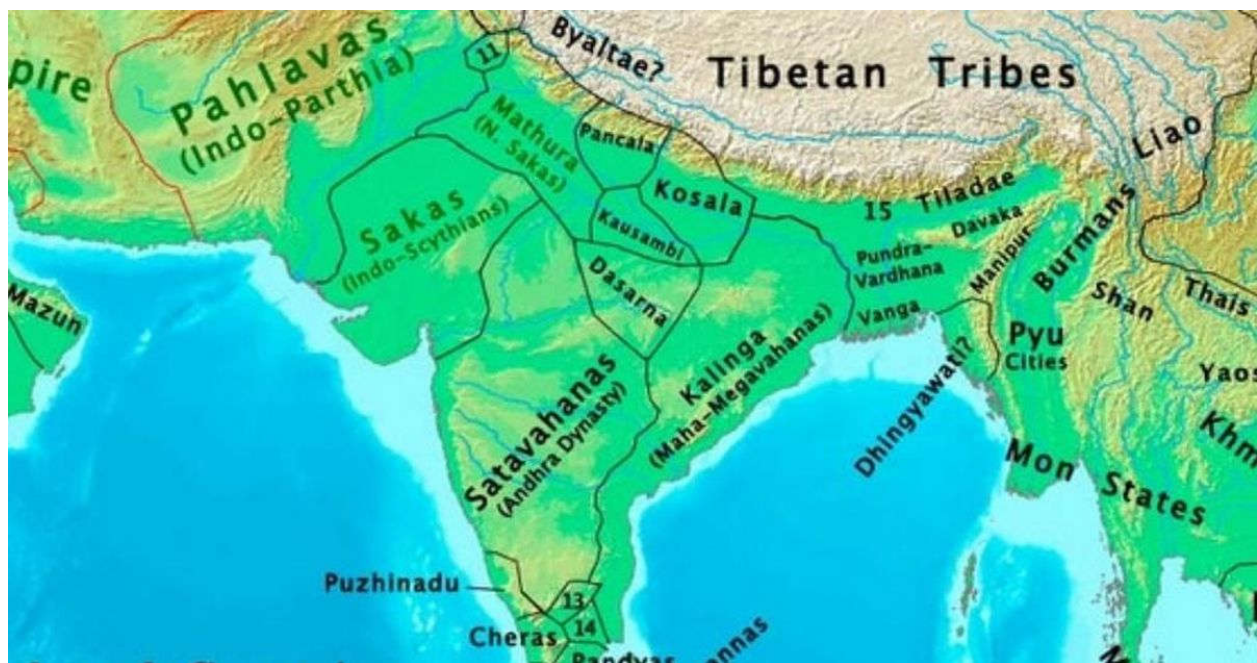


# B.D. Chattopadhyay : The Concept of Bharatavarsha & Other Essays

## History shows that Bharatavarsha has not always been the same thing as the country of India

‘The early meaning of Bharatavarsha can be discussed and understood without any reference to Indian nationalism.’



We have been brought up from our early childhood on the idea that the country we live in is Bharatavarsha which is India and which is also a map with specific boundaries, separated from other countries with similar maps indicating them. The partition of the India of 1947 changed the map, but the notion of Bharatavarsha and the name remained, conveying, as it did to our predecessors, the image of a country which has forever been there and will so remain despite the change in the map.

And yet, the question of the history of India or Bharatavarsha as it evolved over time, and linked to what is perceived as India today, remains to be critically examined in terms of historical change. In other words, the link between a notion or a concept of space, the actual geographical space supposed to be denoted by it, and the space as the locus of our history is an issue which needs to be reopened, because what we accept today as granted is based on a number of assumptions. These assumptions, without adequate deference to the many meanings embedded in our sources, have substantially affected our generalisations about Indian history, particularly of its early phase.

**One major assumption, for example, has been that of the identity of the concept of India with the concept of Bharatavarsha.**

It is not possible, in this essay, to historically explain in what ways the convergence of the meanings of the notions took place, but it seems obvious that by the nineteenth century, whether in history-writing or in general thinking, their identity had been established. Those who write on India, or on the idea of it, take it for granted that what they mean is represented by the term Bharatavarsha as well, and that they both carry with them the sense of our past or our history.

Even in the early phase of colonial history-writing, it was easy to conceive of a History of India, and a corresponding indigenous enterprise in that direction would have produced, for example in a language like Bengali, a title like *Bharatavarser Itihas*. An academic example of the identification of Bharatavarsha with India is a positive statement by a reputed researcher of Puranic cosmography, who wrote:

“The southernmost varsha, Bharata, lying between the Himavat and the sea, is, *of course*, India.” (Emphasis added.)

The understanding and unhesitating acceptance of the identity of India and Bharatavarsha was further formalised in the solemn declaration of our constitution: “India that is Bharat shall be a union of States.” This declaration puts a historic seal on the identity of our country and nationality, but not necessarily on our history. The terms, it needs to be remembered, had different origins, one perceiving the country from what may be called a geographically outer perspective and conveying different meanings in different contexts, and the other term, Bharatavarsha, consistently, but not eternally, used in early texts of different varieties, located within a completely different cosmographic structure.

**The term Bharatavarsha has therefore altogether different nuances, and the texts present variations on how its different segments are conceived.**

Pursuing the early history of this term, independently of its possible correspondences, and clarifying the different contexts in which they occur, may yield rewarding results. Connected with this issue is also the nature of historiography. We have been used for long to take it for granted, despite some recent efforts to explore the history of the idea of India, that the country we inhabit has had the same connotation all along, and that the way we think of our country now is what was always perceived in the past. At the same time, it is common knowledge that geographical spaces and notions such as that of Bharatavarsha are defined and redefined, and that, in order to understand the history of a space and its peoples, it is necessary to be aware of such processes of definition and redefinition.

Secondly, identification of a particular collective sensitivity, which is usually termed nationalism, with a space is not a given quality of that space or of the collective human entity inhabiting that space. It is a sensitivity which is historically acquired and

which may undergo mutations. A country or ideas about that country may exist independently of that collective sensitivity unless this historically acquired awareness is shown to be evident through different forms of articulation.

Today, when we have come to accept that a geographically bounded (in whatever way) and a constitutionally defined country is what we belong to, the need to look into the meanings of that country in the past seems to me, for various reasons, to be urgent. Historiographically, we are at a particular juncture in our efforts to understand that meaning, particularly because there are sharply different approaches to the concept of India or Bharatavar]sa.

Bharatavarsha having been conceived as constituted by a central zone and four cardinal directions (which could be further expanded to seven or nine), and by various janapadas located in them, the self-identification of different human groups (as also their identification by others) was in terms of their respective janapadas, and not in terms of Bharatavarsha. A person could declare himself as from Magadha, Kosala, Dravida, or Kaunkana or Avanti, or be hailed as coming from Gandhara, Kuru or Madra, but never as from Bharatavarsha. Thus, Bharatavarsha, without its janapadas, would not have made much sense.

To raise the question whether Bharatavarsha was the locus of our early national consciousness, either of a fully germinated or of an ever-germinating variety, is therefore somewhat irrelevant. The terms *svadesa* (one's own country) or *videsa* (foreign country) would be of no relevance in the context of the concept of Bharatavarsha. 'The early meaning of Bharatavarsha can therefore be discussed and understood without any reference to Indian nationalism.

**The notions of “border”, “frontier”, or “foreigner”, being absent in the connotation of Bharatavarsha, it seems that despite references to frequent raids and invasions and their negative socio-political impacts in early sources, the bogey of invasions and of foreigners as catalytic agents in effecting grave disorders in Indian society is not in consonance with how the early Indians themselves perceived their Bharatavarsha and its society.**

It was not invasions which split the “self” from the “others”. The major divide in Indian society was perceived through the angle of varna which made the all-important difference between those within it and those outside it.

The way the ideas of India and of Bharatavarsha were drawn upon by colonial administrations marked a definite shift from their earlier meanings in the form of a crystallisation of a mappable, concrete territorial identity thrown back into the past, and what was open-ended now became a closed, administratively defined country. This spatial unit also became the locus of the history of a clearly definable country in a way it had not been earlier, and this lies at the back of the infiltration of the concepts of “foreigners”, “foreign invasions”, “dark ages” and similar forebodings permeating the large span of the past.

This newly enclosed entity of Bharatavarsha was not only the locus of a homogeneous historical narrative; it became, in many willing hands unaware of the danger of anachronism, the seat of an India nation state. One can thus understand the stress, easily decipherable in our history textbooks, on political unification and on the fear of decentralisation and disunity.

The sharply etched chronological division of Bharatavarsha's pre-colonial past into "Hindu" and "Muslim", too deeply embedded in our historiography to be effectively eradicated even today, created a new perspective of the past, not present in Indian thought about the past earlier, clearing the space for the projection of "Hindu" rule and "Muslim" rule, political hegemony passing on from one nation to the other.

This, one need hardly point out, is a highly motivated, diabolical misconstruction of the concepts of both "India" and particularly of Bharatavarsha. Bharatavarsha of the past developed as an idea which could accommodate various spaces and their social characteristics within a structure which had both the ideal and its variants. 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.