

The Slow Silent Emergence of India's National Identity

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As this is a presentation meant for a general but informed audience and not the community of historians, I will make every effort to desist from academic terminology. The prime purpose of this brief piece is to disprove the very common contention that the Indian nation was a gift of British colonial rule that galvanised divergent ethnic groups across the Indian subcontinent into one (or two) nations. In other words, the usual belief is that if the British had not embarked upon their policy of aggrandisement and empire building here, the Indian people would have remained divided among several nations and would never have united. The counter argument that we shall see here is that Indians had, in fact, experienced what it was be together for long periods of history much before the British arrived. For instance, we may recall immediately three empires under which almost all Indians came together: the Mauryas (322-187 BC), the Guptas (320-550) and the Mughals (1526-1707). The more powerful argument that we shall examine is how Indians were conscious of their remarkable similarities even when they were brought together by these pan Indian empires.

In the third century BC, for instance, a Brahman intellectual, Chanakya, moved from somewhere in present day Tamil Nadu to Taxila or Takshashila in north west Pakistan to study and teach at the university and later migrated far east to Pataliputra or Patna of modern times to guide Chandragupta Maurya in setting up his empire. He is just one example of free movement across the Indian subcontinent which required an understanding of the whole and the parts as well as the confidence

to be able to traverse and communicate among people who were quite akin to each other. To understand the purport of this example one may need to transport oneself to the pre Roman era and imagine whether a Scotsman would be able to move across Europe to Poland or Ukraine for studies and then settle in Spain. And this was when the first of the great empires had not yet been established and communications must have been rather difficult. We see how a thousand years later, Shankaracharya the great sage set out from Kalady in Kerala in the deep south to set up four monasteries in four extreme corners of India that are in present day states of Gujarat, Uttarakhand, Odisha and Karnataka.

But before proceeding further, it is essential to state a caveat. The term 'national' that we use here refers more to the 'consciousness' of belonging to an identifiable area, which in this context, is the Indian subcontinent. It is evident in the shared basic values and beliefs of the different peoples or ethnic or linguistic groups who inhabit this geographical area of 'undivided India'. Strictly speaking, the nation state appeared as a preferred political unit only in the nineteenth century and remains till today a rather slippery concept. The notion of 'nationalism' that runs through this piece is therefore more in the nature of 'proto-nationalism rather than the ripe classic version. To explain further, the nation state that consisted of a reasonably homogeneous people who inhabited a demarcated area on the globe and usually shared the same language and/or religion emerged in real earnest only after the First World War. In Europe, it arose from the ruins of battered transnational empires while in Asia and Africa, colonised countries fought and obtained their independence. This narrative covers some three millennia and thus the 'national identity' referred to here obviously precedes the arrival of the modern nation state by several centuries and denotes a cognition among the inhabitants or dominant groups that they belong to a common stock, whether we call it country or race or people.

It is needless to say that this 'unity' does not preclude a sense of distinctiveness as well that could be quite different from the feeling of commonness. But then, just because the Bavarian Catholic is so considerably different from the Prussian

Protestant does not make either a lesser German. Or, St Petersburg and Vladivostok may be quite different and separated by thousands of kilometres, but both are essentially Russian. Many national regimes seek or strive towards greater homogeneity and frown upon differences but that does not obviate the ground reality that people and cultures even across the same nation are not clones produced in laboratories. In other words, the feeling of 'national consciousness', ie, of belonging to an identifiable mega-culture usually leaves sufficient space to its constituent local cultural formations to enjoy their diversity as they are strong enough to be identified as 'one people' and, more important, worth dying for, in the name of their common 'country'. We shall not stray further into the excitable discourse on what constitutes 'nationalism' as different definitions are churned out by ultra-nationalists in this new century, more for political advantages and oneupmanship than for honest reasons. Besides, there are whole libraries of volumes written on the subject by academics who have dealt with its internal contradictions and many imperfections as well as its debatable present and future.

Our point is that even in the ancient period, a section of the learned knew the country and its topography of India well enough to traverse without maps or regular guides. We need evidence to ascertain the period in which a consciousness may have arisen that India or Bharatvarsha was one interconnected land mass that had several common characteristics. As of now, we have no evidence that the earliest civilisation, the Harappan or the Indus Valley, knew about the India that lay beyond the Indus and its tributaries and perhaps the Ghaggar river basin. The problem is that when history focuses on bright spots like the Harappan (3300 BC to 1700 BC) it gives an impression, inadvertently or otherwise, that the rest of India was 'uncivilised'. The fact is that we have no concrete evidence of other urban settlements in the Indian subcontinent at that time between the middle of the fourth millennium and the mid second millennium BC. It is almost certain that we may never come across a vast town-based civilisation spread over such a large area anywhere else but we may stumble upon smaller townships. But the fact that the cultures and settlements were not urban does not in any way lessen their importance where history and the

social sciences are concerned as they do mark the progress of 'man in India'. There is no doubt that the megalithic cultures of India that are now estimated to go back to the third millennium BC represented considerable advancement where culture and technology are concerned. The burial goods discovered at the sites reveal several considerably advanced human settlements. To revert to our theme, however, i.e, whether there is any indication of a pan-Indian consciousness emerging, one can safely say that the answer is negative.

When, therefore, do we see the first whiff of an all-India consciousness? Without this basic 'consciousness', the next stage of moving towards a 'national idea' cannot be thought of. We come across this knowledge of 'other civilisations' for the first time in the Vedic period, albeit in a very oblique manner. The authors of the Rig Veda and three other Vedas were obsessed with the virtues of their own lifestyle, beliefs, language, gods and ritual to such an extent that they deemed all others to be barbarians. It is through these stanzas that we deduce that they were, at least, conscious of a large part of the Indian subcontinent that lay within the north-western quarter of India and all of present-day Pakistan. They reveal a penchant for geography and we have a rough but reasonably acceptable sketch of some parts of India and the surrounding countries, which is really creditable considering the stage of human development. If we choose not to be fixated on the Rig Veda text and examine the context, i.e, the material culture of the period we shall find a lot of similarities across the region. Pottery styles form distinct markers of different cultural patterns and we come across three major categories, namely BRW (Black and Red Ware) which is approximately from 1200 BC to 900 BC; PGW (Painted Grey Ware) which started around the same time, 1200 BC but flourished for three centuries more, upto 600 BC and the NBP (Northern Black Polished) Ware that ruled from 700 BC to 200 BC.

While BRW represented the Late Harappan phase and was confined to the Indus Valley, it appears to have influenced the other two forms. Though we have discounted the Harappan period from our ambit, we need to bring into consideration what we call the Late Harappan period, which overlaps with the

Vedic period. In any case, scholars are convinced that quite a few typically-Indian technologies and products like the bullock cart and the plough appeared first in Harappan culture. Weights and measures, beads, combs, the dice and several items may have spread to the rest of India from the Indus Valley. Our point is that material cultural patterns united large parts of India, which suggests cross fertilisation of ideas, knowledge and some amount of communication. We find vast swathes of northern India containing remains of Northern Black Polished (NBP) Ware pottery, all the way from Pakistan (almost whole), right through the Gangetic valley to Bangladesh and nearby Assam. Southwards, this covered Madhya Pradesh and northern parts of the Deccan. Clear settlement patterns emerged in small towns and villages, where iron was used and this represents an exponential jump in technology. This, in turn, led to vast improvement in agriculture, food consumption, lifestyle and values. The point we need to observe is how technology and usage of cultural items linked large parts of India with characteristics that emerged over the next millennium as distinctly Indian: irrespective of regions. Incidentally, the late Vedic texts and Upanishads reveal a lot of ideas taken from the non-Vedic people of India and indicate that the initial differences between the populace was narrowing and mixed blood was becoming more common.

The next period from 600 BC to 100 BC saw the emergence of the small but powerful in the Gangetic plains kingdoms, the Mahajanapadas, that were linked together in language, culture, technology, urban lifestyles, mercantilism, beliefs and customs. They form the core of India that accounted for almost half the known population of the subcontinent and laid the keel of the Indian nation, two and a half millennia ago. Except for Greece and Rome, that accounted for mere fragments of the European population at that time, the continent was far behind in all aspects vis a vis the Indian subcontinent. Iron and hegemonic regimes ensured not only order all over north India but facilitated smooth trade across the land and beyond. The first signs of 'integration' were clear and this is the theme that we refer to as the slow, silent emergence of the 'national identity' in India. Magadha subjugated the other kingdoms under Chandragupta Maurya (321-298 BC) whose em-

pire, the first in India, united all of Afghanistan, Pakistan with the whole of northern India, upto Bengal. This massive congregation of people facilitated cross movement of culture and trade within the empire. It is remarkable that though Mauryans conquered so many kingdoms, it did not impose the cultural superiority of Magadha did over others like Rome did. Slaves were not paraded in Magadha as was the rule in Rome and India showed that it was different. We have every reason to believe that once Magadha's paramountcy was established, an amity existed all over north India from the Khyber to Tripura, extending to central India as well. The new empire facilitated the emergence of a cultural consensus across north India or else cross communication without force could never be sustained. Trade across India and beyond played an important role in the Mauryan empire of Magadha, but it is critical for students of history not to miss the cultural component as they study the story of empires mainly from the political or economic viewpoints.

This period also saw the rise of two important religions, Buddhism and Jainism that improved the emerging consensus by first challenging the dominant theme of Vedic religion, i.e, ritual sacrifice, and then offering mass level alternative religious beliefs. Vedic religion was not only non-inclusive and elitist in its character as the common man or even the non-ruling strata of society could hardly afford the costly sacrificial fires and the elaborate priestly apparatus that went with them. Buddhism was for the masses and encouraged bonding and it was genuinely inclusive. Buddhism reached the commoner not in the language of the 'Arya' and the ruling classes, i.e., Sanskrit, but in his own language, Ardhamagadhi Prakrit, that was actually the prevailing popular dialect. This was long before Hindi and other Indo-European languages came out of Sanskrit and also its friendly outreach called Prakrit. Prakrit or the Prakrits, as there were many of them, proved to be an effective communicator as well as an excellent binder for Indians spread over such a vast area who could speak in one or more of the Prakrits. The language used for Buddhist texts was just a refined and grammatically-designed version of Prakrit known as Pali, while Jain texts were in Shauraseni Prakrit. Another interesting fact is that Sanskrit did not have its own Devanagari al-

phabet till much later, well more a millenium, and the language of the Brahmans was written in the script of the Buddhists, ie, Brahmi, in which Pali texts were composed by the Sangha.

Equally important was another mission of Buddhism, which was to absorb many of the tales and legends that were prevalent among the masses and elevate them through re-branding as the Jataka Tales. This was the first organised attempt to forge a common stock of morals and beliefs through the length and breadth of the Mauryan empire and beyond. It needs to be noted specially and we must understand the critical importance of this enterprise because it were legends and fables that were, and still remain, the stock in trade among the masses. Pithy idioms and sayings that lace the language rose from these fables and it is rare to find historians look at the utility of the Jataka Tales from this angle of social cohesion. These tales were actually effective proxies for religious philosophies and they were understood by all. Another spin-off of Buddhism was that its monk-hood, the Sangha, did more to fuse India together and its large network of monasteries and missions than is appreciated by text-book historians. Their door to door visits across the vast area brought cultures together and they passed on several messages and elements that were subsequently absorbed into Hinduism until they became inseparable part of the Hindu religion and its core beliefs. The beef-eating Arya-putra was coaxed into non violence as his dharma and turned towards vegetarianism. Peace was emphasised upon as State policy and saffron robes entered Hinduism once monastic life was learnt from Buddhism that had hitherto known of individual ascetics, the Rishis and Munis. Consequentially, seeking of alms or begging for a living, i.e, bhikhsha was considered as an honourable vocation by those who had given up worldly pursuits. We need to remember that while the hereditary Brahmanical class among the Hindus could live off donations (dakshina) made for performing life-cycle and other rituals of the jymans and from offerings made at sacred sites, the Buddhist monk had no such ritual role or assurance of sustenance from Indian society. He had to beg for a living as the Buddha had done. The point to note again is how a disparate people came together in the subcontinent in spite of distances and geographical barriers.

The political unity that the extended empire of Ashoka (268-232 BC) brought about has been mentioned time and again by historians and his messages of peace, coexistence and non violence do not require repetition. The 'root programme' of India, i.e, unity amidst diversity appears magnificently through his edicts that were engraved all over the vast empire. It covered large parts of the Deccan as well, which brought in the southern part of the subcontinent at par with the northern two-third of the land mass. But what we need to examine is how India's core philosophy of heterogenous unity differed so sharply with the other largest country in the world, China. The first emperor of China appeared on the stage around the same time in the same century. He was Qin (pronounced 'Chin') Shi-Huang-di (247-210 BC) who sent up the Qin/Chin dynasty. Forty years after Ashoka crushed Kalinga, Qin united much of China for the first time, with equal if not more brutality. He invented the term emperor (huang-di) for himself and unlike Ashoka, Qin went about the task of enforcing homogeneity in China quite mercilessly. To enforce the Chinese language among the numerous non-Chinese population, he banned all books in other tongues, burnt them and executed scholars of other languages without compunction. He introduced several reforms, quite like Ashoka, but force was his forte, whether it be in enforcing a common measurement system or coinage and even in compelling the axles of all carts to be of the same length. An intelligent observer can trace the origin of the wide divergence between China's historic policy of 'one nation, one language, one people' and India's philosophy of 'many languages, many peoples and yet one nation' to their first emperors. This is important for our purpose to understand the dynamics of India's nationalism that thrives amidst diversity.

Post Mauryan India saw the rule of foreign dynasties like the Scythian or Shaka and the Indo-Greeks but it is fascinating to note how all of them accepted the religious beliefs of India like the worship of Vishnu. Coinage also played its role and the fact that India was being viewed as one nation becomes clear from the utterances of Roman senators like Pliny the Elder who complained in 77 BC that India would eat up all

the world's gold through its prized exports to Rome and elsewhere. Persians, Greeks, Romans and other nations of consequence used different terms for India but meant one entity as it was clear to them that there were strong common features that were visible. We need to ponder on this point and consider how this vast country was referred to as one by the wide world. This was also the time when the two 'magna cartas' of India were finalised, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. Historians date their production period to span some four centuries (2nd century BC to 2nd century AD) or even a bit more, i.e, from the 2nd century BC to the 3rd century AD when their final recensions appeared. Ascribing the composition of the Ramayana to one Valmiki and to credit Veda-Vyas with the writing of the Mahabharata are typical of the Indian intellectual regime that put forward one identifiable figure for the masses to believe. In reality, however, numerous scholars toiled for centuries to graft local legends seamlessly into the central themes, that flowered in two great epics. Every known king or kingdom was interjected into the stories, somewhere or the other, to give an inclusive character to the tales and some grains of historical facts were punched in as well, to lend authenticity. The sites outside the main centres like Ayodhya-Janakpur and Hastinapur-Indraprastha were usually kept vague which meant that a dozen places could claim to be Manipur or Chitrakoot and hook themselves to the narratives. The idea of India was really firmed up through these two absorptive epics, that served thereafter as the reference point for everything.

The next major empire that ruled India or most of it for 230 long years, from 320 AD to 550 AD was that of the Guptas. For our purpose, we can gloss over what we have all been taught, i.e, the might of the empire; its conquests; its sculpture and the arts. What is noteworthy was its active patronage of the Brahmanical class and its religion, that was still not the formed Hinduism we know but half way between Vedic religion and the people's-level Hinduism of the present. Just as Buddhism (and partially Jainism) had managed to penetrate every corner of India and preach to every class, Brahmanism made its real comeback during the Gupta period. This is the period when the eighteen Maha-Puranas were composed and those that had started work earlier were finalised. Along with the two

epics, the Puranas provided for the legitimation of numerous regimes and their ethnic groups by resorting to long genealogies, largely manufactured, which sealed the treaty between the Brahman composers and panegyrists and the martial classes. Of course, some Puranas like the Bhagavat Purana were composed much later and some were finalised for several centuries more, but the bulk of the Purana-construction took place under the Brahman-favouring regime of the Guptas. More important is the fact that this exercise smoothed the process for newer settlements or kingdoms to emerge out of the forested areas that till then lay outside the pale of 'civilisation', and join the mainstream. The classical binary between the Vana or forest and the Kshetra or kingdom that arose out its destruction was increasingly tilting in favour of the settlements where agriculture and trading activities provided for a higher standard of living, nutrition and longevity. The complicated operation of fixing the newer social groups into the stratified caste hierarchy was handled quite adroitly by the Brahmanical and Kshatriya classes, through well established occupation-based working models that were sanctified by appropriately produced justificatory legends and explained in terms of Karma and rebirth.

For our theme, it is also important to note how gods and goddesses were more or less decided upon, finally, though the legacy of a lot of Vedism continued, like Brahma, Varuna and Indra. These would be pensioned off in the post Gupta phase and Shiva, Vishnu and the Devi would be the new power centres on the Hindu pantheon. As there was very little opposition to this new religious wave, except where Buddhism was still strong (which was diminishing rapidly), it swept throughout all Indians and found its way to Southeast Asia as well. Iconography was clear and common and even incarnations and alternative entities were reasonably common. The institution of multiple names for the same deity, often called Ashtottara Shatanaama (108 names) or Sahasranama (thousand names) came in extremely helpful as conflicting deities like Kali (the dark one) and Gauri (the fair one) could be said to be two versions of the same goddess. Pilgrimages came up or were sanctified and went on increasing rapidly as more and more local cults were absorbed into either of the two super-entities,

Vishnu or Shiva, depending on what the appropriated deity stood for originally. Where it came to the female deities of the indigenous people and different ethnic religions, they were all subsumed into the Devi. This gigantic process of 'mergers and acquisitions' is unparalleled in world history where millions of gods, demi-gods, godlings, spirits, demons, celestial creatures and the whole lot were pegged to any one of the three 'major' corporate entities of Indian religion, namely, Vishnu, Shiva and the Mother-goddess.

Every oddity of the local deity, however bizarre, was explained in terms of imaginative legends that were usually sourced from the Mahabharata or the Ramayana or the Puranas or manufactured to suit local exigencies. This is the story of India that was linked by common gods, festivals, beliefs, world views, superstitions and pilgrimages that was inherited by the British more than millennium later. To claim that they united a hopelessly divided country for the first time is a bit shallow, as the prevailing political fragmentation of the 18th and 19th century that they utilised to full advantage hid the fact that beneath the turmoil lay an eternal India. Pilgrimages, incidentally, took care to keep powerful local cults of the indigenous people happy as they were assured of all-India pilgrims if they subsumed their deity to the pan-Indian network. The original non-Brahman priests like the Daityas of Puri were given a suitable position and importance even after the Brahmanical takeover. Incidentally, pilgrimages and the vast network of holy sites meant that even if one never had the opportunity to visit distant ones, one knew which part of India it was situated. Even the unlettered knew different spots scattered all across this vast land and felt at home with far-off places because they were sown into his emotional fabric. Hinglaj in Balochistan and Kamskshya in Assam were linked together by Sakti with Jwalamukhi in Punjab. Shaivates remembered the twelve great sites of their pilgrimage called the Jyotirlingas as the Vaishnavs cherished theirs.

The arrival of Islam did disrupt this centripetal process and for the first time, Indian religion was made conscious that its assimilative process was indeed peculiar and reprehensible as it followed no single holy book like the Quran

or the Bible and neither had any central supreme centre like Mecca or Jerusalem to pine for. Its festivities were raucous, its deities rather ungodly and its prayers rather noisy and boisterous. The fact that widely contradictory belief systems had been harmonised with patience and tact for centuries on end was hardly understood as conversion of Indians was considered the preferred option by quite a few Islamic groups and rulers, though certainly not all. Islam brought in western architecture based on the arch and the dome that boosted temple making activities in India but the fact that the stifling nature of casteism often led to conversions of lower strata to Islam was a wake up call to Brahmanical religion. The egalitarian nature of Islam profoundly impacted India and led to the liberation of suppressed forces of similar nature. This led to the devotional movement and the Bhakti cults, that gripped India from the fourteenth century onwards and encouraged a typically Indian form of assimilation and social equality. This is also the period when north India languages broke free from Sanskrit/Prakrit, like the South Indian languages had done vis a vis Tamil a few centuries ago. This brought in more compactness within the regions that spoke the same language or dialects thereof but it did compartmentalise India again. The empire of the Mughals and the tolerant policy of Akbar brought in unprecedented unity in India, centuries before the British East India Company fished in the troubled waters and rot of post-Mughal India: to win by hook or crook, preferably crook. What is hardly understood is that apart from restoring unity and bringing in new technologies, lifestyles, apparel and foods, it also encouraged the growth of fusing forces like the Urdu language and the Hindustani classical music.

Besides, the Sufi brand of Islam that is most popular in India also believes in matters typical Indian (this includes Pakistan and Bangladesh as well) like Quwwali and music that are anathema to the religion in Arab lands. Festivities and marriage celebrations follow very similar styles and are often indistinguishable except in terms of dress or headgear. The belief in Pirs or holy men and considering their graves or sites as sacred is also an Indian habit that has dominated Islam on the subcontinent which is, of course, sought to be removed and 'purified' by hardliners, Whabis and Salfis. Many of these elements, inci-

dentally, preach violence and terrorism and are as condemnable as Hindu extremists. But our sharp point here is that while the arrival of Islam in India did jar matters in India there is hardly anything in this land except perhaps orthodox temple rituals that have not been influenced by Islam, often for the better. And Islam in this subcontinent is again typically local.

The process of coming together of Indians from distant corners over centuries and millennia has been a slow but definite force and its most evident proof lies in the comfort with which people hailing from widely varying languages and cultures in this subcontinent feel so at home with each other when facing the rest of the world. This process was so inexorable that when the British left after dividing the country, there was not any second thought as to whether Kerala and Assam and Punjab needed to be separate countries, ever. The political unification could not last after 1947 unless there were eternal binders that held India together through common history and culture and the rapid development of a strong nation in just decades after Independence testifies to an inner residence and an urge to be one nation. True, British rule in India did improve communications and lead to the emergence of unifying forces like the English language but then it delayed the industrialisation and economic development as long as it could. Who knows how better Indians would have fared if they were not crushed by imperialism for two centuries but then, history deals with facts not speculation. And the fact is that the Indian national identity took its own slow and silent centuries to emerge but considering the fascinatingly complex nature of the subcontinent, it is only India that could unite so many different ethnic groups into one colourful entity. Nowhere else in the world has such a multi-ethnic equilibrium worked and while China, Russia and the USA seek to homogenise more and more, India has enjoyed its diversity and plurality because it was supremely confident that its underlying unity is more powerful. It has, after all, taken millennia to build.

