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Assessing Artificiality: A Probe into the Basis for Indian Nationhood

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Abstract: While students of nationalism, ardent primordialists aside, will be fully aware that *all* nations are, at their core, artificial constructs, there is nonetheless an implicit acceptance that some nations are more artificial than others. To suggest that certain nations are more artificial than others is not, on its own, an absurd claim, providing, of course, that appropriate criteria are used to measure this "artificiality" against. One country that has had to bear such charges is India, namely because, it is said, its people are far too diverse to be realistically considered members of a singular nation and because it lacks sufficient antiquity as a nation. This article will seek to respond to such charges by providing a glimpse into India's past and ancient belief systems that many laypeople remain ignorant of, the knowledge of which will significantly help to challenge the claim that India is nothing but an artificial construct.
Keywords: Artificial, artificiality, Indian, nation, nationhood

When we look at a political map of the world, we see a mosaic of states separated by defined and, in some cases, perforated lines. When we look at a satellite image of the globe, however, no such lines appear; only the geographical features of the earth's surface, such as the continental mass, mountain ranges, rivers, and seas, exist. This image is perhaps the simplest way to demonstrate that the state system is wholly man-made—it "exists" only because humanity has fashioned it into being through its own contrivances. The term "state" in a political context is used interchangeably with the term "nation-state," a prefix of "nation" that denotes that the states present on a map have at least some figurative basis—namely, that they represent separate nations or distinct bodies of people, each nation with its territory, its national flag, its national anthem, its national bird, and so forth. Yet, there is recognition in this same system that some nations may not have their state or may be spread across various states—it is for this reason that we have terms like "stateless nation," or why the international community permits the right of self-determination for groups seeking statehood. As such, while states are undoubtedly man-made, deliberate, and even cynical creations, the nations that underscore them are not necessarily so.

In an academic sense, debates surrounding the essential basis of nations and nationhood have rumbled on between those we consider primordialists, including both sociobiological (Van de Berghe, 1978, 1988, 1995) and cultural varieties (Geertz, 1973; Grosby, 1994), that believe, to a greater or lesser extent, in the organic and innate nature of nations, versus those that are instrumentalists (Brass, 1979, 1991) and modernists (Gellner, 1983; Hobsbawm, 1983), who contend that nations are nothing but elitist constructs or products of mass social engineering. Other debates that have long raged include whether a nation can exist without nationalism, the latter being the supposed "felt" element of nationhood (Kristeva, 2025). And assuming it cannot, is nationalism itself a positive or negative force (Miller, 1993)? Or is it simply a matter of achieving an optimum balance (Abbay, 2010)? Or is it a question of type which is the key to determining its effect (Mylonas & Tudor, 2023)?

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One of the more remedial yet crucial discussions in the associated literature has been defining the term "nation." Those of a more primordialist persuasion have attempted to do so, such as Johann Gottfried Herder, and those with a more rationalist take, such as Ernest Gellner (1983) and Benedict Anderson (1983). Such definitions are either guilty of overstating the inherent similarities of a national body of people and exaggerating the differences between one nation and another, towards completely denying or downplaying the significance of the emotional dimension of nationhood. In this author's opinion, one of the few scholars who managed to capture the intricacies of nationhood in their definition was Anthony D. Smith, who defined a nation as follows,

> a named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members. (Smith, 1999, p. 11)

Excluding the first part of this definition, which pertains to "sharing an historic territory, common myths and historical memories," it is clear that the other components could more realistically be achieved within the confines of a political state of some sort. As such, nations, seen from this perspective, are a relatively modern-phenomenon. While this may be the case, the idea of collective groups having a collective consciousness and emotional bonds toward one another, supported by common traditions and shared beliefs, is far more deep-rooted (Grosby, 2005). Indeed, such communities were typically grafted on to, partially or entirely, to form the nation-states we see today. Smith termed such groups *ethnies* and defined them as follows,

> a named human population with myths of common ancestry, shared historical memories and one or more common elements of culture, including an association with a homeland, and some degree of solidarity, at least among the elites. (Smith, 1999, p. 13)

Therefore, it is clear that groups meeting the definition of an *ethnie* possess the "essence and spirit" of nationhood. Thus, as far as this paper is concerned, a group that meets the criteria for an *ethnie* is a nation, albeit without the trappings of a modern state. Such *ethnies* could have held statehood in the past and then lost it, or could be simply lying in wait, aware or unaware, until such a time that statehood is attained, but nations are essentially what they are. By taking this line, we can quite confidently say, for example, that the German nation was not founded by Otto von Bismarck in the 19th century, even if he was the architect of the modern German nation-state. Similarly, the Chinese nation was not born through the Xinhai Revolution of 1911, even if it did spell the birth of its first post-imperial republic. These were nations for many centuries, if not millennia, prior.

One may legitimately wonder why defining or classifying a nation is of any importance whatsoever. This paper contends that it is important because agreeing on a definition, or set of acceptable definitions, helps us to be consistent in assessing the substance and credentials of nations or potential nations, whereby we do not simply afford nation status to peoples that we like, or have a vested interest in liking, and deny it to those that we do not. Furthermore, a state devoid of nationhood has very real-world implications. For example, a lack of belief in the nation often accompanies or is a precursor to civil strife and a whole manner of insurgency movements. It also invites rival territorial claims (Çeku, 2017), usually from neighboring states, which can escalate to full-blown international conflicts if not properly managed. So, in a nutshell, defining the nation and nationhood matters; it is not just a futile academic exercise.

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Debates about Indian Nation and Nationhood

Whereas questions about the legitimacy of nations and nationhood are not unique to any part of the world, it is fair to say that certain nation-states have had more of a question mark hanging over them than others. One such country that has had its nationality routinely challenged is that of India. Even for those who agree India is a legitimate nation, there are robust debates about what kind of nation India is or should be. Such a debate, or tussle, exists between those whom we can broadly describe as Indian secularists on the one hand and the proponents of Hindutva, or *Hindutvadis* as they are colloquially referred to, on the other. The Indian secularists tend not to see association with one of India's indigenous religions as a precondition for nationality. For them, religion is not irrelevant or ostracised from public life (Nandy, 1998) as it is in the *laïcité* form. Rather, regardless of the number of adherents or historical association it has with the state's territory, it is deemed that each religion should have parity with one another. This principle can be identified in the Indian nationalist slogan of "unity in diversity" and in many aspects of the Indian constitution that have existed since the formation of the post-colonial state (Luthra & Mukhija, 2018). The evidence of this transpires in many high-profile cases where the constitution is upheld or referred to. For example, the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid dispute was finally settled in 2019 following the Supreme Court's decision to award the land to the Hindu community. In the same ruling, the court also stated that Muslims must be compensated with a separate plot of land to establish a mosque (Padmavathi & Prasath, 2019).

Additionally, many such Indian secularists tend to have quite a post-modernist take on Indian nationhood (Kaviraj, 2010), for they see it as coming to fruition during the long freedom struggle (Desai, 2023). Namely, it was a reaction to British imperialism, and with that, the grass-roots freedom movement, which the Indian National Congress spearheaded, galvanized previously disparate parts of "India" into a sense of national awakening (Sen, 1952). The same secularists also acknowledge the contribution of the infrastructure and institutions that the British created, such as the railways, army, Indian Civil Service, national printed press, or radio, in helping to fuse the nation together (Bayly, 1994; Gautam, 1985). In sum, therefore, it is not so much culture but shared values and the desire for freedom and self-governance, using the means available for them to do so, that built the nation and gave it its vibrancy (Gottlob, 2007).

On the other side are the proponents of Hindutva, who, in line with Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1923), believe, broadly speaking, in upholding the privileged position of the Hindu within India. It is fair to say this ideology is quite negatively received outside of India, similar to how those outside Israel often view Zionism. There is an opinion, and some would say a gross misinterpretation, that the Hindutva ideology is somehow fascist in orientation (Leidig, 2020), intolerant of difference, and especially hostile to foreign religions, especially Islam and, to a lesser extent, Christianity. Regardless of whether such allegations have a genuine basis, it is clear that the philosophy is far more refined than it is given credit for. For Savarkar (1923), a Hindu is

> [H]e who looks upon the land that extends from Sindu to Sindu—from the Indus to the Seas—as the land of his forefathers—his Fatherland (*Pitribhu*), who inherits the blood of that race whose first discernible source could be traced to the Vedic Saptasindhus and which on its onward march, assimilating much that was incorporated and ennobling much that was assimilated, has comes to be known as the Hindu people, who has inherited and claims as his own culture of that race as expressed chiefly in their common classical language Sanskrit and represented by a common history, a common literature, art and architecture, law and jurisprudence, rites and rituals, ceremonies and sacraments, fairs and festivals; and who above all, addressed this land,

> this Sindhusthan as his Holyand (*Punyabhu*), as the land of his prophets and seers, of his godmen and gurus, the land of piety and pilgrimage. These are the essentials of Hindutva—a common nation (*Rashtra*) a common race (*Jati*) and a common civilization (*Sanskriti*). (pp. 115–116)

Furthermore, for Savarkar and other Hindu nationalists of a similar persuasion, it is impossible and ludicrous to try to disentangle Indian civilization from Hindu civilization; they are one and the same, whereas periods of foreign occupation or colonization are just that, foreign. The line goes, how could the co-religionists of groups that destroyed tens of thousands of temples, forcibly converted its people, inflicted famines, looted its wealth, ever be considered sufficiently Indian? So where does that leave the minority populations such as Muslims and Christians? When it comes to these groups—it is clear—they are seen as a group with divided loyalties. Savarkar's (1923) statement sums this up well,

> For though Hindusthan to them is Fatherland as to any other Hindu yet it is not to them a Holyland too. Their holyland is far off in Arabia or Palestine. Their mythology and Godmen, ideas and heroes are not the children of this soil. Consequently their names and their outlook smack of a foreign origin. Their love is divided. Nay, if some of them be really believing what they profess to do, then there can be no choice – they must, to a man, set their Holyland above their Fatherland in their love and allegiance. That is but natural. We are not condemning nor are we lamenting. We are simply telling facts as they stand. (p. 113).

But does that mean Muslims ought not to be considered sons of the soil? For radical *Hindutvadis*, the Muslims of India are fifth columnists who ought to have vacated India after Partition—especially given that they, as a community, supported the division of the country (Saxena, 2015). For those that are on the less extreme end of the spectrum, Muslims are as Indian as any other group (Pandey, 1999). As such, Muslims have the absolute right to preach and practice their religion, and allowing them to do so is not simply out of courtesy but fundamentally rooted in an essential Hindu value of respecting and honoring all religions and religious paths, the so-called *sarva dharma sambava*.

Nevertheless, even among those more moderate *Hindutvadis*, there is a sense that Muslims should tacitly accept the paramountcy of Hindu culture. This, of course, has resulted in friction on more than a few occasions, such as taking issue with Muslims for not singing *Vande Mataram*, an unofficial national anthem that celebrates the nation in its feminine motherly form (Barthwal, 2018). Why should Muslims not salute the mother nation or pay homage to it? Would it really be an act of *shirk* to do so? Or what about the right to slaughter cows following Islamic custom, especially during Eid al-Adha? An animal, which, of course, is sacred to Hindus? For Hindutva ideologues, both radical and moderates, allowing such practices to continue, especially when it is done so in public, is a step too far and is tantamount to an unnecessary provocation (Tejani, 2019). At the heart of these debates, though not always obvious to unwitting masses, are the contrasting interpretations and philosophies on Indian nationhood held by Indian secularists and *Hindutvadis*.

Another, as yet unsettled, debate on the topic of the Indian nation and nationality is whether India should be viewed as a singular nation or as a nation of nations. Insisting on, or gesturing, a singular monolithic version of Indian nationhood, as the *White Paper on the Punjab Agitation* did (Government of India, 1984), has, quite understandably, invited nativist reactions from minority religions, linguistic groups, castes, and tribal communities alike (Kohli, 1998). On the other hand, some would agree that affording sub-national groups too much in the way of deference can also, as it has in the past, conversely encourage separatism and anti-Indianism (Shourie, 1984). While the Indian National Congress caved into the All India Muslim League's

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demand for Pakistan and, therefore, essentially signed off on the religious division of the country (Godse, 2003), it could not bring itself to extend that same privilege to other religious groups. Indeed, India, in the first few years after independence, was deeply suspicious of any religio-political demand. In many ways, this was entirely understandable; the Partition of the country, rooted in a strange concoction of Islamic radicalism and British neo-imperialist policy, had been a political and humanitarian disaster of epic proportions (Kataria, 2021).

As such, the only sub-national autonomy deemed palatable by New Delhi after independence was one that centered on language. This may seem strange and counterintuitive since, across much of the world, language is very much seen as the cornerstone of nationalist movements—but this is not so in India, the exception perhaps being the Punjabi *suba* movement, and that only owing to its special connection to Sikh religion and culture. And strangely, despite being quite proud and protective over their mother tongues, most Indians would not view their linguistic groups as a separate nationality. Only a few groups have subscribed to the "nation of nations" mantra, with certain strands among the Sikhs and Marathas as examples. Both have a deep sense of pride about the pre-colonial entities held in their name—Maharajah Ranjit Singh and Shivaji are more than just folk heroes but, it can be quite legitimately argued, nationalist figures in their own right. However, given that the Marathas have not asked or pushed for their own nation-state means that this immense Maratha pride is not an issue for New Delhi, it has led to anti-migrant views from figures like Bal Thackeray and other members of Shiv Sena, but a long way of supporting separation (Purandare, 2013). On the other hand, in the case of the Sikhs, the Khalistan movement that ravaged the state of Punjab during the 1980s and early 1990s led to a very different and, arguably, overly heavy-handed response from the center.

While questions about the nature of the Indian nations are vibrant within India, some simply refute India's status as a nation altogether or, at best, consider it to be highly artificial. Such questions have been posited as far back as the early colonization of the country. Indeed, India's lack of natural nationhood, or basis as a nation, for some justified its colonization in the first place (Parekh, 1989). However, its nationality has not only been challenged by outsiders but by insiders too, challenges which coincided with the demand for Pakistan and the numerous separatist movements that have occurred since 1947.

Although students of nationalism, ardent primordialists aside, will be fully aware that all nations are, at their core, artificial constructs (Gellner, 1964), there is nonetheless an implicit acceptance that some nations are more artificial than others. This artificialness is typically set in contrast to the supposed naturalness of certain great power nations of Europe that have, apparently, been organically welded into existence by the forces of history rather than by deliberate machination. Regardless of the issue that one may take with the validity of this dichotomy, to suggest that certain nations are more artificial than others is not, on its own, an absurd claim, providing, of course, that appropriate criteria are used to measure this artificiality against (Hobsbawm, 1992; Smith, 1997). In the case of India, its detractors have leveled essentially two main charges, which allegedly expose its high degree of artificiality—the first is that its people are far too diverse to be realistically considered members of a singular nation, and the second, and most commonly cited charge, relates to its level of antiquity, or perceived lack of.

Argument

Though routinely made, these two accusations have not been adequately responded to. Instead, these accusations have hung around India's neck for decades, if not centuries. This article will aim to reveal the specifics of each charge, namely the lack of homogeneity and lack of antiquity, and, then provide a robust response to both accusations by drawing upon a

combination of conventional logic as well as the treasure trove of information relating to India's past and ancient belief systems that many laypeople remain ignorant of. In answering these allegations, Anthony D. Smith's definition of an *ethnie* will be used as a yardstick to measure India's nationality, or lack thereof, against.

Charge 1: Lack of Homogeneity

As mentioned, the first charge against India is that it is far too diverse for its people to be realistically considered members of a singular nation. That India is incredibly heterogeneous is palpably true. There is an absence of a common lingua franca, with the official language of Hindi rarely spoken in rural areas of southern India. There is substantial inter- and intra-religious diversity and, in many cases, outright hostility between these pillars, the awareness of which spurred the vitriolic and, ultimately, genocidal movement for Pakistan. This schism was encapsulated in the words of one, Sir Wazir Khan, who, like many high-profile Muslims of India of the time, was bestowed with titles from the British Crown,

> I wish to emphasise here and it should always be borne in mind that India is a continent; it should further be borne in mind that Hindus and the Mussalmans, inhabiting this vast continent, are not communities; but should be considered two nations in many respects (quoted in Chagla, 1973, pp. 103–104).

Though it could be argued that Sir Wazir Khan and others like him were nothing more than useful idiots in helping his British masters thwart the cherished goal of a united, free India sought by the majority of its inhabitants, to say that deep divisions existed between the Hindus and Muslims of India definitely had, and continue to have considerable evidentiary basis. In the modern sense, this has been borne out in numerous communalist clashes, be it Mumbai in 1992, Godhra in 2002, or Delhi in 2020, or, more trivially, contrasting opinions towards international affairs such as the Israel-Palestine conflict (Jangra, 2024).

In addition to this, entrenched caste divisions remain, and this is the case not only among the Hindu majority but also unofficially among the Sikh and Muslim communities (Ahmad, 1973; Behl, 2011). According to a Mazhabi Sikh by the name of Massa Singh, a *rickshawala* from Amritsar,

> They say there's no caste [in Sikhism] but there's still this feeling inside [held by the higher caste Sikhs]…otherwise why there are too many gurdwaras?... In a village…ok Chamar Sikh [have a] different gurdwara…you see, Mazhabi Sikh gurdwara different…and Jat Sikh their gurdwara [is] different…also one thing where they [are] burning the body, the cremations, they have separate…you see (Interview with Massa Singh, 20 September 2010).

Furthermore, there are pronounced racial differences, with certain people in Kashmir vastly different in complexion from, say, a Tamil in southern India, as a person from Kutch is in their facial and bone structure from a person native to the forests of Nagaland. Indeed, this is relevant even today to the extent that Indians from the north-east, who typically have more East Asian racial characteristics, are heavily underrepresented in popular culture (Dutta, 2023), especially in Bollywood and the arts, perhaps because they do not look sufficiently, or archetypically, Indian.

Responding to the Lack of Homogeneity Charge

Thus far, we can observe that India is an incredibly heterogeneous society or nation. However, even by conceding that this is indeed the case, does a high degree of heterogeneity

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correspond with a high degree of artificiality? It does not, nor should it. Take, for example, the United Kingdom, prior to the commencement of substantial immigration after the end of the Second World War, which accelerated to unprecedented levels ever since the Prime Ministership of Tony Blair (Mendick, 2016), most would not contend that it was an artificial nation or anything approaching that. Nevertheless, like India, the United Kingdom was and remains multilingual; other than English, Indigenous languages such as Welsh and Gaelic are spoken, as well as Scots, both Lowland and Ulster, albeit in certain pockets only (Kiernan, 1993). Similarly, the United Kingdom has historically contended with religious sectarianism, especially in Ulster. While caste is not an issue, undeniably, class has been and continues to be (Halliday, 2024). In terms of racial differences, more moderate yet observable differences have existed on these Isles, from the red-haired Scot to the dark-haired Welshman (Scouler, 1862). So unless the United Kingdom is considered an artificial country simply because of this heterogeneity, it would be quite unfair to do so in the case of India. In sum, being more or less heterogeneous is not a barrier to nationhood or being regarded as a natural nation.

What does need to exist, however, is some degree of solidarity between broad sections of society, even if that solidarity is not always unanimously felt. In the case of India, there have been plentiful examples of such solidarity. This solidarity has usually come in the form of working together to repel foreign invaders or oppressive rulers or valorizing those that do take on that mantel, be it Prithviraj Chauhan and his various battles with the Ghurid dynasty during the 12th century, the Marathas and the Sikhs working to liberate large swathes of India from the more oppressive periods of Mughal rule, or the early resistance to the British performed by the likes of Sultan Tipu, the cross-communal Indian mutiny of 1857, to the freedom movement led by the Indian National Congress from the mid-1880s onwards. Many of these struggles were performed for and supported by a body of people beyond their immediate kin and immediate geography and conducted as part of a coordinated political aim. This shows beyond doubt that, at least, *some degree of solidarity* has been on display in India for many centuries. Albeit that solidarity has been challenged, and even fractured at times, with princely rulers habitually turning on each other during the British-led game of *divide et impera*, or as was the case when the Muslims of India effectively supported division of the country in the twilight years of British rule.

But how about the first portion of Smith's *ethnie* definition, which pertains to myths of common ancestry? Does India's heterogeneous population hold myths of common ancestry? Looking at this through a communal lens, it would have to be an abrupt no. India's religious minorities, especially the Muslims and Christians, though the vast majority of them are essentially descendants of converts from Hinduism (Eaton, 1993; Mohandas Gandhi quoted in Philips & Wainwright, 1970), commonly eulogize lands and peoples outside of India. Going one step further, members of these two monotheistic faiths habitually claim foreign lineage, even when the evidence base is scanty at best (Siddiqi, 2008). Most plausibly, it is a way of attaining status and satisfying the ego that they do not share the same gene pool as the "idol-worshipping" polytheistic Hindu masses. Other minorities, such as the Sikhs, at least a sizeable portion, after the Singh Sabha movement of the late 19th century (Ballard, 1999; Kapur, 1986), and especially after the tragic events of 1984, namely Operation Bluestar and the anti-Sikh pogroms (Rudra, 2005), have also done their utmost to disentangle themselves from Hinduism and re-read Sikh history in a way which makes the two faiths appear philosophically, and in practice, opposed to one another (Singh, 1973).

So, does India fail on the score of having myths of common ancestry? It would appear so, based on what was mentioned above. Even groups such as the Arabs, who, at least racially, are visibly more diverse than the Indians, have a foundational myth, namely that they are descended from Ishmael, the firstborn of Abraham (Arnold, 1859). Such a myth provides unity among the Arabs beyond what mere association with religion or language can provide.

However, returning to the question at hand, if we only look at things from the perspective of the Hindus, then a far stronger case can be made regarding myths of common ancestry. A fitting example relates to one of the four *varnas* of the Hindu caste system, the Brahmins, found throughout the territory of *Akhand Bharat* (Oommen, 1994). Of course, anyone who is moderately knowledgeable about Hindu culture will be aware that the Brahmins are not a uniform group. Several Brahmin sub-castes predominate in different parts of the land, and, as a broad rule, they tend not to inter-marry.

Nevertheless, and crucially so, all of these sub-castes are ultimately still Brahmin and, therefore, by definition, subscribe to their foundational myth, or, more respectfully, belief, which is that their caste was born from the mouth of Lord Brahma, the creator God of the universe and one part of the *trimurti*, or Hindu trinity (Phromsuthirak, 1982). This shared belief held by this named body of people across the length and breadth of united India is especially significant because Brahmins, the highest *varna*, command the reverence of all other Hindus. In other words, this belief not only binds the Brahmin sub-castes together, but it also effectively serves as a metaphysical roof under which an otherwise disparate set of people from across all four *varnas* can stand. Whether this is sufficient enough to indicate a shared sense of nationhood for Hindus over the territory of India remains a matter of opinion.

Charge 2: Lack of Antiquity

However, perhaps the most commonly cited charge against India by those who view it is an artificial construct relates to its level of antiquity or perceived lack of. The charge against India is that before the arrival of the British, there was no such country known as India, and there was no history of unity warranting the title of a nation or even a precursor to such. British colonialists commonly made this charge.

> The notion that India is a nationality rests upon that vulgar error which political science principally aims at eradicating. India is not a political name, but only a geographical expression like Europe or Africa. It does not mark the territory of a nation and a language, but the territory of many nations and languages. (Seeley, 1883, pp. 219–220)
>
> The first and most essential thing to learn about India—[is] that there is not and never was an India, or even any country of India, possessing according to European ideas, any sort of unity. (Strachey, 1888, p. 5)

While fully accounting for such expressed views is, of course, a futile task, it is not beyond reason to suggest that ego and interest, both at the level of the individual and collective, tend to influence our reading of history, including what aspects of history we choose to cling on to, and, correspondingly, that which we choose to dismiss (Halbwachs, 1992; Lowenthal, 1997). Indeed, it could be contended that it suited the ego of many British colonialists, particularly after 1857, to believe that they were helping to build a nation or unite a hitherto unacquainted people, convincing themselves that colonialism was, therefore, a moral civilizational project rather than one based on economic plunder and exploitation (Darwin, 2011). It also meant, for later British colonialists and for historians sympathetic to them, that far from Britain needing to feel regret for the horrendous division of India in 1947, it was their right to leave it partitioned if they so wished, given that they were responsible for its uniting it in the first place. For separatists, be it the Muslim Leaguers of the 1940s (Chagla, 1973; Pirzada, 1986), or indeed Khalistani and Kashmiri separatists from the 1980s onwards, who, for the most part, appropriated views akin to the British colonizers regarding India's artificiality, it makes their task of selling their separatist goal far easier—as nothing but fakery or delusion is being challenged by their potential departure from the entity that is India. Take, for example, Jagjit Singh Chohan, the late self-proclaimed President of the National Council of Khalistan, who,

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while lauding the historic sacrifices made by the Sikhs, appears to acknowledge and recognize the entity of India, then proceeds to disassociate from it to help build his separatist case,

> We [the Sikhs] were made a sovereign people by Guru Gobind Singh when he started the Khalsa movement in 1699. The blood of 500,000 martyrs was spilled to liberate India from the shackles of slavery. What are the sacrifices of [Mohandas] Gandhi or Lajpat Rai compared to the Sikhs, and what is this Bharat? *It has never existed in history, it is merely a creation of the British* [emphasis added]. (Singh, 1982, pp. 154–155)

Responding to such charges against India's perceived lack of antiquity is not too difficult. Others have already done so, such as the Hindu nationalist icon and former head of the RSS, Madhav Golwalkar,

> It was the wily foreigner, the Britisher, who, to achieve his ulterior imperialistic motives, set afloat all such mischievous notions among our people so that the sense of patriotism and duty towards the integrated personality of our motherland was corroded. He carried on an insidious propaganda that we were never one nation, that we were never the children of the soil, but mere upstarts having no better claims than the foreign hordes of the Muslims or the British over this country. The misfortune is that the so-called educated of this land were taken by this ruse. But the fact is, long before the West had learnt to eat roast meat instead of raw, we were one nation, with one motherland. (Golwalkar, 1966, p. 81)

Adding to Golwalkar's view, leaving aside the rather obvious point that the British Raj was still part of India's history rather than a departure from it and the fact that the Raj could only have come into being and thrived due to considerable input and cooperation from the Indigenous population, such critics were seemingly ignorant of or sought to downplay deliberately, periods in India's history when it was united politically. The Mauryan Empire, under Ashoka the Great (reign from 268 BCE to 232 BCE), spanned the vast majority of *Akhand Bharat*, as well as territories beyond, as did the Mughal Empire under the emperorship of Aurangzeb (reign from 1658 CE to 1707 CE). A blunt retort may be that these were at comparatively brief periods in the subcontinent's history and overlook the hundreds of years when no common empire or entity existed. While such a view would be quite legitimate, reference to these prior pan-Indian entities does expose the fallacy that the British were the first to unite the country under one entity.

Responding to the Charge of a Lack of Antiquity

Demonstrating examples of India's prior political unity is not the most fitting or effective way to refute the artificial India claim. Rather, to address this claim with any conviction, there needs to be a movement away from using the traditionally cited objective criteria or indicators for nationhood (Connor, 1978, 1990), and instead, the focus should be on identifying whether there was a *belief* in the existence of the nation (Seton-Watson, 1960; Smith, 1999). In this regard, there are essentially two main questions that must be advanced in this respect. First, how did others see India prior to colonization? And second, how did India see itself prior to colonization?

Dealing with the first of these two questions, there is clear proof that others, outside of the territory of undivided India, were aware of its existence long before the British Raj reached its zenith. Having an awareness of an entity and making reference to it is an implicit way of gauging a belief in its existence. To give one of a few examples in this regard, the term Hindush,

a distortion of the word Sindhu, was used by the Achaemenians to describe the territory surrounding the Indus Valley after the Persian emperor Darius I had conquered it in 516 BCE (Dandamaev, 1989). Admittedly, a cynical riposte could very well claim that this was only a relatively small part of the territory that would later constitute British India and, therefore, cannot legitimately be considered proof of the antiquity of undivided India. This critical line would certainly seem more plausible if one were unaware of Indian, and especially Hindu, history, given that the Indus Valley was very much the cradle of the Rig Veda (Ballard, 1999; *The Tribune*, 1947), the oldest and most authoritative holy scripture of the Hindus, and it was from this valley area that Vedic knowledge and civilization spread across the length and breadth of undivided India.

For the sake of argument, let us agree that Hindush was territorially a very disparate entity from undivided India, and therefore, proving the existence of the former does not, even with civilizational parallels, establish the existence of the latter. Even still, there are other more clear-cut references made to the land approximating undivided India long before the arrival of the British on the subcontinent. For example, Babur, a descendant of Genghis Khan, who would go on to become the first Mughal emperor of India, wrote in his memoirs:

> The country of Hindustan is extensive, full of men, and full of produce. On the east, south, and even on the west, it ends at its great enclosing ocean (muhut darya-si-gha). On the north it has mountains which connect with those of Hindu-kush, Kafiristan and Kashmir. North-west of it lie Kabul, Ghazni and Qandahar. Dilhi is held (airimish) to be the capital of the whole of Hindustan…At the date of my conquest of Hindustan it was governed by five Musalman rulers (padshah) and two Pagan (kafir). These were the respected and independent rulers, but there were also, in the hills and jungles, many rais and rajas, held in little esteem (kichik karim). (Babur, 1922, pp. 480–481).

Going further back than Babur even, to the 10th century to be precise:

> India (the country of the Hindus) is a vast country, having many seas and mountains…The Hindu nation extends from the mountains of Khorasan and of es-Sind as far as et-Tubbet (Al-Mas'udi, 1841, pp. 176–177).

Even by framing this artificial India debate exclusively through a Eurocentric lens, it is common knowledge that two centuries before the British East India Company ever set foot in the subcontinent, the great Italian explorer Christopher Columbus was looking for India before he inadvertently discovered the Americas—and hence Native Americas were referred to as Indians. So, has this section proven the antiquity and naturalness of the Indian nation? According to some, perhaps, for others, all that has been established thus far is that some outside cultures or people had, at most, an understanding and appreciation of a geographical area approximating the territory of undivided India, but this hardly qualifies as a legitimate basis for calling pre-colonial India a nation, or even a precursor to such, in the same way that acknowledgment of the geographical expanse of pre-colonial Africa does not qualify it as a nation. Given the ambiguity over whether outsiders viewed India as a nation or an entity akin to that rather than just a mere geographical area, the only legitimate way to dismiss the artificial India claim is to demonstrate, without ambiguity, that a sizable portion of people living in this geographical expanse held an awareness and belief of about its unity. To answer this in the affirmative, one must understand and be willing to probe into Hindu civilizational history, particularly its associated scriptures and belief systems. By doing so, this should demonstrate that India has shared historical memories and one or more common elements of culture, including an association with a homeland.

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Referring first to scripture, since this, in most situations, stands as hard evidence, there are several quotations and passages in the *Puranas* that refer to India's geography. For example, the Vishnu Purana, book II, chapter III refers to the perimeter of the country of India, or Bharata and Bharatavarsha as per its ancient names, its body of people consisting of the four *varna*, and its spiritual significance:

> The country that lies north of the ocean, and south of the snowy mountains, is called Bhárata, for there dwelt the descendants of Bharata. It is nine thousand leagues in extent, and is the land of works, in consequence of which men go to heaven, or obtain emancipation….
> On the east of Bhárata dwell the Kirátas (the barbarians); on the west, the Yavanas; in the centre reside Brahmans, Kshatriyas, Vaiśyas, and Śúdras, occupied in their respective duties of sacrifice, arms, trade, and service…
> In the Bhárata-varsha it is that the succession of four Yugas, or ages, the Krita, the Treta, the Dwápara, and Kali, takes place; that pious ascetics engage in rigorous penance; that devout men offer sacrifices; and that gifts are distributed; all for the sake of another world. In Jambu-dwípa, Vishńu, consisting of sacrifice, is worshipped, as the male of sacrificial rites, with sacrificial ceremonies: he is adored under other forms elsewhere. Bhárata is therefore the best of the divisions of Jambu-dwípa, because it is the land of works: the others are places of enjoyment alone. It is only after many thousand births, and the aggregation of much merit, that living beings are sometimes born in Bhárata as men. The gods themselves exclaim, 'Happy are those who are born, even from the condition of gods, as men in Bhárata-varsha, as that is the way to the pleasures of Paradise, or the greater blessing of final liberation. Happy are they who, consigning all the unheeded rewards of their acts to the supreme and eternal Vishńu, obtain existence in that land of works, as their path to him. We know not, when the acts that have obtained us heaven shall have been fully recompensed, where we shall renew corporeal confinement; but we know that those men are fortunate who are born with perfect faculties in Bhárata-varsha.'

A critic may say, however, that the existence of such observable references did not infer that anything like a large portion of Hindus were aware of this or even held such belief, especially given that access to scripture was always tightly guarded in a caste-riddled society. In other words, where is the evidence, explicitly or implicitly, that anything like a broad mass of people was aware of India's geographical and civilizational unity? For this, one must look into the belief systems and religious practices of the principal Hindu denominations for millennia, which were palpably observed outside of an elite group of scripturally aware Brahmins. To begin, it is clear that Hindus, irrespective of caste, have believed in the existence of at least seven holy rivers in India, regarded as Goddesses in their own right, including Ganga, Yamuna, Godavari, Saraswati, Narmada, Sindhu, and Kaveri. Other lesser but still holy rivers, including the Krishna, Brahmaputra, and Tapti, can be added to this list. All these rivers have been depicted as Goddesses, except the Brahmaputra, depicted in male form. These rivers each have their own stories that have been narrated across the length and breadth of the country. These rivers are depicted as life givers, none more so than Yamuna, in direct contrast to her mythological brother, the lord of death, Yamraj. Other rivers have the quality of being the granters of *moksha*, or liberation, such as Ganga, which is said to flow to earth from the locks of Lord Shiva's hair. Such awareness and continued veneration of these rivers that span the

length and breadth of India, as blood vessels span the body, undoubtedly helps to build the case that her native inhabitants are associated with this vast territory in a manner that corresponds to a literal worship of their national motherland.

In addition, the three main Hindu denominations have several legends that point to an awareness of India's unity. These denominations include Vaishnavism – which believes in the paramountcy of Lord Vishnu and his ten *avatars*; Shaivism—which believes in the paramountcy of Lord Shiva; and Shaktism, which places focus on the consort of Lord Shiva, Goddess Parvati or Durga and her various manifestations. In terms of Vaishnavism, other than the aforementioned passages of the Vishnu Purana, the starkest demonstration of the awareness and belief in the geographical unity of India is in the location of the *Chardham*—or the four holiest sites for Vaishnavism—that are positioned at the four corners of India, from Badrinath in the north to Jagannath Puri in the east, Rameshwaram in the south, and Dwarka in the west. Indeed, for hundreds of years, many dedicated Vaishnavs and other Hindus performed *yatras* or pilgrimages to each of the locations by foot, usually traveling in a clockwise direction starting from Jagannath Puri (Kanvinde & Tom, 2018). Whether these *Chardham* grew to occupy the symbolic importance they did to Vaishnavism because of their location or whether that was independent of their respective geographies, it is difficult to deny that, for the Hindus, this definitely helped to create a bond, be it consciously or unconsciously, with the territorial mass that they had spanned.

Regarding Shaivism, the evidence for knowledge and belief of India's geographical unity is equally compelling. It is commonly known by Hindus, including the vast majority that rely on oral traditions as a means to communicate and transmit their religion generationally, that Lord Shiva, from his abode in Mount Kailash (i.e., in the north), sent out his family members in different directions across India. While he stayed in Kailash, his consort Goddess Parvati (Durga) went towards the east, with Durga very much the primary deity of eastern India, one of his sons, the elephant-headed Lord Ganesh, was ordered to go towards the west, where modern Marathis, in particular, worship him with the utmost reverence, and his other son, the warrior, Lord Kartikeya, or Murugan as he is also known, being sent towards the south and is, by all accounts, regarded as the principal God of the Tamil people. In other words, the four main constituent members of the *Shiv Parivar*, or family, effectively established their pre-eminence in the four corners of India, thereby pointing to a territorial unity that resembles the ties of the most infamous divine family in Hinduism.

Without much contention, the most palpable evidence for the belief and existence of a cultural and civilizational unity for India lay in the Shaktism sect. A legend, which once again is commonly articulated across India, is that the first consort of Lord Shiva, Sati, who is regarded as the first incarnation of Goddess Parvati, immolated herself in the sacrificial fire in response to the humiliation her husband, Lord Shiva, was subject to from her father Daksha during a *yagna* ceremony—this is where the term *sati*, or widow sacrifice, comes from (Weinberger-Thomas, 1999). After this incident, her grief-stricken husband, Lord Shiva, carried her immolated body around the universe. Her body was then taken away by Lord Vishnu, who is regarded as a brother-like figure to Goddess Parvati, and, using his celestial weapon, the *Sudharshan Chakra*, cut her body into multiple pieces, 51 pieces as per the Pitharaya Tantra, although other numbers have been cited, including 52, 64 and 108, in other texts such as in the Brahmanda Purana and Srimad Devi Bhagvatam (Sharma et al., 2023). Those body parts fell from the heavens and landed around the territory of *Akhand Bharat*, including in modern-day India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Southern Tibet, and Sri Lanka. Each of these *Shakti Peethas* is still venerated, and *yatras* are performed by dedicated followers of the Shakti sect. This shows that not only have Hindus been fully aware of the geographical unity of their homeland for millennia, but that undivided India is itself nourished in the blood and body parts of their mother—Sati—the first incarnation of Goddess Parvati. Hence, India is

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almost literally the motherland or *matrabhumi* of its inhabitants. Seen from this perspective, it would be insincere to claim that India was a British colonial creation or a mere artificial construct. One could quite legitimately claim that India is, as far as modern nation-states go, one of the most natural entities to have ever graced the earth.

Conclusion

During this article, the standard or benchmark of what it means to be a nation was taken from Smith's description of an *ethnie*. This is because the essence and spirit of a nation, as per this author's contention, does not lay in the institutions of the state and its apparatus but rather in its more felt aspects such as "myths of common ancestry, shared historical memories and one or more common elements of culture, including an association with a homeland, and some degree of solidarity, at least among the elites" (Smith, 1999, p. 13). Having done so, the main aim of this article was to shed light on and respond to the two main charges that have been leveled against the country India by its detractors, which allegedly expose its high degree of artificiality or lack of basis as a nation. These two charges consist of its people being far too diverse to be realistically considered members of a singular nation level of antiquity or perceived lack of. In order to respond to these charges, this paper drew upon a combination of conventional logic and a treasure trove of information relating to India's past and ancient belief systems.

Regarding the first charge, while it was conceded that India is an incredibly heterogeneous nation, it was posited that heterogeneity in itself did not invalidate claims to common nationhood, especially so given that there had been numerous occasions in India's past wherein inter-communal and inter-provincial solidarity had been exhibited. Besides that, focusing on the Hindu people alone, it was evident that myths of common ancestry existed and continue to exist, spanning the length and breadth of *Akhand Bharat*. In terms of the second charge about the lack of antiquity, this was easily dispensed with by citing the pan-Indian empires that existed prior to Britain's arrival, together with the belief in the existence of India, which was observed both concerning how outsiders viewed it, and, crucially, how its inhabitants viewed it, as evidenced both in religious scripture, folklore, and practice, with the most potent example being the legend behind the *Shakti Peethas*.

In a nutshell, this article was able to show that the artificial India charge is, at best, rooted in ignorance and, at worst, in an orientalist, condescending, dismissive view of non-European culture and cultural history. While all nations are, at their core, artificial constructs, the evidence that has been put forth in this article reveals that India has far more grounding and basis as a nation than its detractors would care to admit.

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