

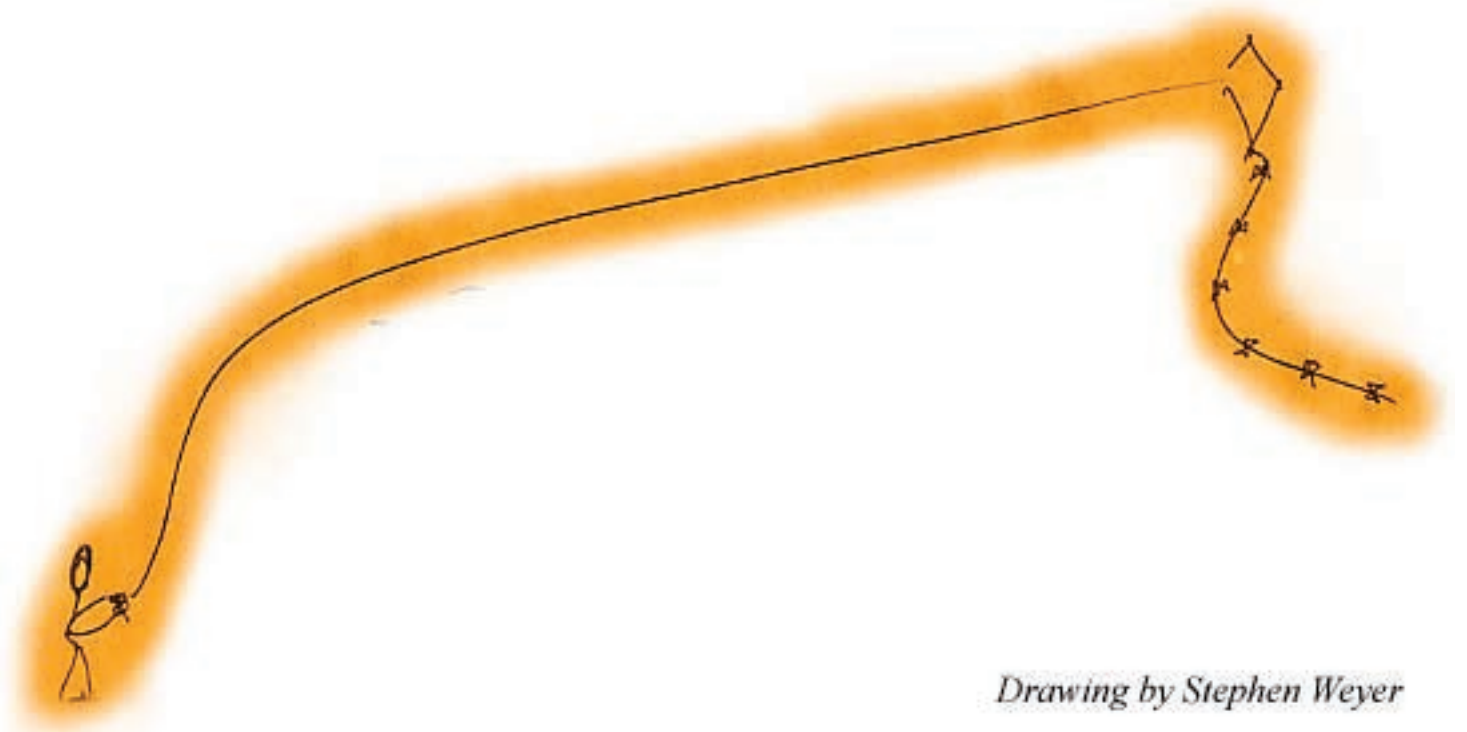
A Look at the Kite Business in India

Editor's note: With bachelor's degree course work at Emory University in Atlanta completed and scholarship money still available to him, the author went to India on a whim in 2001. He found the kite business in the state of Rajasthan fascinating and wrote an academic paper about it, from which this is excerpted.

By Stephen Weyer

My research in India focused on the manufacture of Indian-style fighter kites, known as *patang*, outside of the standard kite flying seasons. Most of the work was conducted in Jodhpur, Rajasthan. Much has been published in periodicals on the two major yearly Indian kite celebrations. But to the best of my knowledge, there has been no study of off-season kite production.

I received much assistance from Tal Streeter's book *A Kite Journey Through India*. Part travelogue and part research journal, Streeter's book delivers a wealth of information on Indian kite manufacturing. Consequently I



Drawing by Stephen Weyer

will not detail the processes of *manja*-making and kite production. (*Manja* is the glass-coated line used by kite fighters to cut opponents out of the sky.)

The local experts on kites are the *patang-wallahs* (kitemakers). Fortunately, I had a reliable and informative contact in Asghar Belim, owner of Belim Kite Manufacturing Company and president of the Belim Kite Club. Asghar claims his company is the largest producer of handmade kites in India. He calculates his firm turns out 1.5 million kites per year. This would make him one of the largest kite manufacturers in the world.

Eager to assist and fluent in English, Asghar was an invaluable source for my research in Jodhpur. I met him frequently inside his shop on Ghas Mandi Road and would sit with him for a couple of hours in the afternoon, shaded from the desert sun. Our discussions meandered from topic to topic, slowly filling in the details of my research.



Entrance to a Jodhpur kite factory. Note legend “Patang Makers” beside door. Patang is the Hindi word for kite.

a seasonal activity, linked to holidays. They view it as a celebration-cum-social activity. Except for a hiatus from flying during the month long celebration of Ramadan, Muslims on the other hand view flying more as a pastime and hobby, and they regularly turn up on Fridays and Sundays at the Jodhpur kite field to engage in aerial fights, also known as “tangles.” And because they view flying as a hobby and not a religious expression, there are no qualms about participating in the festivals associated with Hindu holidays.

For the kite enthusiast, the high point of the year comes early. January 14 is the most important day for kiting in India. It is the Hindu festival of Makar Sankranti, marking a change of seasons. The holiday is celebrated across India, with the biggest single kite festival occurring in Ahmedabad, in the state of Gujarat. Others are held in Jaipur, in the state of Rajasthan, and elsewhere.

A second major kite holiday is celebrated on Independence Day on August 15. I was told that the flying of kites on that day is seen by “the common man” as the perfect way to celebrate India’s freedom.

Both Hindus and Muslims fly from the rooftop terraces of houses in the periods on opposite sides of Makar Sankranti and Independence Day. Estimates varied, but each season lasts about one month. One thing that people agreed on, however, was that each year the season gets shorter and shorter.

My observations, interviews, and casual discussions with enthusiasts led me to discover that Muslims are more likely than Hindus to fly kites year around. These days the Hindus feel flying is

There are several kite clubs in Jodhpur and they are almost exclusively Muslim. Ashgar's club has a single Hindu member.

Interest in kite flying is declining because of a perceived lack of recreational time. Kite flying takes time, patience, and practice. Television watching and the Internet are two activities that offer more immediate gratification. I think cable television and the Bollywood movie and music industry are quickly developing a shared national culture at the expense of many regional traditions. The presence of cable television into the middle class Indian household has drawn much focus away from flying and other traditional forms of youth recreation. Of the males flying on the public kite field in Jodhpur, the average age is between 30 and 40; the youth are simply not showing much interest in this sport. I think that the use of kites will eventually become similar to the use of fireworks-----an activity that is singularly identified with a holiday. I do not believe the old guard of Muslim men who fly as a hobby will be enough to sustain kiting as a recreational activity through the next generation. I'm afraid that I see the death of traditional kiting as an activity of real importance outside kite festivals and holidays. Its significance as a daily activity is waning rapidly.



Amid reels and other gear, Asghar Belim poses with some of his plastic fighters. He is one of the largest kite manufacturers in the world.

Ashgar Belim estimates the workers at his three cottage industry kite manufacturing sites produce in excess of 5,000 kites a day, over the course of 300 days per year. Workers labor 10 hours a day, six days a week. Plastic kites now constitute 60 per cent of the production. Plastics are easier to manufacture and demand less skilled employees. Ashgar has up to 16 workers, including members of his family. Employees turning out plastic kites are paid six rupees (13 U.S. cents) per 100 kites, those making paper kites get eight rupees. Ashgar also farms out work to village women who cut and glue paper designs on the sails. He would not reveal what those women are paid.

After much prodding, Ashgar explained some of his accounting. The cost of making kites breaks down as follows: 50 percent for bamboo spars, 20-25 percent for labor, 10 percent for other material (plastic, paper, glue, tape), and 1-5 percent for shipping. The remainder is profit.

Ashgar sells from his places of business in Jodhpur and operates seasonal sales outlets in Mumbai (Bombay) and Ahmedabad. He sells the bulk of his output to retailers across the country.

Interviewing the owners of the half dozen other kite companies in Jodhpur, I found that each manufactures between 500 and 2,000 kites per day. In a declining market, all admitted competition was tight. The famed kite

patang-wallah Babu Khan said that even though he works 12 hours a day he barely keeps his head above water. Aside from Asghar, all of the *patang-wallahs* believe they are the last of the line and that their children will not carry on their business.

The infiltration of plastic kites into the Indian fighter kite market has been both rapid and damaging. Plastic kites are technically inferior to the paper ones, manufacturers told me. Being slick, the plastic kites allow air to run over them easily. Paper kites, on the other hand, are more abrasive and catch the wind better, so they fly higher. Unlike the tail-less paper kites, plastic models require four-inch tails for stability in flight.

Despite their technical inadequacies, both dealers and competitive fliers have a variety of answers as to why the plastic *patangs* are so popular. Some speculated that it is because of the common belief that because plastic is the product of technology and engineering it is therefore superior to paper. Plastic is new and colorful and is associated with industry; as weird as this might sound, the plastic is seen as novel. There are some advantages to the plastic however. Plastic kites are more durable, and thus can be flown longer; in that way they really are more economical.



Using a homemade paper shredder, a worker cuts tails.

A similar threat to the good order of traditional kiting is posed by plastic reels. They mount a direct attack on traditional manufacturing practices. Being more durable, they curb the market for replacements. But as with plastic kites, the dealers sell the plastic reels because the market is highly competitive and they feel they have to bow to its pressures.

The employment of children is not an uncommon practice in India. The kite industry is no exception. I visited Asghar's plastics factory and found school age boys operating a machine that cut plastic. A girl sorted sheets and counted pieces while her mother made tails in a modified manual paper shredder. Asghar said the boys attended school and worked before and after their classes. He did not mention the girl and I made no further inquiry into the subject.

Five thousand kites per day is a lot of kites! And with some half dozen other Jodhpur businesses producing a total of perhaps 6,000 kites per day, one would think the local market would be flooded. Surprisingly, there is no surplus. Jodhpur makers dispose of their production by direct sales, storage against festival seasons to come, and consignment to retailers across the country.

Ashgar and I figured that although there has been an increase in the number of kites sold per year since he was a boy, that growth has been far outpaced by India's population boom. The population of India has now topped one billion. Even so, all of the people I talked with were surprised that kites sell as well as they do in off-season months.

In an attempt to explain this mysterious sale of kites, Ashgar told me a story:

“When I was a boy, I flew kites whenever I could. It was the business of my father, of course, and it was my business too. I was an adroit flier but I still lost many kites. And there would be kites that I never saw fall to the ground. The line would be cut and the kite would be lost, but it wouldn’t fall to the ground. The kite would continue to travel with the wind, further and further, until it was out of sight. I asked my mother where the kites went and she said God took them. And I laugh, but now when these kites are being bought even though I do not know who flies them, I think maybe God is still taking my kites.”

In recent years, the kite business has received a lukewarm shot in the arm from the tourist industry. International kite festivals at Ahmedabad and in Rajasthan and elsewhere bring international attention, generate some limited revenue for local manufacturers, but are more about promoting tourism than anything else. Several vacation and tourism companies now advertise the kite festivals. What I see as the problem here is that these festivals do not really nourish the kite industry for Indians. Instead of promoting and preserving a dying traditional culture, the festivals feed off of that sense of authenticity, giving the revenue to tourism. If there is a genuine interest in preserving kiting as a form of recreation in India, the focus must be on the next generation of Indian children. While I have not been to one of these kite festivals I have read much of the literature associated with them, as well as the magazine reviews of the festivals. I am skeptical of what, if any, lasting good these festivals bring to the local manufacturers.

I had a wonderful time in India and I have learned to love kites. But I worry about their future. I too worry about the small fish of the Indian kite industry. Business competition, shrinking interest in recreational kiting, the increasing use of plastics---all these elements hurt the smaller companies. And if the children of this generation do not start looking to kites as an activity to participate in outside of the kite seasons, recreational flying as it is talked of so fondly by today’s adults will die a quiet death. I regret that I have no solution to offer. I just hope I am proven wrong.

Peace Fly in India

Hundreds of children, some of them homeless street children, flew kites in a Mumbai (Bombay) park recently as a gesture toward peace, harmony, and religious tolerance in India. The street children had made and adorned their own kites at a workshop conducted by Babu Khan of Rajasthan, a noted kitemaker who has made “lakhs”-- --hundreds of thousands---of kites in his lifetime.

Ajay Prakash, who organizes the annual Rajasthan kite festival which over the years has introduced many dozens of Westerners both to the challenges of Indian kite fighting and the immense charms of the host country, organized the fly as a function of the Nomad Heritage Trust. Prakash runs Nomad Travel, of Bombay, sponsor of the foundation. As he phrases it, “In the sky there are no borders to divide people. It is a free place where people can let their souls soar with their kites.”

Flying her little paper dream was Ashwini Pardesi, 14, who added a message to the sail: “*Hamein shanty se rehana chahiye...jhagda nahin karna chahiye*”----“We should live in peace. Not fight.” This was a response to religious rioting earlier elsewhere in the country. Babu Khan explained his own long trip from Jaipur to Bombay with the words: “*Shanti aur ekta banae rahni chahiye*”----“Peace should prevail, hence we have come.”

In addition to its dedication to harmony through kiting, the Nomad Trust has as a major goal preserving all things uniquely Indian, which the national style of kite fighting using cutting line clearly is. Another long term goal is the establishment of an interactive museum of kiting.