

The Idea of India: A historical corrective

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Unlike a nation-state, a nation is first and foremost a notion. (Photo | P Jawahar, EPS)

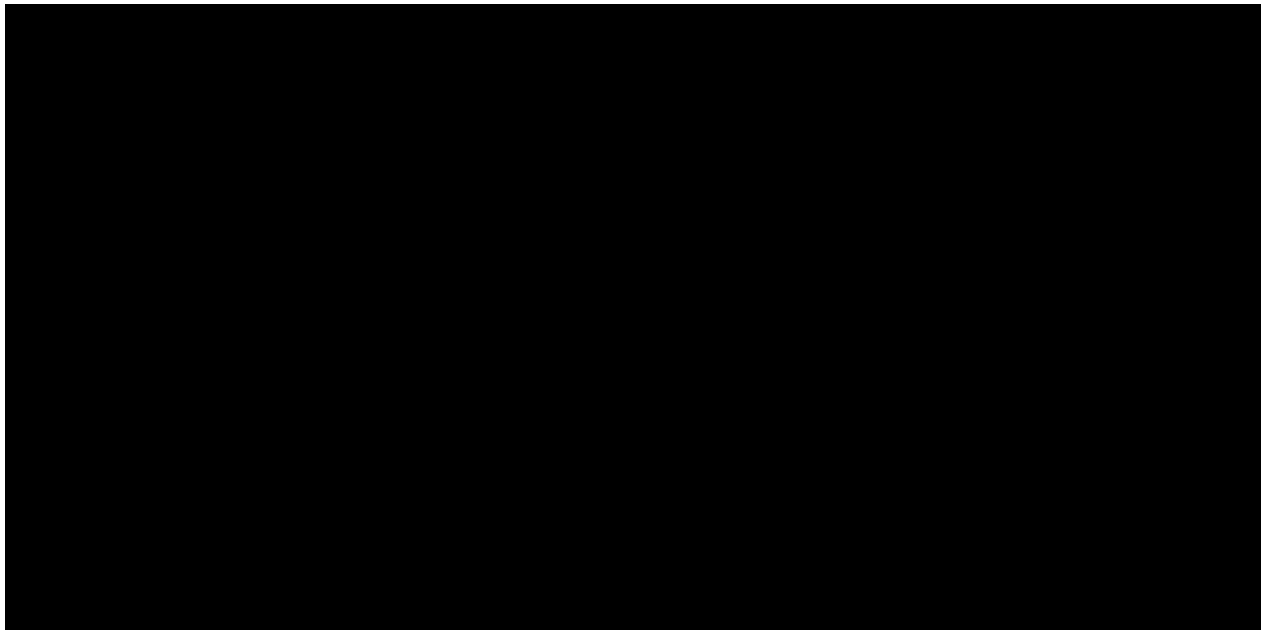
By Shonaleeka Kaul

As 15th August dawns tomorrow, it may be instructive to revisit the ‘Indian nationhood’ debate, which is clearly alive and kicking as seen in the recent controversy surrounding a Bollywood actor spouting what people with greater credentials have also been telling us for a while now—that there was no India before the British colonised us.

This is, ironically, exactly what the colonisers had us believe. In 1880, for example, Sir John Strachey, the British administrator who trained the Imperial Civil Services of India, would begin his lectures saying: “The first and most important thing to learn

about India is that there is not and never was an India"! A century and a half later, some influential Indians are still denying the existence and even the possibility of an India in premodern times. Thus in 2005, the then prime minister in a speech at Oxford University practically thanked the British for colonising India and bestowing on this ancient land such "beneficial aspects" as the railways and civil services.

Underlying his controversial gratitude was the assumption that not only did these British institutions 'modernise' India, they also unified it for the first time. Two years later, a leading historian called India "an unnatural nation" in his book, implying, like the former PM, that modern developments such as British rule and the freedom movement forced a diverse and disconnected bunch of regions and peoples into one artificial and unhistorical entity called the Indian nation. In other words, a country as vast and heterogenous as India could never have been considered one, and all attempts since 1947 to forge a unified nation have been nothing more than a precarious statist project rather than the culmination of a long and rich past.



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But what does history actually tell us? Unlike a nation-state, a nation is first and foremost a notion: the jointly held sense of belonging to a common territorial and cultural entity that a people name and assert; a community of emotion, belief and praxis. And anyone who has even a working acquaintance with some of the master texts of Indian civilisation—the Ramayana, Mahabharata and Mahapuranas (5th century BCE to 5th century CE)—will immediately recognise this notion of a ‘felt community’ and common bounded entity that is affirmed and named as Bharatvarsha in these hoary texts.

The Mahabharata defined it broadly yet resonantly as the land north of the sea and south of the Himalayas. The Vishnu Purana even spelt out Bharatavarsha’s ethnic boundaries thus: ‘The country north of the sea and south of the Himalayas / Is Bharata and her children are Bharati. / A thousand yojanas from north to south, / It has kiratas in the east and yavanas in the west’ (Vishnu Purana 2.3, verses 1, 8) Kiratas is a reference to the people of Assam and yavanas to those settled in Greater Punjab. Can there be a more explicit and inclusive self-understanding of the nation called India?

And then there are other, later testimonies such as that of Xuan Zang, the Chinese pilgrim who travelled to India in the 6th century and wrote that as he stood in Nagarahara (modern Jalalabad in Afghanistan), west of the Khyber Pass, he felt he stood at the gateway to the country called ‘Indu’. That he referred to India is evident from the way he described this country, again, in classical terms as bounded by the snowy mountains to the north and the sea on three sides, extending to an area of 90,000 li (Chinese mile) and inhabited by 70 different kingdoms.

Thus the view that India was too vast and diverse to ever be one nation ignores the fact that the ancient Indian concept of nation could well recognise and embrace that vastness and diversity, and acknowledge alongside a common unified sphere of cultural circulation. Perhaps there is no greater evidence of this historical idea of India than the stellar example of Adi Shankaracharya, the seer-intellectual who in the 8th century established the supremacy of Vedanta or advaita, i.e. unified consciousness beyond multiplicity and form.

Starting from his home town of Kaladi, Kerala, Shankara undertook three famous digvijayas—tours of philosophical conquest of the land, intensely debating and defeating the varied local scholarship, from Kapalikas and Pashupatas to Mimamsakas, Vaishnavas, Shaktas, Jainas, Buddhists and so on, first in Tamil Nadu, then Andhra, Vidarbha, and Karnataka, whereafter he reached Gujarat, onwards to Ujjayini (MP), Bahlika (Bactria), Shurasena (Mathura), Darads (Gilgit Baltistan), Kuru-Pancala (Punjab, Haryana), and then Kamarupa (Assam), Gauda (Bengal) and Koshala (UP).

The fitting culmination of these advaitic travels was in Kashmir at the renowned centre of all learning, Sharadapitha, today in PoK. Indeed the Shankaracharya temple at Srinagar still stands witness to this epic visit as also to the incredible centrality of the far north of India to the imagination of its far south, and vice versa. Shankara also established mathas in the four cardinal directions: Badrinath, Puri, Shringeri and Dvaraka, symbolically evoking the extent of the Indian nation. S Radhakrishnan therefore called him “a shrewd political genius and patriot”. However, Shankara’s pan-Indian voyages also subtly demonstrate the ancient idea of India: a sphere peopled by great diversity of thought but unified by a consciousness that pierced through the illusion of multiplicity.

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