled craftsmen to the region.

If one looks at the kites used across the Indian subcontinent today, the *tukkal* is still favoured in the provinces of Punjab, both in India and Pakistan. *Patangs*, *guddis* and *kankavas* still hold sway over much of northern and western India, and there have been few changes in their construction over the years. Bangladesh shares its kiting heritage with the state of West Bengal since both were part of the Bengal presidency at the time of Wajid Ali sojourn to Matiya Burj.

Further south, Hyderabad retains much of the *nawabi* passion for kite

flying. A large part of southern India uses a unique rectangular kite and a modified *patang*, both designed to overcome the stiff sea breeze. Such kites can be seen engaged in tangles across the Marina beach in Chennai. Kites here often have special holes in the paper sail to prevent them tearing in the strong sea breezes. The tangle or *deal* as recounted in Tal Streeter's *A Kite Journey through India* (New York: Weatherhill Inc. 1996) is also of a more 'rough and tumble version', with flyers jostling each other on the sandy beach as opposed to the gentlemanly fights of kiting clubs of Delhi and Lucknow.

Over much of the subcontinent, kite flying and fighting has seasonal and ritual connotations, with Uttarayan being the main kite flying festival, a day when people take time out from their regular lives to fly kites. In Gujarat, at the western edge of the country, the kite fighting frenzy peaks during this yearly celebration. Here, the kite navigates the path between the old and the new. As the International Kite Festival mesmerizes the visitor with decorated dragons, elaborate fighters, box kites and sleds on the banks of the Sabarmati, in Ahmedabad; in the old city, and across the rest of the state the battle for the skies is underway as the festival continues to hold a symbolic significance in the lives of the people.



The Taj Mahal on a kite  
The Kite Museum, Ahmedabad



A couple flying a kite  
An 18<sup>th</sup> century painting from Bilaspur  
The Kite Museum, Ahmedabad

## II

### The Lure of the Kite

An enduring passion for kites and the development of several excellent fighter kites has left kiting etched in the cultural makeup of many otherwise varied regions of India. As kites spread from one region to another in the Indian subcontinent they acquired many meanings and came to symbolize many things. They have left their impression in arts and languages and continue to appear in cultural expressions throughout history.

The earliest reference to kites in Indian poetry is found in the writings of Namdev<sup>18</sup> (1270 - 1350), a 12<sup>th</sup> century poet-saint who travelled widely across western India. One of his verses, reproduced below, contain references to the *guddi* or female kite, being made of paper and attached to a thread in the hand.

“२३५० - ऐसैं मन रामनामैं वेधिंला ।  
जैसैं कनकतुला चित रखिंला ॥ १ ॥  
आणीले कागद साजील गुडी आकाशमंडल छोडी ।  
पाचजनासो बात बाताउवी चितसो दोरी रखिंला ॥ २ ॥”<sup>19</sup>

Devotional in nature, the verse describes a boy, who having made a kite from paper, is now flying it in the sky. While he flies the kite, he takes in his surroundings, chatting with his friends about this and that, but all the while his attention is focused on his kite. In much the same way, Namdev likens his devotion to Lord Rama as being similarly single minded, like the goldsmith, whose attention is held by his work. Many devotional compositions of the time employ such metaphors, similes and other literary devices to describe this kind of devotion and love towards a chosen deity.

The word *patang* itself emphasises the idea of sky and flight and was used to signify the sun, birds and even insects, indeed anything that was capable of flight much before it was adapted to signify the man-made kite. The word *patangiyu* and *patang* in Gujarati refer to both the butterfly and moth. Given that kite flying on Uttarayan began as a way for Hindus to welcome the Sun God, Surya as he moved northwards, it is not inconceivable that the word *patang* should be adopted for the kite. Infact the word *patang* was used for



Krishna and the Gopas fly a kite, Late 18<sup>th</sup> century painting from Kota, Rajasthan  
The Kite Museum, Ahmedabad

the first time in a verse written by the poet Manzan<sup>20</sup> in ‘*Madhumalati*’ in 1542 A.D. In the verse, reproduced below, the poet associates the flight of a kite with a loved one.

“पांति वांधि पतंग उगई ।  
दिया तोहि ज्यौं पियमहं जाई ॥”

During the golden age of kiting, stretching from 1526 to 1857, royal patronage extended to all forms of art, including the kite makers and flyers. Consequently, this is also the period in which numerous references to the practice of kite flying and fighting can be found both in literature and the fine arts. The names used to refer to the kite however vary widely from the generic term *patang* which is used commonly today.

The Vaishnav poet Nandadas (1533 - 1583) in his devotional writings describes ‘a kite flown by *Kannah* (Lord Krishna) from the banks of the Jamuna (Yamuna) and from a terrace’ using both the words *patang* and *chagg* in his works as follows:

“॥ २ ॥ पंतग उडायवेके पद राग उडानो ॥ कान्ह अटाचढ चंग उडावत में अपने आंगन हु तें हेर्यो ॥ लोचन चार भये नंदनंदन काम कटाच्छ किये भटु मेरो ॥ १ ॥ किधों रही समझाय सखीरी अटक न मानत यहमन मेरो ॥ नंददास प्रभु कबघों मिलेंगे खेंचत दोर किधों मन मेरो

॥२॥ १ ॥ राग हमीर ॥ जमुनाके तीर कान्ह चंग उडाय छबीसों रमैया ॥ हों जमुना जल भरन गईरी ओचक द्विष्टी पर गई दैया ॥ १ ॥ औचन तनक मन उरझोरी व्याकुल भई कोउ धीर न धरैया ॥ ब्रजाधीश घट पकरत भुली लाज कान कुल अब न रहैया ॥ २ ॥ १ ॥ अथ श्रीदामोद –”

Elsewhere the Marathi poet-saint Eknath (1533 - 1599) uses the word *vavadi* for kite. He describes the *vavadi* as a kite made of a dozen bamboo strips that moves up and down in the sky, flown by 10 to 12 men holding on to a thick line, in the verse reproduced here:

“अलक्ष केली वावडी ।  
लक्षाचा दोर परवडी ।  
उडवती बारा चौदा गडी ।  
भरली ती गगनों उडी ॥१॥  
भली चंग वावडी ।  
दादांनो भली चंग वावडी ॥ धु ॥  
औट हात सोडोनी दोरा ।  
मथ्यें कामटी लाविल्या बारा ।  
आत्मस्थितोचा चंग उबारा ।  
वावडी उडती अंबरी ॥२॥  
साहा चार मिलयोनी गडी ।  
अठराजण सोडिती वावडी ।  
एका जनार्दनी त्यांची जोडी ।  
जनार्दनाचे पार्यी गोडी ॥३॥”

The word *vavadi* is used to denote the kite by Deshopant in his work ‘*Granthraj*’, suggesting that kite flying was also popular in southern India in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The Marathi poet, Tukaram also makes use of the word *vavadi* in his verse as follows:

“खुंटोनिया दोरी आपणियापांशीं ।  
वावडी आकाशी मोकलिली ॥१॥”

Kavindracharya Saraswati of Banaras (1628 - 1658) describes Shah Jahan’s valor by saying heads of the enemy soldiers were flying in the sky, like kites during the battle, while the 17<sup>th</sup> century poet Biharilal’s (1595 - 1633) verse

describes Lord Krishna saying to his beloved:

“उडी गुड्डी लाखिलालकी, अंगना अंगना मौहि ।  
वौरी लौ दौरी फिरति, छुवन्ति छावली छौह ॥”

“No object in this world can separate me from your heart;  
Though the kite may wander in the sky, its line is held tightly by my hand”

This couplet is among the 700 couplets that make up the ‘*Bihari Satsai*’, composed at the request of Raja Jai Singh I of Amber, near Jaipur. The kite or *guddi* is used metaphorically in this verse to communicate the twin ideas of freedom and control as it seeks to reassure. Its message may also be interpreted as ‘though the eyes may wander, the kite and the heart are tied to one alone’. Given Lord Krishna’s love for dancing with and teasing the *gopis*, it might have been hard for his beloved to believe this statement, but one gets the general idea...

The ‘*Bihari Satsai*’ couplets were captured by the artist Jagannath of the Mewar School in a series of miniature paintings. Several other miniature paintings and embroidered works dating from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards also depict kite-flying as a sport and the kite as a messenger between lovers. Some of these paintings show kites being used to convey messages and love letters in the Muslim community; a simple method, employed to overcome the barrier of religious constraints on the movements of women. Other paintings depict Lord Krishna or members of the nobility flying kites. These miniature paintings belong to Mewar and Bikaner in Rajasthan, Faizabad in Awadh and the Kulu School of Art and the kites depicted in them include *tukkals*, rectangular and diamond shaped kites.

The rectangular shaped kite depicted in these works, is visibly taller than it is wide and is decorated on each corner with paper pennants or long slips of paper. This type of kite has mostly disappeared from India though I am told that something similar has survived in the coastal regions of Karnataka among the fishing community who make their own kites to fly during Maha Shivratri<sup>21</sup>. Farmers in this region are also known to make kites as large as six feet in diameter to be flown on jute rope according to Mr. Bhanu Shah, the founder of Ahmedabad’s famed Kite Museum. He also tells me of how the coastal town of Bhavnagar, in Gujarat has its own version of the rectangular kite, a three *kinnah* (bridle) contraption with a tail made of mango leaves and peacock feathers attached to it to produce a humming



*“You are away, yet my mind is with yours,  
just as a kite soaring in the sky, is controlled by the kite flyer’s hand”*

A verse from ‘Bihari Satsai’, illustrated by Jagannath  
Miniature painting in the Mewar school, Rajasthan, 1719  
The Kite Museum, Ahmedabad

sound that can be heard within a 500 metre radius.

Indeed, I owe much of my initial knowledge on kiting history to my brief meeting with Mr. Bhanu Shah and my many visits to his Kite Museum, where panels of his own design trace kiting history from the earliest times, alongside videos of the city's kite festivities. Four years in the making, the museum opened in 1989 and has been recently renovated by the city's municipal corporation. Located on the ground level of Sanskar Kendra, just opposite the National Institute of Design (NID) in Paldi, it is a must visit for kite enthusiasts and those interested in the history of Ahmedabad, a town once called the Manchester of India. The building itself was designed by renowned architect Le Corbusier, and inside its cooling galleries one finds many a intricate design of kite sandwiched between glass, with a length of string tied between the two ends of the bow, to relieve some of the pressure and prevent the paper tearing; a preservation method of his own invention, as Mr. Shah later explains. The museum also showcases Mr. Shah's original sketches and plans for the space, and the guides here fondly remember his dedication to kites and his frequent visits to the museum even after retiring as its director.

A lady flying a rectangular kite  
Early 17<sup>th</sup> century painting, Mewar School  
The Kite Museum, Ahmedabad



Among the many beautiful panels at this museum, one also finds images of *tukkal* flying depicted in the embroidered *chamba rumals*<sup>22</sup>. These *rumals*, ornamental coverlets and kerchiefs of unbleached muslin or *mulmul* were used to cover gifts exchanged during weddings between families of the bride and groom, and also as temple hangings or canopies around the idol.

Kite flying also finds mention in more ancient texts like the Ramayana<sup>23</sup> and the Vedas<sup>24</sup>. According to one story, young Hanuman was for a brief period, the palace pet of the prince Rama. One day the young prince and his brothers were flying kites, and prince Rama's kite soared up into the heavens. Hanuman was sent to retrieve the missing kite, and on reaching Indralok, Lord Indra's abode, he found that the Lord Jayant's wife had caught hold of the kite and would only return it if granted an audience with Lord Rama. Hanuman returns to prince Rama, to convey this message, and the prince promises to meet her when he is to live in exile in the hills of Chitrakut. Hearing this assurance Lord Jayant's wife returns the kite to Hanuman.



A 15<sup>th</sup> century *chambal rumal*  
The Kite Museum, Ahmedabad

This story is narrated in the Balkand or childhood episodes of Tulsidas's (1532 - 1623) epic 16<sup>th</sup> century poem, '*Ramcharitramanas*'<sup>25</sup>, with the verses:

“राम इक दिन चंग उड़ाई।  
इंद्रलोक में पहुँची जाई॥  
जासु चंग अस सुन्दरताई।  
सो पुरुष जग में अधिकाई॥  
तिन तब सुनत तुरंत ही, दीन्ही छोड़ पतंग।  
खेच लइ प्रभु बेग ही, खेलत बालक संग।”

Biharilal's and Tulsidas's use of the word *chagg* in their verses, agrees with the history of evolution of the fighter kite, as detailed by Maulana Sharar,



Patang restaurant in the background of the International Kite Festival 2010

metaphor and is most often used to target a victim to the general merriment of those present. The street vendor selling sugarcane who cries, ‘*O brother, who needs to hook his kite?*’ is an example he gives, of this device, wherein neither the kite, nor the pole used to hook a cut kite is referred to directly<sup>27</sup>. Since kite flying and kite looting using sugarcane poles was and still is so much a part of the cultural mindset, it is a matter of little difficulty for a local to grasp the meaning of the vendor’s cries, and appreciate his ability at word play.

In Gujarati, the assimilation of kiting terms is of a more direct nature. The term *pech ladana* refers not just to the kite tangle but is used to speak of

with the *chagg* being the prevalent design of the kite at that time these verse was composed. Tulisdas’s account of Lord Rama and his kite is also recounted by Philip Lutgendorf in his book *Hanuman’s Tale: The Message of a Divine Monkey* (USA: Oxford University Press, 2007)

Examples of the kite as a metaphor in literature, art and media abound from the past to the present, with little change to their meaning or significance; testament to the deep rooted nature of kites in the Indian imagination fuelled in part, by the many beliefs and legends that are associated with the kite.

Kiting terms have also found their way into everyday language. The city of Lucknow, famed for its refinement and *nawabi andaz*<sup>26</sup>, is also known for the development of several witty devices of language. Among them recounts Maulana Shahrar, is the *phabti*, a device which employs poetic simile or