

## ON OTHER FRONTS

# Indian tycoon runs his idea up the flagpole

*Mr. Jindal boasts the biggest banners in a country not used to waving them; decade-long constitutional lawsuit*

BY AMOL SHARMA

KURUKSHETRA, India—Indian steel tycoon Naveen Jindal is on a mission to get more of his countrymen to fly the national flag. He's trying to set an example for the masses by erecting a series of 63-meter poles around the country, topped by flags the size of tennis courts.

The 40-year-old industrialist fought a decade-long court battle to make it legal for ordinary Indian citizens to display the flag throughout the year, rather than just on national holidays. The Supreme Court ruled in his favor in 2004.

Since then, Mr. Jindal, a member of Parliament who controls part of the giant Jindal family steel and power business, has noticed that most Indians aren't taking advantage of their freedom to wave the Tricolor—as the flag is known for its saffron, green and white stripes.

He hopes his flagpoles, the tallest in India, will be an inspiration. They weigh 12.5 tons and are designed to hoist flags measuring nearly 325 square meters. Each installation costs about \$87,000.

Five giant flagpoles are already up here in Mr. Jindal's home state of Haryana in northern India. More are coming soon around the country, from Orissa in the east to Tamil Nadu in the south to Delhi in the north and Mumbai in the west.

"It's my dream that every big city in India has these monumental flags," Mr. Jindal said.

These won't be the tallest free-standing flagpoles in the world. That honor goes to Ashgabat, Turkmenistan, and its 133-meter installa-

tion. Indians are fervently patriotic, but for decades the country had regulations that made displaying the flag a formal activity reserved for official government functions.

But Mr. Jindal says his structures are tall enough to make a statement: "When a person displays the national flag, one rises above one's political affiliations, one's religious affiliations, one's caste, one's region, and just shows that they are proud Indians," he said.

Mr. Jindal took interest in the issue as an M.B.A. student at the University of Texas at Dallas in the early 1990s. There, he noticed the much more open flag etiquette in America, where people hoist flags on their front porches and the Stars and Stripes are on bandanas, bikinis and boxer shorts.

When he returned home after graduating, Mr. Jindal took over one of the family's steel factories in central India and put up a flag on the premises. Local officials told him that wasn't allowed, and, eventually, the district commissioner ordered that the flag be taken down.

Mr. Jindal, at the age of 25, filed a constitutional lawsuit in 1995, to overturn the Indian flag regulations on free-speech grounds. The Supreme Court issued a final ruling in 2004 that flag-displaying is a fundamental right of all Indians.

The legal victory burnished Mr. Jindal's political credentials just as he was seeking office. He was elected to the lower house of Parliament in 2004 as a member of the Congress Party. He has other interests, including skeet shooting and polo, but flags remain his primary obsession. To boost flag-waving, Mr.



Steel tycoon Naveen Jindal wants India to fly more flags. Above, a 63-meter-high flagpole in Kurukshetra.

Jindal formed the nonprofit Flag Foundation of India, which hands out flags and flag-emblazoned paraphernalia like wrist bands. The group is developing a print and TV ad campaign to promote the flag.

Here at Kurukshetra, a region 160 kilometers north of Delhi that's rich in Hindu heritage, the giant flagpole is surrounded by a holy water tank that worshippers believe is the cradle of Indian civilization.

"It's the first time in my life I've seen a flag this big," said Gautam Duklan, a 36-year-old tourist from Delhi. "I feel proud for my country."

One reason for the lack of flag-waving is that there aren't many places to buy an Indian flag.

In Delhi, the only official flag retailer is a store in the center of the

city best known for *khadi*, or home-spun cotton clothing. Mr. Jindal gets many of his flags—including the gigantic ones—from The Flag Corp., a manufacturer in Mumbai. Owner Gyan Shah says he sells about 1,000 big Indian flags a year and 9,000 small ones for cars and table tops.

The other major issue, Mr. Jindal and his associates say, is continuing confusion about regulations governing flags. In India, anyone who shows disrespect to the flag can go to prison for as long as three years. Among the restrictions: the flag can't touch the ground; can't be dipped in anything; can't be a holding receptacle for anything except flower petals.

Mr. Jindal helped push through a 2005 change that allowed the flag

on T-shirts and sporting equipment.

For the giant flagpoles, Mr. Jindal obtained permission last December from India's Home Ministry to keep the big flags hoisted around the clock on the condition that they stay well-lit. Before that change, he would have had to bring the flags down at sunset and put them back up at sunrise. He says financial aid would help, too. "To say governments have come forward to sponsor, to put up monumental flagpoles—not yet," he says.

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