

Reinterpreting the notion of the Bharatvarsha

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Abstract—This paper is attempted to examine the origin of the idea of Bharatavarsha-whether this idea originated in the early historic times [Rigvedic period]/or in the early medieval or medieval period or whether the ‘idea of India is a colonial construct’. In this paper a panoply of not only literary/Brahmanic/Puranic sources but also archaeological sources from across the country even the extreme south or the Jambudvip have been utilized. Whether the idea of India represented the idea of a ‘Hindu Sacred Space’ or is a colonial construct of a mere ‘Geographical entity/ unit’ where the civilizational traits were in the evolutionary stage/ primordial stage.

Keywords: Hindu sacred space, incomprehensible spectacle, Puranic cosmography, Brahmanical discourse, Chakkavatti, ethno-civilizational concept, geographical entity, primordial stage.

I. INTRODUCTION AND BODY TEXT

The question of history of India or Bharatvarsha is actually linked with the notion/concept of the space / geography of India even after the partition in 1947. Because it is based on a certain assumption. For example- the identity of the concept of India with the concept of Bharatvarsha has been a major assumption. The notion of identity of Bharatvarsha ¹ in history writing was established during the 19th century. The idea of India or Bharatvarsha was even conceived in regional history during the colonial period. A researcher of Puranic cosmography expresses the notion of space /geography of India in the following words: ‘the southernmost varsa, Bharata, lying between the Himavant and the sea, is, of course, India’.² Furthermore, Aiyar ventures the opinion that the Aryans had developed the ideas of a nationality and of a stable state long before reaching India.[V.V.S. Aiyer. A Picture of ancient Indian society-I, Hindustan Review XXX-II, 1915, PP. 313-319]. Pannikar apparently hold to the same thesis. He quotes with approbation of Mookerjee’s conception of India as a political unity since earliest times. He argues that the unity movement of India today is a part of process which began long before Britain heard of. Political unity of India was achieved in 325BCE. It persisted during the Gupta dynasty at the time of Tartar’s invasion and reappeared under the Maharatta in the form of great Hindu revival. B. S. Rao by corroborating Panniker, asserts that India was a nation before the British rule and always had a national self- consciousness rooted in her religion. Similarly, Har Vilas Sarada in his work ‘Hindu superiority: an attempt to determine the position of the Hindu race in the scale of nation,’ eulogizes that the ancient Hindus were the great nation that has yet flourished on the earth.

The understanding and acceptance of the identity of India and Bharatavarsha was further formalized in the solemn declaration of our constitution which reads ‘India that is Bharat shall be a Union of States’³.However, the differences enshrined in the term Bharatavarsha is connected with its historiography. On this pretext the idea of history of India has to be explored.

There are different approaches to the concept of India or Bharatavarsha. The major positions found on the notion of Bharatavarsha in recent writings are:-

A] Colonial construct of India: this construct delineates India as ‘a territorial, governable unit, separable for administrative purposes from other spaces, insists on the idea of India/Bharatavarsha as an expression of national unity present in the past. Monographs such as the ‘Fundamental unity of India’⁴ forcefully projected the idea of unity. In this idea ‘unity is a fundamental quality of the country which could be located in the concept of Indian geography, pilgrimage centers, expression of urge for political unity through conquests or colonization. The notion of the existence of our unified country has permeated through the writings on the history of India as an unquestionable unit. The notion of Bharatavarsha or India is present in a recent work on the concept of India.’⁵

The identification of a collective sensitivity usually termed as nationalism. This sensitivity is not a given quality of a particular space. This sensitivity is, in fact, historically acquired which may undergo mutations. So, geographically and culturally, if not politically and ethnically, the Bharati were a notion.

Another essay ‘Imaginary institutions of India’⁶ expresses an opposite position which were published in the Subaltern Studies Series’ which describes that the idea of India was historically instituted by the nationalist imagination of the 19th century. The approach in this essay itself involves certain implicit assumptions which are open to questioning:-

A] The essential equation that it posits between nationalism as historical reality and the idea of India

B] Invention out of nothingness without any pre-existing concepts or notions which may have been ‘objective reality of a different kind, not necessarily denoting nationality and

C] Attribution of the 'invention' to the nationalist imagination discarding the possibility of the emergence of the modern notion of India as a colonial space and the relationship with the construction of a particular state and its history. This essay seems to deny the idea of India, it equates the objective reality of India with the reality of Indian nationalism which is modern. This denial seems to be present in C. A. Bayly's 'Empire and Information'⁷ in which the idea of India is seen as an important aspect of emerging national consciousness. Bayly underlines the distinction between European and 'Hindu conceptualization of geography' and in the light of this contrast characterizes Bharatavarsha as corresponding to 'Hindu sacred space.' He elucidates that the 'concept of India is seen as an important aspect of emerging national consciousness and geography as a social science which was very close to the British colonial information system. While Mathew Edney in his work 'The Mapping of India'⁸ opines that it was for the first time, as a massive intellectual campaign to transform a land of incomprehensible spectacle into an empire of knowledgethe geographers created and defined the spatial image of the Company's empire and also its territorial integrity and its basic existence. Edney says that the British represented India as their India. This was British India which comprised what they perceived and governed.

It is also pertinent to raise question of the notion of India during medieval period or the pre-colonial times. In this regard the viewpoints of Irfan Habib is noteworthy who traces the existence of the concept of India not only as a geographical unit but also as representation of a country in which certain special social and religious institutions are present as early as 4th century B.C. separating the country from the others⁹. The geographical and cultural separatedness of India was the basis of Habib's argument, of Al Baruni's comprehension of India as a 'cultural unity' and reinforced by long process of interaction and adjustment, some pre-requirements of nationhood had ...seemingly been achieved by the time the British conquest India began in 1757. India was not only a geographical entity but also a cultural and political unity.

Though the idea of India was historically evolved, the diverse textual sources of early India do not support the idea of Bharatavarsha in a geographical sense. However, the concept of Jana was defined in textual context particularly in the Rig-Veda which also mention the most dominant tribe Bharatas, but it does not describe the word Jana in a territorial context. However, the different Brahmana texts written on the Vedas like Aitareya, Satapatha, Taittiriya Brahmana mention Janapada. The Aitareya Brahmana¹⁰ clearly mentions different 'disi' or directions and their rulers to be anointed from the tribes of Kuru-Panchalas, Vasas and Usinaras e.g.

Area/Direction	Titles of the Rulers
A] North-- Udichayam disi /Vairajya	Virata
This region was ruled by the people, it lacked a king	
B] South: Dakshinashyam disi	Satavanta /Bhoja
In this region federal type of government was there	
C] East: Prachyanam Disi	Rajanah/ Samrat
Monarchical form of government was present in this region	
D] West: Pratichyam Disi /Swarajya	Swarat
This region was ruled by republican form of government	
E] Centre: Madhyadesha	Rajah

In the later Brahmanical discourse, the middle region or the Madhyadesa dominated all the regions.

In fact, the idea of a country which accommodated Janapada appeared for the first time in the context of Jambudweep in an early Buddhist text.¹¹

One of the four Mahadvipa or four great islands, it extended around Mount Sineru and was ruled by a Cakkavatti or a sovereign ruler. In fact, according to the text, The Buddha and the Chakkavattis were born only in the Jambudvip. This Jambudvip indicates the continent of India as was mentioned by Malalasekara- he writer of Pali Dictionary. However, if one goes by a reference in the Anguttara-Nikaya, here is a Jambudvip in each chakravala or horizon, making it difficult to consider Jambudvip as a corresponding geographical space /country like India.

The concept of Jambudvip, despite such ambivalence, persisted and became a part of the Brahmanical concept of the universe sometimes identical with Bharatavarsha or sometimes Bharatavarsha being a part of it. This term the Jambudvip mingled with the Mauryan ruler Ashoka of the 3rd century B.C.E. which extended from Afghanistan to Deccan where he ruled. Bharatavarsha was a crucial part of an elaborate cosmographic schema. However, the expansion of historical stages of his region [Jambudvip] does not support its

meaning i.e. King Kharvela of Kalinga or coastal Orissa conquered Bharatavarsha. It is discernible here that when Kharveala was ruling, Kalinga was not a part of the Bharatavarsha. In fact, the concept of Bharatavarsha figured as a key component of the cosmographical schema when the Puranas were being compiled. In this very context we have to understand the structure of the space and its enshrined characteristics. This cosmographical schema of Bharatavarsha was present in a number of Puranas.¹² This cosmographic schema of Bharatavarsha was very much similar to the Dig-vijaya narrative of the Mahabharata¹³. Though the Puranas are voluminous, so, for the purpose of better understanding two - three Puranas can be quoted like Vishnupurana¹⁴ where the narrative of dig-vijaya is mentioned which is very similar to the Mahabharata narrative. It can be also compared with the dig-vijaya narrative of Raghu of Raghuvansham¹⁵ of the great poet Kalidas of the Gupta period.

Same type of narratives were mentioned in the Kavyamimansa of Rajashekhar¹⁶ of the 10th century C.E.

Thus, the Puranic type of Bharatavarsha became stereotyped, however, some changes underwent in this schema.

Though the Puranic details do not pertain to the geographical details of India. However, in the Vishnu-purana, the Bharatavarsha genealogy is interchangeable with the Svayambhu Manu. In this genealogy the seven sons of Manu are put in charge of the seven dvipas/islands [Jambu, Plaska, Salmani, Kraunch, Kusa, Saka, and Puskara] which together consisted the earth [Vasundhara]. The Bharatavarsha -varnanam of Vishnu-purana is followed by Jambudvipa- varnanam. Jambudvipa was ruled by the Bharata and his successors. The Bharata genealogy continued after Bharata the space Bharatavarsha came to be divided into nine parts [Bhedas]. This was the creation of Svayambhu Manu by the earth was peopled when he resided over the first Manvantara.¹⁷

The cosmographic detail of the term Bharata varsha is mentioned in the verse two of the Vishnu -Purana which reads

‘Uttaram yas samudrashya Himadreshchiam Dakshinashya

Varsam tad Bharatam Nama Bharatiyatra santatih’¹⁸

Its literal meaning is that the varsa which lies north to the ocean and to the south of the snowy mountain, is called Bharata, where the progeny is called Bharati. In another verse of the Vishnu-purana not only different kingdoms like Kiratas or the Yavanas but also in the Madhyadesha caste like Brahmanas, Kshatriya, Vaishyas and Shudras are mentioned. Even in the context of the Janapadas the certain communities and their geographical locations has to be fixed. Thus, the Kurus and Panchalas were assigned to the Madhyadesha, Kamarupa to the east, Saurastras and Abhiras to the Aparanta [west] regions and so on.

The construction of geographical and cultural space of Bharatavarsa, however, is methodologically, inappropriate to fix in a concrete territorial unit, though the writer of the Vishnupurana has underlined the attributes of that particular region. Some of the regions and tribes or kingdoms mentioned in the Vishnupurana are overlapping with each other, even after that it gives the basic idea of the notion of Bharatavarsa. The description of the Bharatavarsa is inextricably linked with the details of genealogy. The Puranic projection of the genealogy can be understood in Dig-vijaya [the winning spree of the rulers] sense too which was mentioned in Kalidasa’s Raghuvansam. Here, the hero of the epic Raghuvansham of Kalidasa went on conquering different regions starting from the east followed by west, south and north. In the course of his visva-vijaya he conquers different kingdoms of different regions like Magadhas, Yavanas, Abhiras, Nagas, Kambojas, Arjunayanas, Kamrupas and Pragjyotishpura etc. However, the cosmographic schema of territory/ geography of the Hero Raghu was not the intention of Kalidasa to describe instead he gives a wider concept of geographical location of Bharatavarsa in the course of visva-vijaya started by the actor. In the course of his description of the visva-vijaya of Raghu, the poet par excellence, gives an eloquent description of the rivers, mountains, floras [Kalamas-paddy, coconuts etc.] and faunas [elephants, horses, deers etc.] of the different directions.¹⁹

In addition to the Puranic traditions and the epics like Raghuvansham of Kalidasa, another important work which delineates the concept of the Bharatavarsha differently is that of Rajashekhar’s Kavyamimansa. It essentially follows the Puranic structure of Bharatavarsha which was particularly described in the Vayu-Purana, though Rajashekhar too divides Bharata into nine [9] parts. Rajashekhar’s description is distinct from others in the sense that he suggests specific geographical points from which different quarters begin, his central or the core region being the Aryavarta which was equivalent to the Madhyadesha. The geographical space of Bharatavarsha in Rajashekhar was the region / space between the Eastern and Western Oceans and between the Himalayas and the Vindhya.²⁰ Rajashekhar, further introduces the concept of Chakravarti-kshetra²¹ in the context of the Bharatavarsha and the Jambudvipa. His Chakravarti- kshetra spread from Kumaripura to Bindusarovar over a stretch of 1000 yojana which may not be measurable in geographical terms but the significance of the concept within Bharatavarsha is in consonance of that space.

What Rajashekhar has attempted to establish the Puranic notion/design of Bharatavarsah in his descriptions is shorn of genealogical connections of the Puranas.

Ostensibly, the notion of Bharatavarsha was not perceived as a well -defined geographical entity in the historical periods. It appears that Bharatavarsha emerged from the Janapadas of the early periods. In fact, the term Janapada expanded in different directions [dis] and the notion of Bharatavarsha as a country developed on the notion of ‘Dis’[direction]. However, the country was open -ended and not geographically bounded. Despite the puranic attempt to define Bharatavarsha geographically as a varsa

lying between the Himavanta and two Samudras [seas], the Janapada and the ethnic communities of different directions does not correspond to these geographical limits. Hence, the idea of the Bharatavarsha was an open-ended space as has been described by B.D. Chattopadhyay in his work 'the Concept of Bharatavarsha'²² where the narration of Puranic cosmography and royal genealogy are important parts.

If one studies it from the chronological perspective, he/ she finds here, a progression from the idea of a Jana to that of Janapada to varsa and Desa. Therefore, Bharatavarsha was not a 'sacred space' nor an 'incomprehensible spectacle' as was described by Edney. The concept of Bharatavarsha does not make any sense without the description of the Janapada. In the same vein, the notion of svadesh or videsh[foreign] do not fit here. The early meaning of Bharatavarsha can be understood without the notion of nationalism in the early times. The notion of 'border', 'frontier' or 'foreigner' can be understood in the sense of frequent raids and invasions in the medieval times, however, again, it could not be understood in terms of the

Bharatavarsha. The major divide in the Indian society can be understood in the sense of the varna system.

However, the major changes in the concept of India or the Bharatavarsha appeared during the colonial period when the British started redefining and redrawing the territorial borders for their convenience. In fact, the notion of the Bharatavarsha is a homogeneous historical narrative which makes India a nation state. The chronological division of Bharatavarsha's pre-colonial past into 'Hindu' and Muslim' too effectively embedded in our historiography has to be eradicated, which created a new perspective of the past. This is a highly motivated, diabolical misconstruction of the concepts of both 'India' and particularly of 'Bharatavarsha. Hence, the idea of Bharatavarsha or India is a conglomerate idea which accommodates all sections of the society and regions irrespective of their caste and creed. However, the idea of India, identified with Bharatavarsha, created in the colonial period, is a burden that we are forced to carry and perhaps further embellish in our increasingly neo-nationalist age.

The idea of Bharatavarsha or the Jambudweepa can be found in the inscriptions of 10th and 14th century even from the South regions of present times. It can further be crystallized and substantiated by an inscription of the Rastrakuta period of 929-30 from south Karnataka mentioning a Janapada called 'Purakira'²³ characterizes it as an Abharana [ornament] -Bharatamahimamandala. The term Bharatamahimamandala is a reference point even for a small locality, showing an essential regularity of the occurrence in different sources. A 12th century inscription of 1181AD from Kurgod²⁴, Bellary district of Karnataka and a 14th century inscription from Telangana also substantiate the Puranic tradition of Bharatavarsha echoing the epic-puranic image of expansive spaces. With reference to some of the other important inscriptions of 10th and 14th centuries from south India would further crystallize the idea of Bharatavarsha. These inscriptions refer to the country of Kuntala as located in the Bharatakshetra which, in turn, is a part of Jambudvip surrounded by deep seas. We find some elaborately articulated inscriptions from Andhra of late 13th and early 14th centuries in which the reference to a part of Bharatavarsha would further be broken up to the details of local landscape, including sacred sites. Similarly, an early 14th century set of plates from the Pithapuram area of East Godavary district in Andhra²⁵ refers to the land extending from the southern ocean to the king of mountains [Himalayas] as Bharatavarsha in which the lands of the Andhras called Trilinga-Bhumi by its association with three famous shrines [Lingas] viz. Srisaila, Kalesvara and Draksharama were included. Therein five gardens called Daksa, Amara, Ksira, Kumara and Prachya- the sporting grounds of Siva and the holy rivers such as Gautami, Krsanaveni, Malaprabha, BHHimārtha and Tungabhadra were there. While on the bank of river the Krishna is Srikakulam-the abode of lord Vishnu [Sri Vallabha] for the protection of the three worlds. It seems that the invocation of the epic-Puranic idea of Bharatavarsha in the context of what were emerging locally or regionally important settlement zones or religious landmarks was a device for valorization by relating it to a universally recognized cosmographical landmarks, much in the same way as a new lineage would seek to validate its status through affiliation with an epic-Puranic genealogy²⁶. The same device is repeated in another 14th century inscriptional reference from the same region to Jambudvip to Nine Khandas [divisions] and to Bharatavarsha, lying to the south of the Himalayas and to the north of the oceans. This is where different languages and customs prevailed²⁷ and which was divided into many countries. Tilinga was one of them through which flowed many holy rivers, which contained many prosperous cities, beautiful mountains, impenetrable forests, deep tanks and unassailable fortresses. Clearly, by this period, Bharatavarsha with its epic-Puranic image of an expansive space had come to be acknowledged as an essential reference point for, however, minor or major a place or a region may have been in case it came to figure in a written record.

II. CONCLUSION

This is also pertinent to note here that as a result of colonial intervention, the issue of nation and nationalism automatically creeps in wherever debates/discussions start on the idea of India or Bharatavarsha. In fact the concept of Bharatavarsha and its unity is considered to be ethno-civilizational in the case of the newly emerged intelligentsia and the neo-nationalists of not only the 19th century and early 20th but also in the first quarter of the 21st century. In this paper, I have tried to understand how the concept of India evolved historically, how the notion of Bharatavarsha was articulated in different contexts for the historiography of the early India which is reflecting even in the present era of political turbulence.

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