

PREFACE

The Indian Constitution famously begins with the words “India, that is Bharat”. The title of this book then, *Bharata Before the British*, is not only for alliterative effect, but is also a nod to the reclamation of selfhood that our Independence from British rule in 1947 symbolised and for which it set the stage. This book, or rather the essays that it brings together, addresses in one way or another a number of fundamental questions regarding the history of early India. It is written expressly for the lay person and brings exciting new insights and in-depth explorations from the arena of scholarship out into the world of the general reader who is curious and invested in knowing authentically about the early career of Indians as a people.

How far back does the idea of Bharata, that is India, go? Did the British bring India into existence or is she an ancient nation? Was Kashmir historically ‘unique’ and isolated from the rest of India or thoroughly connected with it? How was Islamisation culturally experienced in medieval Kashmir? Is myth the antithesis of history or a historical mode in its own right? What is the antiquity of Krishna worship at Mathura? How did Shakti veneration shape the identity of a people and their land? On a different plane, is there only one way of time-keeping or did premodern India host multiple temporal visions

and worldviews—ways of knowing and being—that have been suppressed by an unequal world order? Did ancient Indians write history? Was there an Indic vision of the discipline as different from modern Western notions? Was Sanskrit an elitist language or a literary culture with public reach and relevance? Did it speak only for the rich and the powerful or did it recover the voices of marginalised Others, including non-human animals? What was the purpose of architecture in ancient India? Could it be an instrument of liberation (*moksha*)? On the other hand, what was the ancient idea of erotics (*kama*) and how did it relate to society? How did it feel—smell, sound, touch, appear—to live in an ancient Indian city? Does Sanskrit poetry contain merely stereotyped and idealised depictions of ancient times or have we been reading it wrong? What were the overarching goals of Indic knowledge systems and how far have we come from them today?

In engaging these varied issues, in filling gaps in our knowledge about ancient India or its regions, in correcting misplaced perspectives, and in offering culture-sensitive methods with which to work through our texts and traditions, *Bharata Before the British and Other Essays* invites us to rethink our understanding of India and Indology. It challenges, in particular, the hold on the profession of history of colonial and neo-imperial approaches, on the one hand, and political ideologies, on the other. These have taken us considerably away from developing a robust emic understanding of ourselves—our nation, our thought, our practices and patterns of belief and behaviour. The diverse essays in this book, penned over the years and bringing together history, literature, philosophy, anthropology and art, attempt to reclaim such an understanding in ways that do justice to our

historical sources on their own terms rather than compromise them in the service of extra-academic imperatives.

We live in a time of fake narratives and social media-fuelled disinformation, on the one hand, and hubris of some professional historians towards 'public' histories, on the other. Fittingly perhaps then, the last two essays in this book discuss the state of Indian history today and also what the way forward may be to ameliorate the ills of the academic establishment, the associated stasis in the field, and its disconnect with the masses.

Several of the essays carried here are revised versions of a popular invitation column that I used to do for *The New Indian Express*. Some of these pieces going viral and the enthusiastic feedback that I received in my inbox from readers every time the column appeared, were proof of the thirst and need for transmitting rigorous historical research and revelations to the public in a digestible and engrossing manner. History did not have to be boring and heavy and abstruse! It could and should speak to people of all backgrounds and their concerns while yet retaining its classical literary form (rather than only the current rush to videos and podcasts!). This book is an extension of that belief. Without diluting historical detail and referentiality, nor falling for populism, it draws the audience into a whole new world of stimulating questions about India and Indology and offers cutting edge answers to them.

I wish to thank Prasanna R S, Assistant Resident Editor of *The New Indian Express*, for inviting and nudging me to do the column and being a supportive and involved editor over the two years that I wrote for his paper while battling multiple attacks of Covid and other challenges. My gratitude is also due to the publishers (especially Routledge) of my earlier books, as well as the IGNCAs journal *Kalakalpa*, on which I have drawn

for the content of a few essays. A special thanks to Arpita Biswas for executing the lead map carried in chapter one. Ravi Dhar, B R Mani, Mayank Pandey, Ananta Vrindavan Das, Shailendra Bhandare, Iqbal Ahmed, Todywalla Auctions, Classical Numismatic Group CNG and the Tallenge Store are all warmly acknowledged for their help with other illustrations. Aishani Shrivastava assisted with re-formatting a few of the essays. My thanks to Renu Kaul Verma, the dynamic Director of Vitasta Publishing, who when she requested this book, convinced me this labour of love would be in the best of hands.

My revisionist journey in history is a quarter of a century old now and I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the teachers, colleagues and friends in this time who gave me the freedom and applause to tread new paths and critique, often radically, old ways of the history academy. To be sure, this freedom is not to be taken for granted in Indian academia where, despite the lip service, neither dissent nor autonomy of scholarship is encouraged. Similarly, a large number of my students in Delhi University and JNU over more than two decades have given abundantly of their devotion and enthusiasm for their teacher and the new histories she did with them.

I owe my lessons in professional independence and integrity as well pride in the country to my beloved father and prodigious journalist, the late Sumer Kaul. With my husband, Nachiketa, I have shared a love of Indian philosophy. My canine kids Jim, Kalli, Vito and a host of others have brought me joy and sustained me through life's many ups and downs.

For these people and this book, and for the singular honour of being born an Indian, I thank God.

Shonaleeka Kaul

13th April 2024, Baisakhi

Bharata before the British: The Idea of India in Precolonial Times

1

In an ancient, continuous living civilisation like our own, the past is never past but an important complete and context to situating the present. This is not only because national identities typically form in the *longue durée*. This perspective is important to reclaim also—and all the more so—for societies that have undergone the colonial disjuncture: the irruptive epistemic violence that colonial modernity wreaked on much of the non-west, including Bharata or India, forcing a break with the endogenous in the service of Empire, and making necessary today a fresh, decolonised engagement with our past and ourselves. A prime example is the question: how old is the idea of India?

Of course, 75 years into independence, we should not have had to still be wondering whether and what the idea of India in premodernity was and yet here we are. One of the reasons why this remains an enduring question rather than a long-clarified one is that mainstream ancient Indian historians, but for exceptions such as R K Mookherji and B D Chattopadhyaya,¹ have shown reticence in engaging with this fundamental question, as if there were something inherently reactionary or chauvinistic about it. Indeed, in today's deeply antagonistic political climate, if you even make a claim about an ancient idea of India, you can in certain circles be villainised for it!

You can be subjected to invective and slander and accused of having a certain sectarian ideological motive.²

This is deeply unfortunate because it attempts to sabotage the query from being what it is: an impulse to know our past on its own terms, on the strength of irrefutable historical testimonies. But the irony is that while all founding fathers of modern India swore by the Indian 'nation' and 'nationalism', today these seem to have become swear words for some. To speak of India's unity through all her vibrant diversity may invite abuse in these quarters. And to refer to her antiquity and ancient texts evinces a condescension (oh what do these Puranas know!) and worse, a communalised hostility (again a throwback to colonial mindsets) that ancient Indian texts speak for only one denomination or faith, which is an unhistorical supposition.

Broadly, reactions today to the question 'How far back does the idea of India go?' range from taking India as an unexamined, given, eternal category at one end, to denying its very existence before the British colonised us. The latter is perhaps a more serious historiographical problem because, as we will see, it chooses to ignore or silence rather too vast a body of evidence that does attest the existence of a clear premodern idea of India.

Why is there this denial? One reason is modern myopia and hubris that pre-empts looking back beyond the colonial experience, which is seen as defining of everything we are today – as great an irony as there can be for a 5,000-year-old civilisation. A second reason is clearly a hangover of imperialist politics and historiography, which prided itself in this instrumentalist disinformation that there never was an India. For instance, in 1880, Sir John Strachey, 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”!³ Coming from a representative of the colonial state then, whose political conquest of the land had indeed been piece by piece, this divisive statement uninformed by historical insight should perhaps not surprise. What is surprising, however, is that nearly a century and a half later, there is still epistemic confusion over the question of how far back India as a territorial entity and unity goes and it is not uncommon to find some leading scholars deny the very possibility.

Thus in his authoritative book *India after Gandhi*, Ramachandra Guha called India “an unnatural nation”, implying 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.⁴ It was understood that this happened, for instance, on account of the British bestowing on this ancient land such institutions as the railways and the civil services, which supposedly did not just ‘modernise’ India but also unified it for the first time by building a common locomotive and bureaucratic framework that we had otherwise lacked.

Others such as Partha Chatterjee, concerned perhaps with countering eternalising claims, declared that “there are no ancient nations anywhere in the world. All nations (*rashtra*) are modern. . . . The Indian *rashtra* as a nation-state has only been in existence since the middle of the twentieth century” [sic].⁵ Ironically, *rashtra*, the Sanskrit word used here for the concept of nation (which then confusingly becomes nation-state in this work), is in fact a very ancient term. It occurs multiple times in later Vedic texts from the 10th to 5th century BCE

(for example, *Vajasaneyi Samhita* 10.2, *Shatapatha Brahmana* 5.3.4.5, *Atharvaveda Samhita* 7.109.6), in the *Mahabharata* from the 4th century BCE (for example, 5.40.7, 12.279.25),⁶ in the *Arthashastra* from the 4th century BCE (?) (for example, 1.6.5)⁷ and in the *Manusmriti* from the 2nd century CE (for example, 7.65).⁸ But while Chatterjee does not entirely dismiss vast premodern Indian empires such as the Mauryas and the Mughals, he prefers to insert a new element in any understanding of nation, namely, popular sovereignty, which he admits “is a very modern idea which emerged in Western Europe and North America in the late eighteenth century”. He then concludes in circular fashion: “Without the claim to popular sovereignty, there can be no nation-state or *rashtra*. Therefore all nations are modern.”⁹

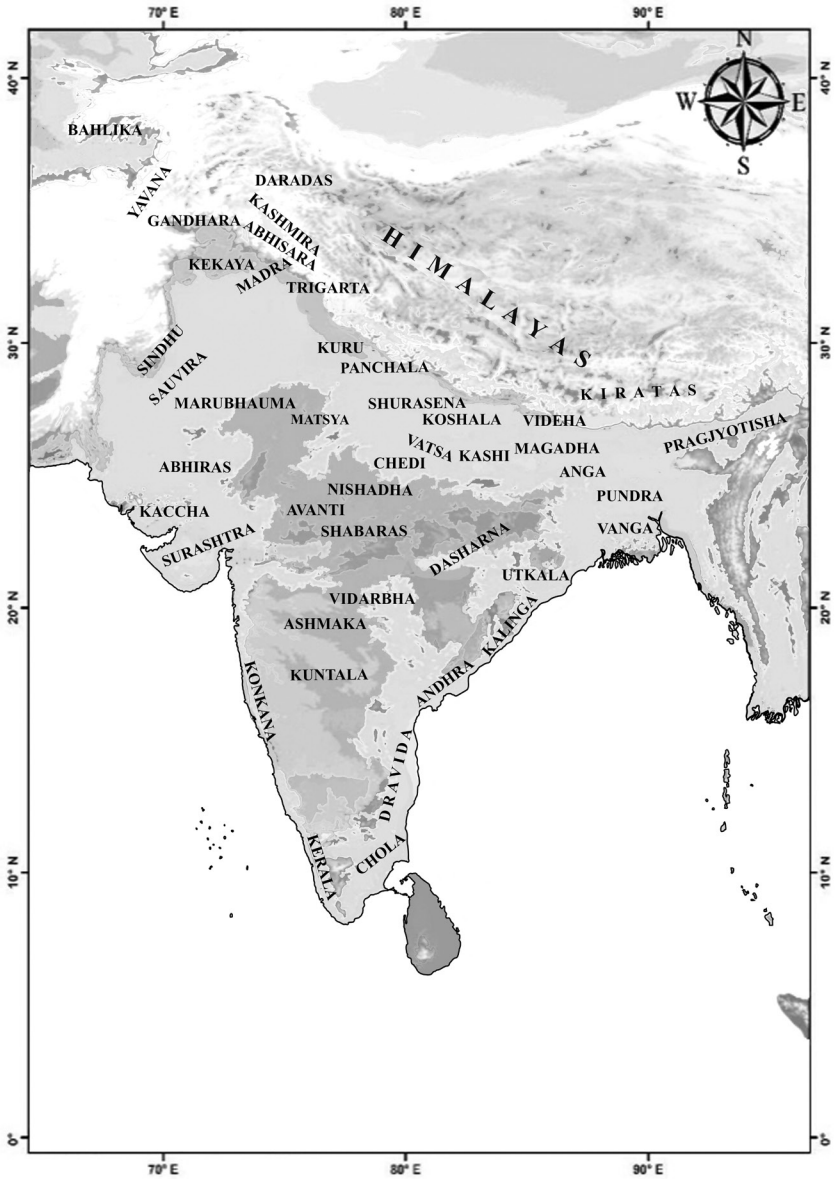
Clearly, in operation here is a teleology—the presupposition that the modern period is more influential in shaping a people than the ancient or medieval could ever be. These positions also show the persistent hold of colonial and Western thought worldwide. For so deep is the dependence on European models of historical development and vocabulary, such as that of German and Italian unification or the French Revolution, that the fundamental difference between a nation and a nation-state is lost sight of in these denials of the ancient idea of India.

To be sure, unlike a nation-state, which is a formal and political arrangement, 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, of belief and of praxis; “a felt community”, as Rajat Kanta Ray called it,¹⁰ and a classic ‘subjective region’, as Bernard Cohn may have said.¹¹ Now, even a working

acquaintance with what are known as the master texts of Indic civilisation and the cultural geography contained in them yields the presence of this notion of a felt community and a common bounded entity which are affirmed and named. Moreover, there are astonishing convergences over two millennia in the way a disparate set of historical commentators and observers attest this readily recognisable idea of Bharata or India. And further, remarkably, this idea is seen to embrace, with no apparent unease, both India's spatial unity as well as her incredible diversity. This will sound familiar to those conversant with the claims ("Unity in Diversity!") of India's nationalist movement leading up to 1947 and after; however, it is not the invention of that movement. We have premodern Indian texts that put out ages ago this inclusive vision of what India is and it is time we acknowledge and substantiate this remarkable phenomenon.



Perhaps the earliest text to define India as 'Bharatavarsha', broadly yet resonantly, as the land between Himalayas and the sea, is the hoary *Mahabharata* (conservatively dated to between the 5th/4th century BCE to 4th century CE). In particular, its sixth book, the *Bhishma Parva's* tenth chapter, details in more than 70 verses first the historical geography of India—all the many mountain ranges and rivers of this land running from north and north-west to the south and from north-east to the west, including Ganga, Sindhu, Vitasta or Jhelum, Saraswati, Yamuna, Chandrabhaga or Chenab, Gomti, Sarayu, Godavari, Narmada and Mahanadi (*Mahabharata* 6.10.1–74). It then documents the ethnography of the land, namely, the *janapadas*



Not to scale. For broad representational purposes only.

Figure 1.1 Bharatavarsha as revealed in the *Mahabharata*:
Select *janas*. Courtesy: Author.

or territories occupied by variegated communities (*janas*) that peopled Bharatavarsha.

Significantly, in a so called ‘mythological’ text, the *janas* included are all historically attested people, from those of Kashmir, Gandhara (Peshawar), Kamboj (Afghanistan) and Punjab in the north to Vidarbha and Malava in central India and from Kashi, Magadha, Odisha, Bengal and Assam in the east to Dravida, Kerala, Karnataka, Kuntala (Telangana) and Chola in the south. (This should urge a reconsideration of the myth versus history binary. See Chapters 9 and 11.) Those named also included *mlecchas* and *yavanas*, on the one hand, ‘outsiders’, so to speak, and ‘tribes’ such as the Nishadas, Shabaras, Kiratas and Abhiras, on the other. There is also an explicit reference to all four castes (*varnas*) inhabiting Bharatavarsha.

In this way, as per the Indian epic’s testimony, no conflict is seen between the spatial unity and identity of Bharatavarsha and its inherent diversity. Instead, a frank acknowledgement of its geographic and ethnic complexity obtains rather than any exclusionary vision of the land. Thus to see this unity as only a “retrospective thrust of hegemonic [modern] nationalism”, as some scholars suggest,¹² is to miss the capaciousness and pluralism within the most ancient ideas of India. Bharatavarsha emerges here as a singularity that subsumed rather than erased the many.

Further, while the focus of our discussion here will be this ethnic and cultural idea of India, let me just say a little bit about the political, because this is something that some scholars like to insist is missing before the British. But the truth is even politically, Bharatavarsha is already seen in the *Mahabharata* as this singular aspirational realm for all kings

to want to bring under one rule, as the conversation between Dhritarashtra and Sanjay in the same *adhyaya* tells us.¹³

Moreover, this idea of Bharatavarsha as *chakravartin kshetra* or the area of the great conqueror is echoed many times in historical inscriptions from across the country. For example, the Hathigumpha inscription of King Kharavela of Kalinga (Odisha), dated as early as 1st century BCE, mentions how this king went out to conquer all of Bharatavarsha ('Bharadavasa' in Prakrit).

The Satavahana king Shri Pulumayi's Nasik inscription and the Shaka king Rudradamana's Girnar inscription, both from the 2nd century CE, as well as Samudragupta's 4th century CE Allahabad *prashasti* (eulogy) enumerate the two halves of the subcontinent, the *uttarapatha* (northern route) and the *dakshinapatha* (southern route), thereby presuming the larger whole, just like in ancient Buddhist literature from the 6th century BCE where these names are first mentioned. The 9th

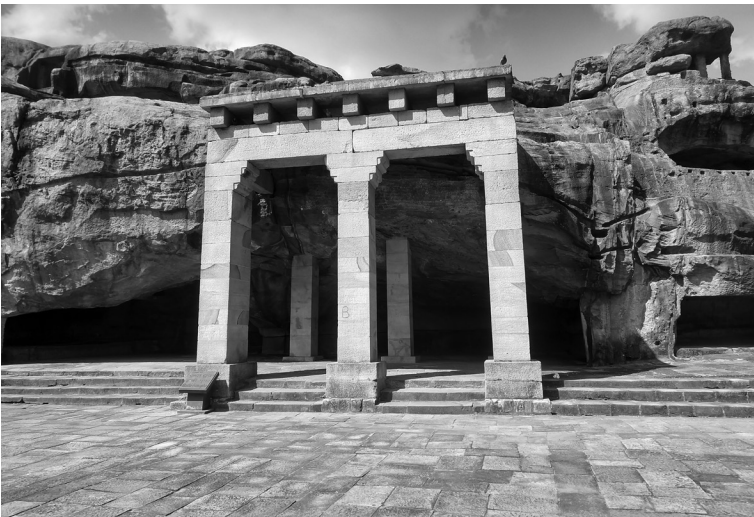


Figure 1.2a Hathigumpha Cave, Udayagiri, Odisha. Courtesy: Author.

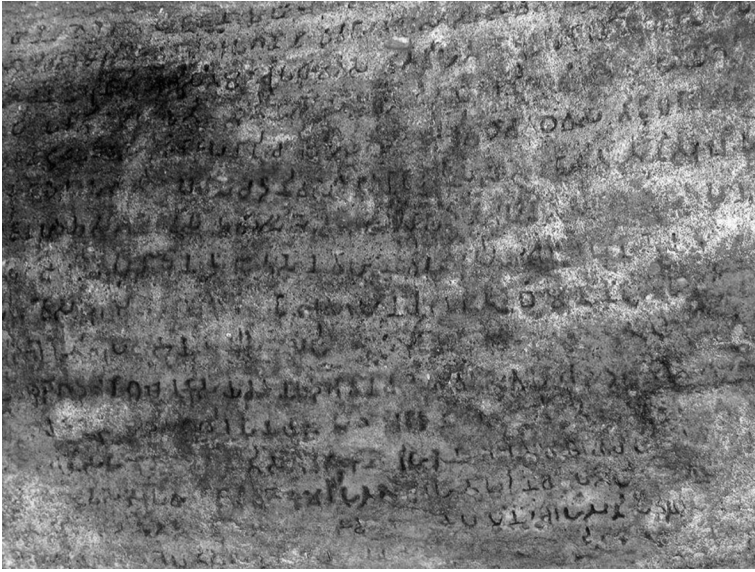


Figure 1.2b Inscription of King Kharavela of Kalinga, 1st century BCE, naming 'Bharadavasa' in Hathigumpha Cave. Courtesy: Wikimedia Commons.

century CE Pala king of Bihar and Bengal, Devapala's rhetoric of conquest also included the land "bounded by the snowy mountains in the north, Setubandha-Rameshvaram in the south and the two seas in the west and east".¹⁴

So clearly, right across a millennium and a half, India *is* present as a term of political reference and aspiration. And occasionally, it showed up as not just political reference but political reality too, for we know that the first pan-Indian empire in our history, that of Asoka Maurya in the 3rd century BCE, covered nearly the whole of the subcontinent. And much later, under Akbar and his successors, the Mughal Empire displayed a similar vastness.

With that point made, and before we return to textual testimonies, please note that a number of other inscriptions also refer to Bharatavarsha, be it the Rishthal inscription of

western Madhya Pradesh from 515 CE, which refers to a temple built as a symbol of Bharatavarsha, or the Rashtrakuta king Govinda IV's 918–933 CE inscription and the Chalukya king Someshvara IV's 1038 CE inscription, both of which show Kuntala (Telangana) to be in Bharata, the Shravanabelagola epitaph of Mallishena dated to 1129 CE where the entire extent of what we know as India is meant, or the Handala grant of Vijayanagara king Harihara in 1356, where Karnataka is described as in the south of Bharatavarsha.¹⁵ So, the idea spouted by some, that only one kind of idealised literary sources in antiquity refer to India and not the supposedly more pragmatic, everyday sources such as inscriptions, is untrue.



Now, returning to chronology in our story, after the *Mahabharata*, in the 4th century BCE, the Greek ambassador to India, Megasthenes, in his book *Indika* also named 'India' as bounded by the sea to the east, west and south, by Mount Hemodos ('Abode of Snow') to the north, where it was separated from Central Asia (Scythia), and by the Indus to the west.¹⁶ The extent of the whole country is said to be 28,000 stadia (ancient Greek measure of length) from east to west and 32,000 stadia from north to south. He adds for good measure: "It is said that India, being of enormous size when taken as a whole, is peopled by races [sic] both numerous and diverse, of which not even one was originally of foreign descent, but all were evidently indigenous."¹⁷

After him, Ptolemy, the celebrated 2nd century CE geographer from the Roman Empire based in Egypt, described India and her regions in copious detail. He claimed in similar

fashion that India was bounded by the ocean in the south and the snowy mountains in the north; further, he fascinatingly spoke of an India that went east of the mouth of the river Ganga right up to China, thereby including perhaps what is known as the North East today as well as Bangladesh. He cited the Hindukush as this country's western boundary, much like Xuan Zang after him (see below).¹⁸

At about the same time, in the far south, Tamil Sangam texts such as the *Patirrupattu* and the later epic *Shilappadikaram* (5th century CE) were also invoking the same geographic imagery of the space between the snowy Himalayas and Cape Kumari (Comorin) in the oceanic south.¹⁹

Meanwhile, in the 5th century CE, the *Vishnu Mahapurana* (2.3.1, 8) mapped not just Bharata's geographic but also ethnic and cultural boundaries thus:

*Uttaram yatsamudrasya himadreshchaiva dakshinam
Varsham tadbharatam nama bharati yatra santatih.
Yojananam navasahram tu dvipoayam daksinottarat
Purve kirata yasyante pashcime yavanah sthitah.*²⁰

This translates to “the country north of the sea and south of the Himalayas is Bharata and her children are Bharati. Nine thousand yojanas from north to south, it has kiratas in the east and yavanas in the west”. Kiratas referred to denizens of Assam and the eastern Himalayas, while Yavanas at this point in history referred to those settled in Greater Punjab. On view then is an explicit and inclusive self-understanding of the land whose other features, including being a *karmakshetra*, are also elaborated in the text. As per the text, it is the only land of karma (*karmabhumi*) on the entire planet—the land of action and its fruits by which people can ascend to heaven or

hell, that is, where they can realise their own destinies.

Explicitness and inclusivity in the idea of India are found articulated again in the 6th century CE encyclopaedia *Brhat Sambhita* composed by the polymath Varahamihira. This text (14.1–31) exhaustively enumerates the many regions and peoples that were part of India, displaying, yet again, clarity and detail of this idea of a unity through plurality.²¹

This would resonate with Xuan Zang, the Chinese Buddhist pilgrim's testimony in the 7th century CE. Zang travelled all over India and left a detailed account of the land. Writing in his memoirs *Si Yu Ki*, Zang says that standing at Langham, not far from ancient Nagarahara (modern Jalalabad, Afghanistan), west of the Khyber Pass, he felt he stood at the gateway to the country called 'Indu'. He described Indu, 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.²²

He tells us the meaning of the name Indu, calling it the Sanskrit word for 'moon' since the country was luminous like the moon from the collective radiance of its sages.²³ He says Indians liked this name best, even though the Chinese had earlier other names for this country, such as *Tien chu kuo*, which meant Country of the Heavenly Bamboo, or *Hsi-yu*, the Western Domain. So the idea of India in Chinese perceptions went back much further than Xuan Zang.

What all of this suggests is that well before the 7th century CE, there was in place a clear notion of India as a conceptual and lived place. Moreover, the modern view that this land was too vast and diverse to ever have been one country or 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.

It should come as no surprise, then, that clear geographic and circulatory horizons would inform the itinerary of any premodern traveller seeking to circumambulate this robust cultural sphere. Indeed, through their movements, such travellers would have simultaneously enacted this sphere and its routes and pathways, fortifying what Diana Eck called (in a narrower ritual context) a pilgrims' nation.²⁴ Thus, notwithstanding its endemic pluralism, India was also acknowledged as a common unified sphere of cultural circulation and a singular episteme.

Perhaps there is no greater illustration of this idea of India as both many and one, both diverse and unified, than the stellar example of Adi Shankaracharya, the seer-intellectual who in the 8th century CE established the supremacy of trans-sectarian Vedanta *advaita* i.e. unified consciousness beyond multiplicity and form. Let us dwell on this remarkable case at some length.

The 13th century CE *Shankara Dig-Vijaya* narrates that Shankara, together with his disciples and king Sudhanva, undertook a great tour of the land (*digvijaya*), debating a great variety of schools of thought.²⁵ He set out from Kaladi (Kerala) and traversed first to Rameshvaram, then Kanchi (Tamil Nadu), then Andhra, Vidarbha and Karnāṭaka, defeating in particular Tantric Shaivas such as the Bhairavas and Kapalikas. Thereafter he reached the shores of the western sea and then Gokarna



Figure 1.3a Shankaracharya temple, Srinagar, Jammu and Kashmir, 8th century CE. Courtesy: Wikimedia Commons.

(Maharashtra), Saurashtra, Dvaraka (Gujarat), defeating along the way Vaishnavas, Shaivas, Shaktas and Sauras. He is then said to have moved onwards to Ujjayini (Madhya Pradesh), Bahlika (Bactria?), Shurasena (Mathura), Darads (Gilgit Baltistan) and Kuru and Pañchala (Punjab and Haryana).

Following that, he is described as taking his exegetical endeavours to Kamarupa (Assam), Koshala (Uttar Pradesh), Anga, Vanga and Gauda (Bengal), defeating Shaktas, Pashupatas, Baudhas and Kshapanakas (Jainas) (*Shankara*



Figure 1.3b Some places associated with Adi Shankaracharya and his *digvijaya* around Bharatavarsha, 8th century CE. Courtesy: Author.
(Map for broad representational purposes only.)

Digvijaya 15.166–185). This phase of his *digvijaya* would have included his momentous debate with Mandana Mishra, the famed Purva-mimamsaka ritualist, and his scholar-wife Abhayabharati at Mahishi (Bihar) (*Shankara Digvijaya* 8). Shankara also went to Badrinatha and Kedarathana later (*Shankara Digvijaya* 16). The text tells us:

The doctrine of *brahma-vidya* that Shankara preached, which confers liberation through the elimination of all duality, reigns victorious over the country—from Rameshvaram in the south, where Rama built his bridge dividing the seas, to the northern boundaries marked by the Himalaya mountains which bowed down with its peaks to Shiva at the time of the conquest of the Tripuras; and from the eastern mountains where the sun rises, to those of the west where it sets. (*Shankara Digvijaya* 6.106–07)

The culmination, as it were, of these advaitic travels was, we are told, all the way in north Kashmir where the ultimate victory of Shankara's intellect was symbolised in his ascension of the throne of omniscience (*sarvajñapitha*) at the renowned Sharada *peetha* (*Shankara Digvijaya* 16.186–195) on the banks of the river Kishenganga, today in Neelum Valley (Pakistan Occupied Kashmir), just north of the Line of Control. We know independently from the 12th century CE history of Kashmir, Kalhana's *Rajatarangini* (IV. 325), that the Sharada *peetha*, the seat of the goddess Shakti-Saraswati, was a pilgrimage of subcontinental renown and draw in the 8th century CE. Al beruni also informs us that it continued to be among the top three shrines of entire Hind in the 11th century CE.²⁶ (See Chapter 2 for the intensely connected histories of Kashmir and the rest of India.)

The *Shankara Dig-Vijaya* narrates that, gathered on the banks of the Ganga while on his *digvijaya*, the *acharya* was exhorted by a voice in this manner:

In the world, Jambudvipa is the most famous region. In that region Bharata excels all others. In Bharata, Kashmir is the most famous place. For there, it is said, Mother Sharada is present. In that region there is a temple with four gates dedicated to Sharada. Within is the Throne of Omniscience. . . . Scholars from the east, west and north, who could prove their omniscience, have in the past opened the three gates pertaining to their respective directions. It is said that till now there has been no learned man from the south who could open the southern gate. (*Shankara Digvijaya* 16.54–61)

Note how the symbolic unity of Bharatavarsha's directions as coming together in Kashmir is self-consciously stated here. Hearing this, Shankara headed towards Kashmir and successfully passed the test that the goddess Saraswati herself set him and thereafter he ascended the *sarvajñapitha*.

Commemorating this association with Kashmir appears to be the 8th century CE Shankaracharya temple, a landmark till today in Srinagar city, built atop a hill at the site of the old temple of Jyeshtheshvara, which is said in the *Rajatarangini* (I. 124) to have been founded by a descendant of Mauryan King Ashoka circa 3rd/2nd century BCE.²⁷ Shankara's connection with Kashmir and his strong local memory there indicate the remarkable centrality of the far north of India to the imagination of its far south and vice versa, pointing again to coherent territorial assumptions.

Furthermore, tradition, as recorded in some late

hagiographies such as Chidvilasa's *Shankara-vijaya*, maintains that Shankara established *mathas*, or monastic institutions, in the four extremities of Bharatavarsha, among other centres. These *caturamnaya pithas* were/are Badrinatha in the north, Puri in the east, Shringeri in the south and Dvaraka in the west, which are also associated with the Advaitic orders of Dashanami Sannyasins. It needs no labouring to see that not only these four centres but the entire itinerary of his peregrinations, his *digvijaya*, corresponds to the extent of India as it was mapped in premodernity.

This prompted Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan to suggest that Shankara was being “a shrewd political genius and patriot” in his choice of the location of these *mathas*.²⁸ I believe that his peregrinations were not exactly “patriotism”, nor were they only polemics; they were also pedagogy. For, Shankara's *digvijaya* simultaneously effected and demonstrated a sphere peopled by great diversity of praxis and thought, such as India, but unified by trans-sectarian *advaita*, which pierced through the ‘illusion’ (*mithya*, *maya*) of multiplicity. Bharata thus provided a laboratory, as it were, for Shankara, one that in its own diversity and unity mirrored both the bewildering variety of *samsara* (the material world) and the ultimate oneness (*ekatmata*) of *brahman* (pure consciousness). The singularity—whether *brahman* or India—that subsumes rather than erases the many was recognised only through its realisation.

We are still not done with the evidence! To continue our story in chronological order: In the 11th century CE, the Persian

traveller Abu Raihan Al beruni in his *Kitab ul Hind*, describes India ('Al Hind') thus: "Limited in the South by the above mentioned Indian Ocean and on all three other sides by the lofty mountains, the waters of which flow down to it". He goes on to say: the inhabitable world extending southwards from the Himavant is Bharatavarsha, which is the centre of Jambudvipa. The parts named and ascribed to it are located in Al Hind alone.²⁹ Note that we come across *Bharata kshetra* or *Bharata khanda* in southern Jambudvipa in Jaina cosmological literature as well from this early medieval period.

There are still more examples: In the 14th century, Indo-Persian poet Amir Khusrau in his *Nuh Sipihr* (3.5.69–72) resoundingly speaks of Hind as his *watan* (nation) and cites Hind's dozen diverse languages (*hindawi*) to include Sanskrit, Kashmiri, Sindhi, Punjabi, Bengali, Gujarati, Kannada and Tamil. His understanding of Hind, then, was co-extensive with this entire area peopled by these languages.³⁰

Further, throughout the same Chapter 3, Khusrau praised Hind as the one country that was paradise on earth (*firdaus*) and superior to other countries thanks to its temperate climate, its abundant flora with special reference to its luscious mangoes and bananas, condiments such as cardamom, cloves and betel nuts, and also because of its classical language of learning, Sanskrit, which he describes as a pearl amongst pearls.

According to Khusrau, the intellectual wealth of Hind was incomparable and the world's scholars came to India to gain knowledge whereas Indians had no need to go to the world for the same. He goes on to name all the knowledge systems that thrived in India, traditions of wisdom (*danish*) and philosophy (*hikmat*) including logic, astronomy, mathematics and the physical sciences. Khusrau affirms that India invented

the numerals (today ironically known as Arabic numerals!) and especially the zero and also the game of chess (*shatranj*).

He also singled out for mention Indian music, animals and feminine beauty. In his own words:

How exhilarating is the climate of this country
Where so many birds sing melodiously.
Poets composers and singers rise from this land
As abundantly and as naturally as the grass.
How great is this land which produces men
Who deserve to be called men!
Intelligence is the natural gift of this land
Even the illiterate are as good as scholars.
There cannot be a greater teacher than the way of life of
the people here.
It is the gift of the almighty, this cultural environment,
very rare in other countries that
If perchance any Iranian Greek or Arab comes by
He will not lack for anything
Because they will treat him as their own!³¹

This son of a Turkish settler from Uzbekistan clearly knew and admired his adopted country!

Then, in the 16th century, the famed Mughal historian Abul Fazl writes in the *Ain i Akbari*: “The sea borders Hindustan on the east, west and south. In the north, the great mountain ranges separate India from Turan, Iran and China ... Intelligent men of the past have considered Kabul and Qandahar as the twin gates of Hindustan... By guarding these, Hindustan obtains peace from the alien raiders.”³² Note the reference to Kabul also resonates with Ptolemy and Xuan Zang. Interestingly, however, Fazl claims that Hindustan also

included Sarandip (Sri Lanka), Achin (in Sumatra), Maluk (Malaya), Malagha (Malacca) and many islands, “so that the sea cannot really demarcate its limits”. He probably referred to the spread of Indic culture here.

Fazl, much like Khusrau, further writes of the inhabitants of Hindustan: “the people of this country are God-seeking [all acclaim the oneness of God], generous-hearted, friendly to strangers, pleasant-faced, of broad forehead, patrons of learning, lovers of asceticism, inclined to justice, contented, hardworking and efficient. True to salt, truth-seeing and attached to loyalty.”

The Tibetans, on the other hand, called India rGya-gar (Vast Land?) or Phags-Yul (Noble Country), the source-country of their Buddhist masters. Their works such as Lama Taranath’s 16th century *History of Buddhism in India* and the later *Jewel Garland of Buddhist History* mention gurus from Phags-Yul belonging to Kashmir and Peshawar (N), Andhra and Kanchi (S), Saurashtra (W) and Bengal (E).



Thus on view, again and again, is staggering evidence, over an enormous span of time and variety of contexts, of astonishing convergences in the perception or knowledge of what India—Bharatavarsha, Indu, Hind, Indoi, rGya-gar, Phags-Yul, Hindustan—was. Though not necessarily identical in every respect, nor coterminous with present day boundaries or concepts, the fact that there seems to be a great deal that continued to be held in common in the idea of Bharata across the centuries by Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims and Jains, by residents as well as foreign travellers, by pilgrims, poets and