

The Unity of India

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India: One Nation or Many Nationalities? Ancient Sources and Modern Analysis

[p.1>] This article¹ is an attempt to explore the idea of an India – to see whether the idea is meaningful, and if so, to trace the birth and the evolution of the idea. Was this concept indigenous to India? Was it a bequest by outsiders, or invaders, or colonizers? Chronologies are rarely given – the reader can pick her/his favorite dates for the various *Purānas* and epics; it should not matter to the conclusions we have drawn.

An English authority, Sir John Strachey, had this to say about India:

... this is the first and most essential thing to learn about India – that there is not and never was an India or even any country of India, possessing according to European ideas, any sort of unity, physical, political ...²

His was not an isolated opinion. Reginald Craddock, Home Minister of the Government of India under Hardinge and Chelmsford, in *The dilemma in India* (1929) denied the existence of an Indian nation:

An Indian Nation, if such be possible, has to be created before it can exist. It never existed in the past, and it does not exist now. ... There is no word for 'Indian' in any vernacular tongue; there is not even any word for 'India'. Nor is there any reason why there should be an Indian Nation. The bond or union among the races to be found there is that they have for the last

¹ This article appeared in the journal *History Today*, (Journal of the Indian History and Culture Society, New Delhi, No. 7, 2006-07, pp. 1-11) under the title India: One Nation or Many Nationalities? Ancient Sources and Modern Analysis.

² Quoted in *The Fundamental Unity of India (From Hindu sources)*, Radhakumud Mookerji, Longmans, Green and Co. 1914, pp. 5-6.

century and a half been governed in common by a Foreign Power.³

P.C. Bobb sums up Craddock's views nicely:

According to Craddock, India was merely, like Europe, a subcontinent within the vast single continent of Europe and Asia, whose peoples had "roamed over the whole" in prehistoric times. Down the centuries nationalities had become localized, until Europe and India, for example, each contained well over twenty separate countries, divided by race and language. India looked like one country only if seen from the outside, from ignorance or distance.⁴

On account of its cultural diversity and lack of political unity India has often invited comparison with Europe. Also the boundaries of India have changed very often. The present boundaries of India do not include all the regions that have been part of 'Classical India' at some time or another in history, and doubtless, the nation-state of India as we see it today is a very recent political entity. Also the word *India* is not to be found in the modern languages of India, suggesting (at first sight) that 'India' is a latter-day conception.

If 'India' is not a word native to India, the etymology of its name would have a special interest and would carry implications of its own. One explanation is provided by the renowned Islamic scholar, Mawlana Syed Sulaiman [[1-2](#)] Nadwi, who develops a variant of a widespread idea about the origin of the name *Hind*:

Before the advent of the Muslims, there was no single name for the country as a whole. Every province had its own name, or rather a state was known by the name of its capital.

³ Quoted in P.G. Bobb, *Muslim Identity and Separatism in India: The Significance of M.A. Ansari, Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, Volume LIV, Part I, 1991, pp. 116-117.*

⁴ Ibid.

When the Persians conquered a province of this country, they gave the name 'Hindu' to the river, which is now known as Indus, and which was called Mehran, by the Arabs. In the old Persian and also in Sanskrit, the letters 's' and 'h' often interchange. There are many instances of this. Hence Sindh became in Persian Hindhu, and the word 'Hind' derived from Hindhu, came to be applied to the whole country. The Arabs, however, who were acquainted with other parts of the country, restricted the word 'Sind' to a particular province, while applying the word 'Hind' to other parts of the country as well. Soon this country came to be known by this name in distant parts of the world. The Western nations dropped the 'h' and called the country Ind or India. All over the world, now, this country is called by this name or by any one [sic] of its many variants.⁵

A more nuanced account is given by the historian, André Wink, writing about the fashioning of India from whatever geographical, cultural and human materials were present in the region now known as India:

We will see that the Muslims first defined India as a civilization, set it apart conceptually, and drew its boundaries. The early Muslim view of India includes, to be sure, a close parallel to the Western *Mirabilia Indiae* in the accounts of the "aja'ib al-Hind". It also includes a number of stereotypes which were already familiar to the ancient Greeks: of India as a land of self-absorbed philosophers, high learning, "wisdom", the belief in metempsychosis, of sacred cows, elephants, and, again, great wealth. The Arab geographers are perhaps uniquely obsessed with Indian idolatry and polytheism, "in which they differ totally from the Muslims". But the Arabs, in contrast to the medieval Christians, developed their conception of India in direct and

⁵ Mawlana Syed Sulaiman Nadwi, *Indo-Arab Relations (An English Rendering of Arab O' Hind Ke Ta'alluqat)* By (Translated by Prof. M. Salahuddin), The Institute of Indo-Middle East Cultural Studies, Hyderabad, India, p. 8.

prolonged contact with it. In a political-geographical sense, “India” or al-Hind, throughout the medieval period, was an Arab or Muslim conception. The Arabs, like the Greeks, adopted a pre-existing Persian term, but they were the first to extend its application to the entire Indianized region from Sind and Makran to the Indonesian Archipelago and mainland Southeast Asia. It therefore appears to us as if the Indians or Hindus acquired a collective identity in interaction with Islam.⁶

According to this view, the idea of an India or of the Hindus itself emerged in interaction with Islam. The Arabs must have called a vast land al-*Hind* as a shorthand term, just as a modern textbook of geography might club diverse nations under the umbrella term Middle East. The term *India* could be similar to the term Sudan. It was the Arabs who named a vast tract of land (without delimiting it exactly) as *Bilād al-sūdān* – “land of the blacks”. The various peoples of that region did not refer to themselves as ‘Sudanese’ until modern times. Yet the alert reader who reads the excerpt given above would surely notice that the concept of an *Indianized region* stretching from Makran (Baluchistan) to Indonesia has somehow wriggled its way into a discourse which would deny (*a priori*) the existence of an India. A question arises immediately: What was it about the region from Sind to Indonesia that merits the term *Indianized*, which caused the Arabs to call this region collectively as al-Hind? A partial answer to this question can be formulated by quoting what Vincent Smith, an authority on early India had said: “India, encircled as she is by seas and mountains, is indisputably a geographical unit, and as such is rightly designated by one name.”

But was this unity only a geographical phenomenon? Or did it begin as a geographical accident, and then acquire cultural, linguistic and ethnic overtones? Let us postpone that discussion briefly, and go back to Wink’s statement: “We will see that the Muslims first defined India as a civilization, set it apart conceptually, and drew its boundaries.” Let us clarify whether:

⁶ Andre Wink, *Al-Hind: The Making of the Indo-Islamic World*, Oxford University Press, 1990, Pp. 4-5

1. the definition or conception of India is a Muslim (or generally Arab/West Asian) invention.
2. the name India/Hindu/Ind is an Arab (or Greek or Persian) coinage.

As is clear from several of the quotes given above, the fact that the word India is ostensibly of foreign origin is used to insinuate that the very idea of an India is a contribution by outsiders. But the argument is too hasty. To see this, it may be useful to make a few preliminary remarks about country-names.

First of all, there are many countries with names of foreign origin. Consider, for example, the case of France. The French people are descendants of the ancient Gaulish people, who spoke languages of the Celtic family. The Gauls were conquered by Rome. When Rome was itself taken over by Germanic peoples, Gaul came under the influence of the Germanic Franks. The Franks gave their [~~2-3~~] name to France, a country now Latin by language and Celtic by race. However, few would argue that French nationhood somehow depends upon Germany.

Again consider the example of Germany itself. The word is of Latin origin, and the self-appellation Deutschland is hardly known among non-Germans. In the Latin world, Germany is known as *Allemagne* (after the name of a Germanic tribe). This French word is also used by the Arabs and Iranians.

Or take the familiar case of Great Britain. Today the bulk of the population of Britain is English, that is, Germanic by language and culture. But the name *Brittania*, celebrated by English poets, is the original Celtic name.

The French may have popularized the term *Basque*, but the Basques call themselves *Euskera*. *Hayastan* is more widely known by its Latin name *Armenia*. *Sakartvelo* in the Caucasus is known as *Gruzia* to the Russians, and is called *Georgia* by the English-speaking world. *Suomi* is known the world over by its Swedish name *Finland*. *America* is named for an Italian, and *Spain* takes its name from a Carthaginian word for “rabbit”. This list is by no means exhaustive.

It is clear that a people's sense of identity does not crucially depend on the name by which they are widely known. What matters is whether a single term can

adequately capture their ‘identity’. The term itself can be native or foreign. Thus the simple fact that the word India/Hindu/*Ind* is probably not of Indian origin *alone* does not amount to a proof that no notion of *an* India existed, in the indigenous cultures of India.

No matter how the name India originated, it eventually came to mean something quite well-defined, and the use of a single term India is justified, and not merely as a tentative term for an ill-defined idea. Vincent Smith explains:

The most essentially fundamental Indian unity rests upon the fact that the diverse peoples of India have developed a peculiar type of culture or civilization utterly different from any other type in the world. That civilization may be summed up in the term Hinduism. India primarily is a Hindu country, the land of the Brahmans, who have succeeded by means of peaceful penetration, not by the sword, in carrying their ideas into every corner of India. Caste, the characteristic Brahman institution, utterly unknown in Burma, Tibet, and other borderlands, dominates the whole of Hindu India, and exercises no small influence over the powerful Muslim minority. Nearly all Hindus reverence Brahmans, and all may be said to venerate the cow. Few deny the authority of the Vedas and other ancient scriptures. Sanskrit everywhere is the sacred language. The great gods, Vishnu and Shiva, are recognized and more or less worshipped in all parts of India. The pious pilgrim, when going the round of the holy places, is equally at home among the snows of Badrinath or on the burning sands of Rama’s Bridge. The seven sacred cities include places in the far south as well as in Hindustan. Similarly, the cult of rivers is common to all Hindus, and all alike share in the affection felt for the tales of the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyana*.

India beyond all doubt possesses a deep underlying fundamental unity, far more profound than that produced either by geographical isolation or by political suzerainty. That unity

transcends the innumerable diversities of blood, colour,
language, dress, manners and sect.⁷

The reader may not agree with all that Vincent Smith says. Caste is not uniquely an Indian institution. It was found among Indo-European peoples like the ancient Persians; it is also found among the Naga tribesfolk, to mention just two examples. However, Hinduism, though it is far from being the sole cultural matrix of all the peoples of India, does provide a framework for thinking about *India*. *India* is meaningful at least to the extent that *Hinduism* can be discussed as a coherent whole.

Indeed, in the *Purānas* and the epics, we find evidence of the existence of an India, an ancient superstructure over the various distinct regions that now make up India. This superstructure was (and is) known as *Bhārata* to the Indians themselves, and as India (or variants like Hind and Hindustan) to outsiders. The oft-repeated quote from the Vishnupurāna says:

Uttaram yat samudrasya himādreścaiva dakṣiṇam
Varṣam tad bhāratam nāma bhāratī yatra santatiḥ

That is, the Vishnupurāna defines *Bhārata* as the land north of the seas, south of the Himalayas, and where the people are called *Bhāratī*. But the *Bhāratī* peoples were not all alike. The fact that they were distinct peoples was also not unknown to the authors of the *Purānas*. That did not deter them from using a blanket term to refer to the peoples of *Bhārata*, for:

Already during the Gupta period this pluralism had become an established feature of life in India and a [3 - 4] defining feature of its Indianness. Already in the *Kūrma Purāna* we find the Hindu thinkers reckoning "with the striking fact that men and women dwelling in India belonged to different communities, worshipped different gods, and practised different rites.

Bhāratesu striyaḥ puṃso

⁷ Vincent Smith, *Oxford History of India*, 3rd Edition, 1958, p. 7.

Nānāvārnāh prakīrtitāh
Nānā devārcane yuktā
*Nānākarmāni kurvate*⁸

The words translated as “dwelling in India” are literally expressed as “among the *Bhāratas*” in the original. Who are the *Bhāratas*? What is the *Bhāratī santatī*? If asked, the linguist Suniti Kumar Chatterji would probably have answered this question with his quote, written in another context:

Sanskrit looms large behind all Indian languages, Aryan and non-Aryan. It is inseparable from Indian history and culture. Sanskrit is India. The progressive Unification of the Indian Peoples into a single Nation can correctly be described as the Sanskritisation of India.⁹

Let us take as a definition of India/*Bhārata* roughly that land where Sanskrit is spoken. What outsiders called Hind was what the locals considered as *Bhārata*. Sanskrit was *the Hindī* language, as far as outsiders were concerned. The earliest translations from Sanskrit to Arabic, carried out in the early days of the Baghdad Caliphate, referred to Sanskrit as *Hindī*.¹⁰ The Persian poet Firdousi Toosi, refers to the language of the *Kalila wa Dimna* (Panchatantra) as *Hendī*. Al-Biruni, who wrote about the Islamic kingdom of Sindh and Mansura (Multan), made a distinction between the vernacular Sindhi language and the learned *Hindī* language (Sanskrit).

⁸ Arvind Sharma, What is *Bhārata*? What is *Bhāratīyatā*? In *The Perennial Tree: Select papers of the International Symposium of India Studies* (Ed. K. Satchidananda Murty, Indian Council for Cultural relations, New Delhi & New Age International (P) Limited Publishers

⁹ Suniti Kumar Chatterji, *India: A Polyglot Nation and its Linguistic Problems vis-à-vis National Integration*, Mahatma Gandhi Memorial Research Centre, Bombay 1973, p. 32.

¹⁰ See for instance, *Pahlavi, Pārsi, Dari: Les Langues de l'Iran d'après Ibn al-Muqaffa'*, by G. Lazard, in *Iran and Islam*, ed., C.E. Bosworth, Edinburgh University Press, 1971. Lazard points out that Ibn al-Muqaffa', who translated the *Kalila wa Dimna* (the Panchatantra fables translated from the Sanskrit) into Arabic, refers to Sanskrit as *al-hindiyya*. The same term is employed by Mas'ūdī (d. 956) in the *Murūj*

Earlier, the Chinese pilgrim Yuan-Chwang had referred to Sanskrit as the language of India.¹¹ Thus, observers familiar with the differences in the colloquial speeches of India, refer to Sanskrit as the 'language of India'.

There are many names for the Sanskrit language, but the only name which can be related to any territory or people is the name *Bhāratī*. The Indian tradition preserves no memory of where the Sanskrit language originated. Unlike the Latin world, which remembers that the well-springs of the Latin language lie in the Italian peninsula, the Indic world has no such regional territorial word for its classical language. This would suggest that the Indic civilization has developed an organic unity, and if at all it was united by conquest in some remote period in history, that is now long forgotten. *Bhāratī* now belongs to all *Bhārata*.

In the tenth century, when arguably no Western Orientalist had set foot in India, Al-Biruni would write:

The middle of India is the country round Kanoj (Kanauj), which they call *Madhyadeśa*, i.e. the middle of the realms. It is the middle or centre from a geographical point of view, in so far as it lies half way between the sea and the mountains, in the midst between the hot and cold provinces, and also between the eastern and western frontiers of India. But it is a political centre too, because in former times it was the residence of their most famous heroes and kings.¹²

Since Al-Biruni clearly says that the *Madhyadeśa* halfway between the sea and the mountains, we can see that by his time, *Madhyadeśa* did not refer only to

al-dhahab (Meadows of Gold) when listing works translated into Arabic from various foreign languages.

¹¹ For instance, Yuan-Chwang notes that the language of the Buddhist scriptures in Kucha was "the language of India." (Thomas Watters, *On Yuan Chwang's Travels In India 629-645 AD*, (Edited by T.W. Rhys Davids, & S.W. Bushell, AMS Press, 1971, New York), p. 60)

¹² *Alberuni's India* (translated by Edward Sachau), Abridged Edition (edited by Ainslee T. Embree) (W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. New York, 1971), p. 198.

the middle of the Indo-Gangetic plain¹³, but to the middle of the whole of India, including the southern peninsula. If there is a concept of 'middle country' there must also be an awareness of the region that makes up its periphery. In fact, without an awareness of the *whole*, a *part* cannot be identified as such. Those who referred to their homeland as *Madhyadeśa* would also have a geographical awareness of the rest of the country whose central part was *Madhyadeśa*. It is a modern accident that the middle country is now called Uttar Pradesh (Northern State) in post-partition India. Now, al-Biruni was only reporting about the idea of a middle country, and peripheral regions; he did not think up this notion himself. (Though it is possible that Al-Biruni had accompanied his master Mahmud Ghaznavi in his campaigns, he could not possibly have visited South India.¹⁴) The people who conceived of *an* India were indigenous Indians who

had a system of dividing the country into five zones; and for an ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and even political-historical study of India that classification is very useful. The five zones are: Madhyadesha (the Middle Country), Purvadesha (the east), Dakṣiṇapatha (the South), Aparanta or Pratiçya (the West), and Uttarapatha or Udīçya (the North). We find them explained in the *Dharma-Śāstras*, in the Buddhist *Vinaya*,¹⁵ and in the *Bhuvanakośha* or gazetteer section of the *Puranas*. The provincial distribution of the Maurya empire conformed to these zones, and all the *digvijayas* described by our classical poets are arranged on this pattern.

The five zones are called the five Indies by the Chinese pilgrim Yuan Chwang (c. AD 640), and five *sthalas* by Rajashekhara (c. AD 900). In later periods, whenever there were

¹³ The Amarakośa, for instance, regards Āryavarta to be the sacred land between the Vindhya and the Himalayas (*āryavartah punyabhūmir madhyam vindhya-himālayayoh*). But by Al-Biruni's time, the centrality of *Madhyadeśa* to a larger geographical region (*Bhārata*) was already accepted.

¹⁴ Alberuni's India, (translated by E. Sachau), ed. Ainslee Embree, 1971, page ix.

regional States in India maintaining a balance of [<4 - 5>] power for a sufficiently long time, they too generally conformed to them.¹⁶

In the two epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, the various regions of an India are seen to be linked by a common culture and awareness. Al-Biruni, writing about India from a place west of the Indus, is already aware of the centrality of Vasudeva and Rāma to the Indian tradition. All over India we find local versions of the Rāmayana and the Mahābhārata. They may disagree on the details, but not on the essentials. Even the regional variants of the epics show an awareness of the 'whole' and not merely of the region they were composed in. The 'Great' tradition of the Sanskrit epics is mirrored in the 'little' traditions, which are local in their form and yet global in their scope. The detailed geography of India, as reflected in the epics, will be saved for another article. Here let us be content with a single quote:

Besides this intimate knowledge of the parts, the Mahabharata presents a conception of the whole of India as a geographical unit in the famous passage in the Bhīṣmaparva where the shape of India is described as an equilateral triangle, divided into four smaller equal triangles, the apex of which is Cape Comorin and the base formed by the line of the Himalaya mountains. As remarked by Cunningham [*Ancient Geography of India*, p. 5], "the shape corresponds very well with the general form of the country, if we extend the limits of India to Ghazni on

15 Third Century BC.

16 Jay Chandra Vidyalankar, Regional Structure of India in Relation to Language and History, in *The Cultural Heritage of India*, Vol. I, 1958, Calcutta, The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture.

Vidyalankar refers the reader to *Kāvya-mīmāṃsā* of Rājaśekhara (Gaekwad's Oriental Series, 1916), p. 93-94.

the north-west and fix the other two points of the triangle at Cape Comorin and Sadiya in Assam.”¹⁷

This does not mean that the Puranic conception of India was static, and always referred exactly to what is now called India. In the words of Subas Rai:

In all Puranas there occurs a particular topic designated as Bhuvankosa, in which are actually discussed the general and the regional geography of the world and India both. ... The shape and bulk of Bharatvarsha is given in various puranas and contemporary literature where it has been described as a half moon, a triangle, a rhomboid or an unequal quadrilateral or like a drawn bow. The Markandeya Purana (57.59) is quite specific about the shape of the country. Its configuration is that of a bow in which the Himalaya is like the stretched string of the bow and the arrow that was placed on it indicates the peninsular area of the south. It is said to extend in a triangular shape with its transverse base in the north. (Vayu Purana 45.81).

The different stages of Bharatvarsha as given in ancient literature represent various stages in the process of extension of the occupied or known areas of the country during the course of history. To say that there are inconsistencies in the Puranas regarding the shape of the country is thus unfair.¹⁸

The modern Sinhalese word for India (the name you would find in colloquial parlance) is Dhambadiva¹⁹. This word is ultimately to be traced to the Pali name for India, *Jambudīpa* (Sanskrit *Jambudvīpa*), literally the "Rose-apple Island/Continent". The conventional explanation is that it got this name from the shape of the fruit which, like the Indian Sub-Continent, is also roughly pear-shaped/triangular. If this

¹⁷ Mookerji, *op. cit.* pp. 62-63.

¹⁸ Subas Rai, *Aryans through the Ages*, Allahabad, Pandey Pub. House, 1996.

¹⁹ Deshappriya Jayasuriya, private communication.

explanation is true, then a geographical awareness of the whole peninsula (and naturally the Indo-Gangetic plain to which it is attached) must have been inherent in the word. In fact, the Jammu region takes its name from Jambu-dvīpa, and reflects the awareness that the pear-shaped land was attached to the Himalayas at Jammu.

We thus see that the concept of *Bhāratavarsha*, even if considered cosmological to begin with, became firmly geographical, and that in "classical" times. The words *Jambudvīpe Bhāratavarse* chanted by the Brahmin in countless ceremonies could only have strengthened this geographical concept over the centuries.

The idea of a culturally united India – call it a nation, or a civilization -- clearly did not depend upon the Arabs/Muslims. Nor was the idea born out of the labors of the Western Orientalist or the British colonial administrator.

India -- the name which launched a thousand ships, and which has fired the imagination of explorers for ages, predates the emergence of Islam and Western Indology, by centuries, if not millennia.

Where did the term 'Hindu' come from?

Now let us look at the name Hindu/India, and see whether the term is of Muslim origin, even if the concept is not. As mentioned in the quote from André Wink, the Arabs and the Greeks got their term for India from a pre-existing Persian term. However, the most influential Islamic scholar writing on India, Al-Biruni, includes those regions in India which the astronomer Varāhamihira considered as Indian. This strongly suggests that the *Indians* themselves had a notion of an *India* which they conveyed to others.

There may be one more explanation for the origin [[5-6](#)] of the terms Hindu/Hind/India. This is related to the Chinese term for India.

According to D.P. Singhal,

the earliest mention of India in Chinese chronicles occurs in the report of an envoy from the Chinese court to Bactriana. The envoy was taken captive by the Huns, but escaped after ten
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years. He reported that in Bactria he had seen cloth and bamboo poles exported from the Chinese province of Szechwan, which had been transported overland through *Shen-tu* (India) and Afghanistan. This report brought India and other western countries to the notice of the Han Emperor.²⁰

But *Shen-tu* did not remain the only Chinese word for India. In his book on the travels of Yuan-Chwang, Watters has devoted much attention to the vexatious issue of India and its name:

His [i.e. Yuan-Chwang's] statements about the name may be roughly rendered as follows –

We find that different counsels have confused the designations of *T'ien-chu* (India); the old names were *Shên-tu* and *Sien* (or *Hien*)-*tou*; now we must conform to the correct pronunciation and call it *Yin-tu*. The people of *Yin-tu* use local appellations for their respective countries; the various districts having different customs; *adopting a general designation, and one which the people like*, we call the country *Yin-tu* which means the "Moon".²¹

The old Chinese name for India *Shên-tu* had been replaced by *Yin-tu* by the time Yuan-Chwang was visiting, and it has remained that ever since. Let us explore whether this name change has any significance. Was a new name, that is a replacement of the old term, or a new linguistic form of the old name?

It is well-known that the word India in European languages derives from the Greek. The Greeks themselves had learned of Hindu -- the Persian rendering of the Sanskrit word *Sindhu* (meaning the Indus river). There are good linguistic reasons to

²⁰ D.P. Singhal, *India and World Civilization*, Rupa and Co., 1993, p. 292. (For the meaning of the word *Shen-tu*, Singhal says: "The term *Shen-tu* can be philologically related to the word *Sindhu* (Indus). See B. Karlgren, *Analytical Dictionary of Chinese*, No. 869."

believe in this classical explanation for the origin of the term Hindu/Ind, is also enough to account for the Chinese name for India:

In Chinese "hs" (Taiwan) or "x" (PRC), pronounced "sh", often represents a foreign H or KH, in this case the H of Hindu. Initial h in most languages tends to weaken and disappear, so by the time the next Chinese traveller came through Bactria, "Hindu" was pronounced "Indu", just as the Greeks had relayed it.²²

That is, the word 'Shen-tu' in Chinese may just be 'Hindu' transcribed. And when Yuan-Chwang came looking for 'Shen-tu', he heard a word 'Indu/Yin-tu', which had become current in the borderlands of India, and was startled enough to make a note of it. Yuan-Chwang proposed an etymology for the name "Yin-tu". India is said to be named "Yin-tu" because, like the moon, its wise and holy men shed light even after the sun of the Buddha had set. Other Chinese texts, such as the I-ching, do not provide an explanation for the name.

However, to regard the word *Yin-tu* as merely a transcription of the name *Hindu* does not explain why the Chinese chronicles explicitly use the pictogram for the moon to represent India. The word Indu means "moon" in Sanskrit. If Yuan-Chwang had merely chosen the pictogram for "moon" to represent India, it would have been read as the Chinese *yueh*. The pronunciation *Yin-tu* is clearly derived from Sanskrit. This would seem to indicate that there was at least some place called *Indu* (perhaps distinct from *Sindhu*²³), which could have given its name to all India. Could it be that the *Indians* themselves called their country *Indu* after the lunar dynasty, and that its other name *Bhārata* later became universal? Or did the name 'Indu' refer to the crescent shaped Indo-Gangetic plain? Was it the half-moon shaped India of the Puranas (referred to by Subas Rai above)? It is interesting to note that

²¹ Watters, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

²² Koenraad Elst, private communication.

²³ Yuan-Chwang explicitly uses a different word *Sin-tu* to refer to the Indus river and its valley.

'Indu' in Sanskrit could well be changed to 'Hindu' in Old Persian, as is clear from the word-pairs *astā* (Sans.)/*hasht* (O.P)(eight) and *andha* (Sans.) /*hand* (O.P.) (blind).

On the other hand, if Indu was an indigenous term for India, we must be able to explain why it has been so completely washed out from memory, to be replaced by *Bhārata*. Until that is done, the suggestion that Indu is the origin of the word "Hindu" must be regarded as only a speculation.

Watters mentions another name used by Yuan-Chwang for India, viz. -Country of the brahmins (*P'o-lo-mên-kuo*):

Among the various castes and clans of the country the brahmins, he says, were purest and in most esteem. So from their excellent reputation the name "Brahmaṇa-country" had come to be a popular one for India.

Now this is also a foreign designation, and one used by the Chinese especially. It does not seem to have been ever known, or at least current, in India. In Chinese literature we find it employed during the Sui period (AD 589 to 618) but it is rather a literary than a popular designation. In the shortened form Fan kuo, however, the name has long been in common use in all kinds of Chinese literature.

But was the name Brahmaṇa-country a 'foreign' name, as Watters suggests? It is possible. But can we rule out the chance that Yuan-Chwang was translating the [[6-7](#)] name *Brahma-varta*? Here is some geographical information from the Manusmriti:

The land between the rivers Sarasvati and the Drishadvati was called *Brahmavarta*. Beyond it, the land of the five rivers upto the Mathura region was called *Brahmarshi Desha*. The land between *Vināshana* (the place of disappearance of the Sarasvati river in the desert) and Prayaga and Vindhya was called *Madhya Desha* (Central Land). And finally, the land bounded by the mountain of Reva (Narmada), the Eastern Sea (Bay of Bengal)

and the Western Sea is *Arya Desha*. This is the land where the black-skinned deer roam freely.²⁴

Whether Yuan-Chwang recorded a name that was indigenous to India, or a name given to India by outsiders, it is clear that it was not merely a shorthand term for an ill-defined territory which lay across a frontier:

The territory which Yuan-chuang calls *Yin-tu* was mapped off by him, as by others, into five great divisions called respectively North, East, West, Central, and South Yin-tu. The whole territory, he tells us,

was above 90,000 *li* in circuit, with the Snowy Mountains (the Hindu Kush) on the north and the sea on its three other sides. It was politically divided into above seventy kingdoms; the heat of summer was very great, and the land was to a large extent marshy. The northern region was hilly with a brackish soil; the east was a rich fertile plain; the southern division had a luxuriant vegetation; and the west had a soil coarse and gravelly.²⁵

Thus, Yuan-Chwang used the term Yin-tu to apply to the whole of the Indian subcontinent, inclusive of the Indo-Gangetic plain, and the southern peninsula. He can only have written what his informants told him. This means that Yuan-Chwang's Indian informants must have had a geographical conception of the whole of India, even if they were citizens only of, say, Magadha or Kashmira. Also, Yuan-Chwang clearly spoke of 'Indian' lands which were then under Persian rule. That is, Yuan-Chwang could tell that a province was "Indian" even if it happened to be under foreign rule.

²⁴ N.S. Rajaram, *A Hindu View Of The World: Essays in the Intellectual Kshatriya Tradition*, Voice of India, p. 82.

²⁵ Watters, *op. cit.*, pp. 140-141.

Hiuen-Tsang includes Nepal, then a subordinate ally of China, in India. Another of Hiuen-Tsang's Indian kingdoms, Lang-Kie-lo, was subject to Persia.²⁶

It may not be inappropriate to remind ourselves that Yuan-Chwang visited India in the time of Harshavardhana, at least half a century before the Arabs under Muhammad bin Qasim knocked on the gates of India.

So far, we have seen that:

the idea of an India has existed since classical times – since time immemorial, some would say. It has been celebrated in the classical literature of India, even though the name “India” was not used.

the civilizations that came in contact with classical India did perceive the very diverse peoples of the land as somehow “one”

the term “Hindu” has been current among Greeks, Persians, and Chinese quite independently of the Arabs or the Muslims. It is widely believed that the term itself is the creation of foreign peoples (even if the idea is not). However, this belief needs to be reexamined.

The fact that the idea of *an* India is very ancient, and that it predates the arrival of Christianity, Islam, Zoroastrianism and Judaism into India, by no means implies that the followers of these faiths do not belong in India. In 1909, when Hindu-Muslim differences were vitiating the political atmosphere of the country, Sri Aurobindo said of the Indian Muslim that “to him too our Mother (India) has given a permanent place in her bosom”.²⁷ Madan Mohan Malaviya, a Hindu leader, spoke truly when he said that:

Now it is not only Hindus who live in India [Hindustan].
India is not now their land alone. Just as India is the beloved

²⁶ Surendernath Sen, *India Through Chinese Eyes*, K.P. Bagchi & Company, Calcutta, 1956 (Reprinted 1979, University Of Madras), p. 61.

²⁷ *India's Rebirth*, Sri Aurobindo.

birth-place of the Hindus, so it is of the Muslims too. Both these communities live here now, and they will always live here (Malaviya 1962: 24-25).²⁸

The same applies to all the inhabitants of India, regardless of religious belief. Indeed, followers of these faiths have often themselves taken the lead to emphasize their bonds with India, and celebrated their Indianness. Justice Mohamedali Currim Chagla, to name an example, had this to say in his autobiography:

I have always thought that it was India's destiny to remain one country and one nation. One has only to look at a map of Asia to be convinced of this fact. With the Himalayas in the north and the sea in the west, south and east, India stands out as something distinct and apart from other countries that separate it. The Gods in their wisdom wanted India to remain one and undivided. Further, there is an Indianness and an Indian ethos, which has been brought by the communion and intercourse between the many races and the many communities that have lived in this land for centuries. There is a heritage which has devolved on us from our Aryan forefathers. There is an [~~7- 8~~] Indian tradition which overrides all the minor differences which may superficially seem to contradict the unity. Even the Muslim community, which numbers about 60 million, inherits the same tradition and legacy, because more than 90 per cent of the Muslims living in India were converted from Hinduism, which is the primary religion of this country. Hindus and Muslims have lived together as friends and comrades from times immemorial.

²⁸ P.K. Malaviya. 1962. *Malaviyaji Ke Lekh*. Delhi [Quoted in Gyanendra Pandey, *The Appeal of Hindu History*, in *Representing Hinduism: The Construction of Religious Tradition and National Identity*, (eds. Vasudha Dalmia and Heinrich von Stietencron, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 1995).

They participate in one another's festivals and even worship together common Saints in whom they both have faith.²⁹

The notion of *an* India thus has deep roots, and yet its expressions at the surface may change with time. Peoples such as the Buddhists of Ladakh may not be represented in the classical literature of India, in a measure proportional to their stature as one of India's numerous constituents. Yet, they have now taken their place as staunch and patriotic Indians. In the spring of 1953, the Head Lama of Ladakh argued for the complete integration of Ladakh into India. In August 1953 he went as far as to say:

"Plebiscite or no plebiscite, Ladakh has made its choice, and its decision to accede to India is irrevocable."³⁰

The Ladakhis had originally been interested in an arrangement which would have bound them closely with the Tibetans, who are spiritually and ethnically kindred to them. But when Tibet was submerged inside China, the Ladakhis chose to throw in their lot with India. What started as a mere convergence of interests has in time become a strong bond, which has enlarged the scope of term India. The concept of India is now broad enough to embrace all peoples whose homelands are contiguous to India, and who choose to celebrate the notion of an India. We will call this consensus, namely, that there is *an* India which is greater than the sum of its constituent parts, as *Indian nationalism*. The term is being used here, for want of a better term, since India is clearly not a nation in the same way that European states like Italy or France are.

We use the term nationalism to emphasize the element of consensus highlighted by Ernest Renan. Renan regarded nations ultimately as a consensus among people who wish to be included in a nation. East Germany united with West Germany to become one single nation, because a consensus for unity was reached in both countries, and factors which blocked the consummation of this consensus became ineffectual. On

²⁹ Mohamedali Currim Chagla, *Roses in December: An Autobiography* (Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1973, Bombay).

³⁰ Josef Korbel, *Danger in Kashmir*, Princeton University Press, 1954, p. 244.

the other hand, Czechoslovakia split up into two nations because the Czechs and the Slovaks preferred to separate. The fusion and dissolution of nations need not be a difficult process.

The two examples cited above show that nationalism is inherently morally neutral. However, in recent years the very concept of nationalism has come in for much criticism. The term *Indian nationalism*, as defined above or not, has also suffered from the general suspicion towards 'nationalism'. After fighting two World Wars, Europe is weary of nationalism. Scholars all over the world are quick to take up cudgels against the real and imagined excesses of nationalism. The historians of the Middle East, Ephraim and Inari Karsh, have noted the tendency

to view nationalism as the scourge of international relations, the primary source of inter-state conflict and war, a tendency that has gained considerable currency following the end of the Cold War and the bloody wars of dissolution in the former Yugoslavia and several former Soviet Asiatic republics. "From the very beginning the principle of nationalism was almost indissolubly linked, both in theory and practice, with the idea of war," writes the British military historian Michael Howard. "It is hard to think of any nation-state, with the possible exception of Norway, that came into existence before the middle of the twentieth century which was not created, and had its boundaries defined, by wars, by internal violence, or by a combination of the two."³¹

They go on to clarify the matter further, by explaining that there is nothing inherently violent about the desire of groups of people with some things in common – be it language, descent, tradition or history – to live in some clearly demarcated territory that is by consensus regarded as the homeland. However, in the age of nationalism, that is, in the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, most nations were subsumed into a few empires. If nations had to resort to armed

struggles for self-determination, it was because the imperial powers would not grant them this right willingly.

In other words, imperialism rather than nationalism, has constituted the foremost generator of violence in modern world history. For it is the desire to dominate foreign creeds, nations or communities, and to occupy territories well beyond the “ancestral homeland”, that contains the inevitable seeds of violence – not the wish to be allowed to follow an independent path of development. In each of imperialism’s three phases – empire-building, administration, and disintegration – force was the midwife of the historical process as the imperial power vied to assert its authority and maintain its control over perennially hostile populations. True, violence was not the only means of subjugation, as many incentives [<8-9>] were offered for those prepared to be integrated within the imperial order, but it was always there, like a huge sword of Damocles, and was occasionally used with great ferocity as the ultimate penalty for nonsubservience.³²

The naïve criticism of Indian nationalism is thus misplaced. Indian nationalism is not the fruit of any imperialism, at least, not within historical memory. While actions based on the ancient notion of a *cakravartī-rājā* may have imposed a certain unity from above, it has not left behind backlashes in the form of disaffected peoples fighting for deliverance from the scions of King Bharata (who is regarded as the first *cakravartī* or Emperor).

To understand how a land as diverse as India could develop a sense of unity is a subject best understood with a

³¹ Efraim Karsh And Inari Karsh, *Empires Of The Sand: The Struggle For Mastery In The Middle East 1789-1923*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1999. p. 347.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 348.

concrete example from more recent times. This example is taken from the writings of Jared Diamond who describes “the formation of complex societies”, by means of “merger by conquest”. The earliest white settlers found the Zulus divided into little chiefdoms. During the late 1700s there was much fighting between the chiefdoms, as population pressures increased. Attempts at political centralization led to backlashes and reprisals, and prevented the formation of a single state. A chief named Dingiswayo, who gained control of the Mtetwa chiefdom in 1807, was able to extend his power over 30 other chiefdoms. His strategy was to recruit warriors from all villages into mixed regiments. As he conquered other chiefdoms, he did not slaughter his political enemies, but co-opted members of the family of the defeated chieftains as his vassals. Dingiswayo bequeathed a unitary state to his successors, who “strengthened the resulting embryonic Zulu state by expanding its judicial system, policing, and ceremonies.”³³

But Dingiswayo’s methods were hardly a novelty to classical India. The law books of India, such as the *Arthaśāstra*, had dealt with these issues a long time ago and promoted acceptance of diversity. The law-books long counseled the fiery of temper in India to make their peace with the world:

Not only are all these provisions of the various law books humane, they are remarkably wise, as they take into account all the particular and individual aspects, they recognise differences as legitimate. The same attitude prevails in the case of a conquered territory, where the king “should carry out what is agreeable and beneficial to the subjects”, also “what he has promised” (*ASh*, 13.5.3). “For, he who does not keep his promise becomes unworthy of trust ..., also he whose behaviour

³³ Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*, W.W.

is contrary to that of the subjects. Hence he should adopt a similar character, dress, language and behaviour (as the subjects)", *tasmāt samāna shīla veśa bhāsācāratam upagacchet* (ASh, 13.5.6-7). It is even added: "And he should show the same devotion in festivals in honour of deities of the country, festive gatherings and sportive amusements," *desha-devatā-samājotsava-vihāresu ca bhaktim anuvarteta* (ASh, 13.5.8). In this passage concerning "Pacification of the conquered territory" (*labdha-prashamana*), the ASh recommends neither weakness nor hypocrisy – but shrewdly shows consideration for the new subjects' customs, beliefs, and feelings. Many revolts, even in recent years, have taught us how wise Kauṭilya's recommendations are. They are all the more striking when we remember what western attitudes have too often been.³⁴

It is difficult to determine when the idea of an *India* arose in India, but it is clear that it is an ancient phenomenon. A notion comparable to the idea of 'manifest destiny' may never have been explicitly stated. However, such a process has long been at work. As the frontiers of *Bhārata* expanded, newer peoples entered the *Bhārati* fold. An acceptance of diversity made the integration of very different peoples possible. If there were conquests, the conquests have not left behind legacies of blood and vendetta. Already in the days of Kautilya, it was "politically incorrect" to speak ill of other people's *janapadas* (provinces, "nationalities"), and was considered a crime to be punished as libel.³⁵

The India that grew over the centuries developed a non-hegemonic political character as has been long recognized:

Norton & Company, New York, London 1999, pp. 291-292.

34 Colette Caillat, What India Can teach us? In *The Perennial Tree: Select papers of the International Symposium of India Studies* (Ed. K. Satchidananda Murty, Indian Council for Cultural relations, New Delhi & New Age International (P) Limited Publishers), pp. 14-15.

35 *Arthashastra of Kautilya*, Ed. Shama Sastri, Second Edition, Mysore, 1919, pp. 193-94, quoted in Vidyalankar.

India herself has never been seized by the compelling will to bring other nations within her sway. Already in 851 A.D. Suleiman the Merchant comprehended this when he said, "wars waged by the Indian kings are not usually undertaken with a view to possess themselves of the adjoining dominions."³⁶

Over the centuries, the call of the idea of an India has exerted a powerful influence on the peoples who make up India. The Spirit of India came to permeate the diverse lands and peoples that make up India. It is to this Spirit that the poet Rabindranath Tagore pays tribute in the national anthem, whose second stanza reads:

*Aharaha tava ahvāna prachārita, śuni tava udāra vāni,
Hindu-Bauddha-Śikha-jaina-pārasika-musalmāna-khristāni
Purava-pāścima-āse tava singhāsana pāse,
[<9- 10>]
Prema-hāra haya gānthā
Jana gana aikya vidhāyaka jaya he bhārata bhāgya vidhāta
Jaya he, jaya he, jaya he, jaya jaya jaya jaya he!
Day and night your call resounds,
And to the sound of your loving voice,
Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, Jain, Parsi, Muslim and Christian,
Approach your throne from east and west,
And weave for you a garland of love.
Unifier of the peoples, thou, dispenser of India's destiny!
Victory, victory, victory to Thee!*

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³⁶ R.A.Jairazbhoy, *Foreign Influence in Ancient India*, Asia Publishing House, 1963, preface, page v. (Jairazbhoy refers to E. Renaudot: *Ancient accounts of India and*

is possible that I may have unconsciously quoted from his work, without explicitly acknowledging his work in the endnotes.

China by two Mohammedan travellers, 1733, p. 33.)