

Essay

The Early Concept of Bharatavarsha

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Writing on nations and nationalisms has always been a challenging task, precisely due to the tremendous passions that they stir amongst the masses. However, not only has it been challenging, but the concepts of nation and nationalism have been somewhat amorphous too. Thus, in the words of E J Hobsbawm: "The academic literature on nationalism multiplied, but did not advance greatly..."¹. Interestingly enough, this literature too has been capricious. Contradictory positions in the historiography of the nation have made it an extremely turbulent zone, marked by opinions at much odds with each other. The case is no different with the specific historiography on India. It is, however, not our duty here to take sides; for, we believe that no historian is more or less nationalist than the other, and as R.C. Majumdar would tell us, all "historians of all nationalities, when writing the history of their own country" tend to suffer from a "nationalist bias"², and are, therefore, nationalist historians in one way or the other. Our task at hand here is to succinctly present a conceptual understanding of *Bharatavarsha* as it has been understood and outlined by a select number of historians, all of them having a unique understanding of their own. This is a synoptic essay, but by no means an exhaustive one, on what scholars have thought about *Bharatavarsha*, rather than a presentation of our own views on the matter.

It is important, nonetheless, to add a caveat: our aim here is not so much to address nationalist history or historians as conventionally understood, but rather to discuss history and historians of the nation. In other words, the selection of views presented here constitute a catholic and eclectic reading of diverse histories by diverse historians irrespective of their ideological standpoints. In writing about ancient India, the opinions of historians have indeed differed from each other, so much so that they have often been diametrically opposite to each other. We, however, intend to accommodate and present these differing

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interpretations in the hope that instead of supplanting each other, they can supplement each other for a more balanced understanding.

The Mahabharata War

Writing such a synoptic essay is not free from problems, and the first predicament that we stumble upon is how to start a discussion on something as vast as the concept of *Bharatavarsha*. War, it seems might be an appropriate point to start with, and therefore, we can start with the Mahabharata war. The Mahabharata war, which indeed is much invoked in tracing the genesis of a political notion of *Bharatavarsha* or even in depicting a politically dazzling ancient India *per se*, has been a somewhat contested zone, provoking a range of diverse, if not opposing, opinions. For R.C. Majumdar, the great enthusiasm that academics have shown in studying the War, and the tremendous “pertinacity” with which it has come to be theoretically accepted and even practically worked out, all epitomize not simply the veracity of the War, but also its magnitude as something comparable to perhaps the cataclysmic World Wars of the twentieth century.³ Majumdar would further reckon the War as essentially central to the understanding of an ancient India, since it heralded much radical alterations within the very cultural cosmos of early *Bharatavarsha*.

In stark contrast to this, for D.C. Sircar, there was no Bharata war at all.⁴ Sircar thought that the Bharata war was a pure figment of imagination, or at most a petty skirmish between tribes, which simply came to be exaggerated and embellished over centuries by bards and poets, rendering to it ultimately its grandiloquent form, as has been depicted in the epic Mahabharata. Sarkar had provided a couple of justifications for making his point: namely, the absence of any reference to the war in the Vedic literature, as also the tremendous uncertainties over the date of the war even in ancient India. In fact, so convinced was Sircar about the non-occurrence of the Bharata War, that he, much in concurrence with A.B. Keith, found it worth wondering about “the naïve credulity of those who believe in the historicity of the Bharat War in spite of the absence of any mention of it in the Vedas”⁵

For Dilip K. Chakrabarti, though it is important to question the historical veracity of the war, for him, the historian’s true task lies somewhere else.⁶ More than taking sides as to if the war even happened or not, for Chakrabarti, the historian or the archaeologist’s more challenging chore is to incorporate the bits and pieces of truth as reflected in the narrative about the war within the existing scheme of historical knowledge. For, B.D. Chattopadhyaya⁷, the problematic lies yet somewhere else—in determining whether a “one-to-one correlation between archaeology and tradition” is even possible in the first place. In the context of the Mahabharata war, Chattopadhyaya writes that in fact “archaeology can serve as a corrective to the exaggerated accounts of the epics”. But then, it is most certainly

beyond our purview to delve deep into the controversy of whether there was a Mahabharata war or not; instead, what we intend to figure out from such apparently incongruent accounts is the congruent consciousness of a politically redolent *Bharatavarsha*. Indeed, in discussing all these diverse and even opposing takes on the occurrence of the Bharata war, we find a vibrant historiography that attempts to explore the political shades of an ancient *Bharatavarsha*.

The Glorious Space

For R.C. Majumdar, the delineation of the concept of an ancient *Bharatavarsha* is about an enthralling politico-cultural story.⁸ Thus, from 600 B.C. onwards, which he reckons as an age of imperial unity, there were epic developments in India's political history, marked by the rise of gargantuan empires. Multiple actors as the Greeks, the Parthians, the Sakas and the Kushanas all occupied strong positions within the political chessboard of ancient *Bharatavarsha*. The Magadhan empire, the Mauryan empire, the grand conquests achieved through wars, the proselytization drives based on pacifist ideals, the abrupt demise of grand empires—all of these, Majumdar argues, were important chapters in the *Bharatavarsha* story. But then, these momentous political developments were acting as the harbingers of important cultural changes as well. Thus, as Majumdar wrote, "the political unity ushered in by the Mauryas led to a cultural unity which manifested itself through the development of a uniform type of language, literature, art, and religion all over India; and this left a deep impress which the lapse of time has not been able to efface."⁹

Ancient *Bharatavarsha*, for Majumdar, conceptually marked a terrain of free thoughts, religious consolidation (as the religions of Buddhism and Jainism sprang up), the rise of an exuberant literature particularly in classical Sanskrit, the emergence of exquisite artistic traditions, as also the maturity of Indian political thoughts. Majumdar thus conceptualized *Bharatavarsha* as an extremely glorious space. This appears as an exaggeration to some scholars, though it is true that indigenous achievements during this phase were indeed many.

The Geographical Space

Apart from providing political perspectives, Hemchandra Raychaudhuri attempted a spatial/territorial explanation of the ancient *Bharatavarsha* and in course of it, engaged extensively with Puranic literature.¹⁰ The land of India, for Raychaudhuri, is the southernmost Varsha, named Bharata, territorially located between the Himavat and the oceans, as described in the Puranas. He nonetheless adds a qualifier here, that it would be erroneous to equate the entire *Bharatavarsha* with present-day India, since, according

to him, “the term...as used by Puranic cosmographers, embraces much more than India Proper as is apparent from the names of some of its divisions which “extend to the ocean, but are mutually inaccessible”.”¹¹

While tracing the etymological origins of the term '*Bharatavarsha*', Raychaudhuri argues that the term could have been derived from the Puranic king Bharata, generally depicted as the descendant of Priyavrata. But Raychaudhuri states that it seems more credible and believable that *Bharatavarsha* was actually derived from the Bharata tribe, a name that we constantly come across in the Mahabharata epic, the Vedas, the Brahmanas, as also certain Buddhist texts.¹²

Raychaudhuri found a territorial explanation of the ancient concept of *Bharatavarsha* necessary; and thus, he so ardently undertook an epic exposition of its rivers and mountains, valleys and islands, and so on. Foreign treatises as much as archaeological sources (epigraphic and numismatic), geographical texts as much as references to geography in non-geographical texts—Raychaudhuri sifted through all this with utmost interest, so as to get a sound territorial sense of the ancient *Bharatavarsha*.

Networks and Interactions

We now turn our attention to a closer examination of the views of two contemporary stalwarts, Dilip K. Chakrabarti and B.D. Chattopadhyaya, who approach the theme from significantly differing yet extremely important perspectives. Dilip Chakrabarti does not extensively discuss *Bharatavarsha* as a categorical entity; yet, his works offer much in favour of a somewhat comprehensive image of a unified ancient India. Chakrabarti, being more of an empirical archaeologist and relying heavily on precise material culture for framing his opinions has indeed done much in archaeologically depicting an integrated ancient India. Thus, he highlights how, during the Mauryan Empire, particularly under the Asokan reign, India or *Bharatavarsha* (if we can use the terms interchangeably for the time being) came to be rather extensively interconnected on political as also cultural planes. This connectedness became particularly explicit through the Asokan inscriptions strewn across the length and breadth of the colossal Indian territorial landmass.¹³

Ancient *Bharatavarsha* can be explored in the light of increasing interactions amongst its people. Chakrabarti makes such a case while discussing ancient India's geopolitical orbits. His discussion is extremely interesting in the sense that, while he conceptualises ancient India in quite political terms, yet he does not. While exploring the interactional dynamics within the ancient Indian subcontinent, he argues that these interactional patterns can be best explained through a study of various political components

such as dynasties and kingdoms; however, an understanding of ancient *Bharatavarsha* must not be framed along the lines of modern India, which is defined politically. The aim is not “to bolster the claim of any arbitrarily drawn line on the map of India as a significant boundary-marker in her cultural or political history.”¹⁴

In discussing the trade ties or the commercial connections forged across ancient India at large and eastern India in particular, Chakrabarti makes us cognizant of *Bharatavarsha* as an interactional and collaborative space.¹⁵ The fact that exchange systems are evocative of increased interactions, has been famously pointed out by scholars like Timothy G. Baugh and Jonathan E. Ericson¹⁶. In the context of ancient India too, one can think of a similar situation. Procurement of raw materials and production or supply of commodities can indeed be postulated as propelling interactions within an ancient India, which might have led to augmented encounters in other avenues as well, particularly political and religious. This could have played a role in fostering a sense of collectivity and the conception of an ancient integrative *Bharatavarsha*.

Beyond Geography

On the other hand, we have B D Chattopadhyaya¹⁷, who, like Raychaudhuri, also engages with the Puranic literature for figuring out patterns of depicting *Bharatavarsha*, though in a way that is very different from Raychaudhuri’s approach. According to Chattopadhyaya, for the compilers of these ancient texts, geographical accuracy was not much of a concern but they were rather interested in sketching a broader and more of a conceptual image of *Bharatavarsha*—one that was in harmony with the particular cosmographic structure in which it was inscribed. Furthermore, genealogical details came to play a major role in the depiction of ancient *Bharatavarsha*, which somewhat bore resemblance to the larger picture of the universe. But, in saying all this, what is essentially implied is that *Bharatavarsha* as a conceptual category transcended a geographical notion, and rather came to epitomize an eternally mutating space.

The notion of *Bharatavarsha*, according to Chattopadhyaya was more centred on the various *janapadas* or those “spatio-social components of it”, rather than any robust sense of the nation. The ancient understanding of *Bharatavarsha*, thus, according to Chattopadhyaya, had almost nothing to do with the modern sense of India, or the nationalistic urge associated with it. *Bharatavarsha* was rather more of a geographically unfrozen space, which according to Chattopadhyaya, was “part of a cosmography in which, at least in the Puranic cosmography and Puranic world-scape (if one may use the term), narration of creation and royal genealogy (of which Bharata genealogy is a segment) are important parts”¹⁸.

Conclusion: Reconciling Extreme Perspectives

In conclusion, it may be mentioned that Chattopadhyaya recommends, and quite rightly so, an active engagement with diverse patterns of recent historiography, which he classifies into three types.³⁹ Of these, two are extreme perspectives: one that identifies a rather robust sense of collective if not national unity in a distant *Bharatavarsha*, and hence projects the concept of *Bharatavarsha* as synonymous with a burgeoning sense of the nation; and the other, which denies any sense of India as ensconced in *Bharatavarsha*, since this school “equates the ‘objective reality of India’ with the reality of Indian nationalism which is modern”. But then, there has been a third way of history writing as well, which chooses to project *Bharatavarsha* not simply as a geographical entity, but rather as one marked by a precise set of cultural and spiritual ideas and institutions since the very ancient times perhaps. As mentioned at the outset, we hope that the divergent views presented above will be looked upon as supplementing rather than supplanting each other. That way, it is possible to arrive at an understanding of the early concept of *Bharatavarsha* that can benefit from the two equally true standpoints of geographical and cultural spaces respectively.

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