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ANALYSIS

## Idea of Bharat: Exploring its remnants in contemporary India



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There are important generic terms related to the concept of Nation-State found in many societies and cultures across the world. The term 'country' has evolved from the combination of French terra (land) and contra (opposite), which entered the English language in the 11th century. In Sanskrit, the comparable expressions are Deś and Pradeśā. These expressions signify the geographical characteristics of an identified patch of land on the surface of Earth. Nation or Rashtra connotes less geographical and more to cultural entity or unity. Rashtra has emanated from the Sanskrit raj and tattva. Raj may be translated into 'rule' or 'governance'. And tattva may be understood as the essence, quality, or substance. The present political debate on the idea of Bharat is exclusively trapped between the political and geographical ideas of Nation-State.

Little do we realise that the 'idea of Bharat' does not exemplify a political unity for the sake of governmentality. Instead, it may be understood as enriched cultural systems shared since antiquity by the people living in the Indian subcontinent. Bharat symbolises a sui generis cultural ensemble in itself, which has its own indigenous social systems coupled with philosophical visions on the metaphysical questions. Those life visions were constituent elements which proved as the 'basic structures of the organic social order'. The reason why the philosophical and social systems that compose the idea of Bharat have survived in spite of the epistemic violence unleashed by European colonisers in the subcontinent.

### Bharat in Historical Context

Bharat or Bharatvarsh is an ancient and puranic name. The Vishnu Purāna is amongst the first scriptures to mention the name Bharat. The idea refers to a naturally bounded territory, which was known as Jambudvīpa. In Purānas, Bharat was described to be surrounded by the ocean on the east, west, and south, and by the Himalaya in the north. Spatially, on the planet Earth, Bharat was known as sacred land, governed by an internal principle of cultural unity. A person belonging to the system called Bharat was known as Bharatvanshi.

The closest alternative to the idea of Bharat is Aryavart. However, it has a smaller connotation in terms of territoriality and cultural significance. The expression Arya in ancient and modern literatures is always used in association or comparison with Dravida, mlecchas, and dasyus, etc. Consequently, it can be concluded that Arya is a racial category which must have a limited cultural significance.

The idea of Hindustan could be understood in the context of two words, i.e., Hind & stan. In Persian, stan signifies a place where people live. Interestingly, Sthan in Sanskrit has the same meaning. There is no agreement as to when this terminology was used for the first time. Some argue that Persians used this term for the first time in the third century BCE. Others believe it to be of recent origin and started in usage with the coming of Muslim invaders in India. Hindu as an expression emerged from the expression of river Sindhu. Those who lived on the bank of Sindhu were known as Hindu.

The Greek term Indikē and Latin India have a different history. Some accounts ascribe its old history. However, it is a fact that the term 'India' was used by the European countries in the modern times to refer to the south Asian subcontinent as a political and economic destiny of their colonial empires.

### **India as a Political Unit**

The ideas of Aryavart, Bharat, Hindustan, and India cannot be equated with each-other. Hindustan, undoubtedly, meant a political and administrative unit, which was systematically developed by Turks and Mughals. However, the idea of Hindustan does not signify the social and cultural order that persisted since antiquity in the subcontinent. Much less it refers to a knowledge or cultural systems which had birth and growth in the social milieu persisted since antiquity, though the name had great emotional appeal during the freedom struggle of the country against the British.

India under the dominance of imposed legal apparatuses of the British empire witnessed an authoritarian administrative unit coupled with gigantic bureaucracy. It had no continuity with the historical roots of Bharat. Post-colonial India imitated the British model of legal and political system which could not discover the roots of Bharat which were still surviving on the marginal landscape of culture. Interestingly, on the eve of Independence, the idea of India as a political unit did not give the space for spiritual and folk traditions which made the idea of Bharat as an enriching place for jnana and prajna.

### **Basic Structures of Bharat**

The idea of Bharat is a cultural concept. Historically, Jumbudvipa was never under one administrative or political unit. The cultural system developed from the life worlds composed of the knowledge and social systems shared by the people for a long time. The cosmological vision of Bharat consisted of division of time in four Yugas, which repeat itself in a circular way.

Most importantly, the cultural idea of India never allowed the political units to eclipse the autonomous social life shared and innovated by communities generation after generation. Indian societies since ancient times did not allow the monopolisation of social goods such as administration of justice, access to education, drinking water, and other social resources. Education has similar status in many European countries even in contemporary age which have different histories of their societies. Indian political and social lives were composed and guided by the idea of Dharma which was microscopic as well as macroscopic in character. Dharma was considered, on the one hand, as the binding law of the universe, and on the other hand, it was the moral force used to guide the moral conduct of social and political institutions.

### **Conclusion**

The modern idea of India should be synthesised with its long rooted cultures of plurality and ethos of deliberation. The spirit of Bharat still thrives in the social bonds of village communities. Its autonomous blooming can be inspirational for the idea of India which aspires to achieve human dignity and fraternity as the highest goals for the Indian Republic.

*This article is co-authored by Prof (Dr.) Chanchal Kr Singh, Professor of Law at HPNLU; Dr Mritunjay Kumar, Assistant Professor, and Advocate Aastha Naresh Kohli, practising at the Himachal Pradesh High Court.*

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