

## Lhadar: Flags of the Gods

The *lhadar* (ལྷ་དར་) flag is a special flag hoisted at the entrance of important establishments in Bhutan. Literally known as the flag of gods, it is a tall flag measuring some 50 meters with a white cloth on it. It marks an important institution, establishment or household. The *lhadar* marks the status of the house and only buildings containing the sixteen volume sacred scriptures on the *Perfection of Wisdom* are entitled to hoist a *lhadar* at their entrances.

The flag pole is generally a tall slender tree. After felling the tree, the branches are neatly cut off and the bark is removed from the trunk. The tip of the tree is cut off and the pole dragged out of the forests. Men from a community often work together to transport the flag pole. The long and heavy pole is put on wooden wheel and pulled using different words of exhortation.

Once the flag has reached the destination, a white cloth is attached to it. Smaller pieces of yellow, green, white, red and blue cloth are attached to the main white cloth. The five colours represent the five elements and the five wisdoms of the Buddhas. While the smaller rectangular pieces of coloured cloth are sewn to the main white cloth horizontally, the main white cloth is stuck to the flag pole vertically. One end of the white cloth is folded to give strength and wooden pins are hammered into the flag pole through the cloth. The cloth is attached from about two metres above the ground and up to about one metre before the tip of the pole. The top part of the flag is adorned with a wooden plate which represents the wheel of dharma. Above the wheel is a wooden design of a lotus seat, sun disk, crescent moon and the flaming wisdom sword. This is often painted in different colours. However, the *lhadar* poles near important establishments have a full victory banner made of bronze or copper and plated with golden colour, in place of the wooden designs.

The flag is hoisted at the entrance of the establishment at a distance of about 50-100 yards so that it does not hit the house if it fell. A deep hole is dug at the spot to place the foot of the pole, and stones are piled around it to strengthen it. The cloth on the flag is changed annually and the pole is also replaced if it is not in acceptable condition. The existent pole would often be reused for a few years by cutting of the bottom end which has decayed. Flag poles in front of

some dzongs are required to be changed every year. An exceptional case was the flag pole of Wangdiphodrang Dzong, which the people of Shar must fetch as a part of their taxes. The flag pole was used in Wangdiphodrang for one year and then carried upstream using the river to Punakha dzong, where it is used for another year. In the third year, the flag pole was carried uphill to Talo monastery where it was hoisted.

On the day of the hoisting, the flag pole and the cloth are cleansed of impurities by performing the *lhasang* and *thrüsöl* rituals. Huge billows of smoke are created near the flag spot to fumigate and purify the spot and the flag, while the officiating priests says the prayers. Then, the priest performs the ablution ritual of *thrüsöl* before the flag is consecrated with the mantra of consecration and dependent origination. Grains of rice are thrown towards the flag as the priest supplicates the enlightened forces to reside in the flag as long as the materials last.

Groups of men and women slowly erect the tall flag using wooden crosses called *om* and strong ropes. Some form groups to pull the rope while others give support using the crosses. Once the flag is properly erected, there would be often a formal ceremony for auspiciousness with many drinks and snacks. Today, the wooden flag pole is being replaced by strong steel or aluminum poles which need not be replaced annually. Pulley systems with ropes are also used to replace the cloth without having to bring down the pole or climb it.

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