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*The Formation of India—
Notes on the History of an Idea***

Marc Bloch, the great French historian and Resistance martyr, began his last book *The Historian's Craft* by referring to his son's question to him, "Of what use is History?" The boy could well have asked, "How much can History be abused?" For the momentarily triumphant Nazis had then appealed to the very same History, of which Bloch was such a careful practitioner, to justify their theory of racial purity, of Nordic superiority and a Jewish conspiracy against it down the ages. With all the dreadful consequences of such notions, readings of History of this sort did not disappear with Hitler, or with the more recent demise of Apartheid in South Africa. These survive and revive surely because of a residue of the parochial and irrational that subsists in all of us. We are gratified if someone tells us that we have been great previously, and, if currently we do not have as much achievement to show as we would like, then the fault must lie with certain perverse internal or external saboteurs. Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983) drew attention to imagined reconstructions of the past on the basis of newly acquired national consciousness in modern times. But parochialism is not just distorted nationalism. After all, communities of religion, race, caste, and tribe all constitute as much of "imagined" phenomena as the nation. In India where these various identities mix, contradict and interact, we have long been finding endeavours to reconstruct such histories as might justify one's particular attachments.

At first sight it may seem that if imaginary or one-sided history gives people a measure of self-confidence, it would be churlish to refuse such medicinal aid. But one ought to remember that history is for a people as memory of one's past is for the individual. If I build up for myself in my own mind an imagined greatness which the world has failed to recognise because of the machinations of certain people, such a view is not likely to assist me in faring better in relations with fellow human beings or, indeed, in divesting myself of those gross imperfections which exist in me. What applies to individuals, must apply to peoples. A false history poses a real danger to their moral fibre and capacity for development, whatever its immediate or short-term blandishments. There can therefore be no justification ever for doctored history.

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In 1938 in his *We or Our Nationhood Defined* Guru Golwalkar of the RSS, whose followers are in power in this country today, praised the Nazis fulsomely for their race theory. Such explicit invocation of “race” is now difficult to make, but the sub-conscious desire to be “Aryan” and to claim India as the homeland of the “Aryans” is patent enough. One sees it today in the writings of notable figures of the archaeological establishment and in semi-official journals like the *Puratattva*, home to some unbelievably fantastic pieces. It is time, therefore, to recapitulate what reliable researches tell us on this vexed question of race and the physical descent of the Indian people.

Two very important books came out in 1994, analysing the results of massive research across the world. The UNESCO’s *History of Humanity*, Vol.I, edited by S.J. De Laet summed up mainly the archaeological evidence, while the *History and Geography of the Human Genes* by L.L. Cavalli-Sforza et al., laid out an analysis of the genetic material. Though the works are independent, their results are strikingly similar. The species of *Homo Sapiens*, on current evidence, evolved in Africa, where the first great division in the human genealogical tree (between ‘black African’ and other peoples) occurred, between 130,000 and 50,000 years ago, i.e. between the earliest appearances of the species in Africa, and its first appearance in West Asia. As human diffusion into Eurasia proceeded, both the European and Mongoloid features became well established in their regions long before 10,000 years ago. No human fossils have been found in India, but it is fair to assume that humans in India too had assumed their present physical features around the same remote time as in Europe and China. This is far beyond the period when the families of Indo-European and Dravidian languages could possibly have originated. There is thus in India, at least, no established link between ‘race’ and language. As Cavalli-Sforza’s ‘Genetic Tree’ shows the speakers of Aryan and Dravidian languages are practically indistinguishable by genetic markers; so are Iranians (speaking Aryan languages of the Iranian branch) and South West Asians, speaking Arabic, both of which latter groups are genetically distinct from Indians, though perhaps only two or three ‘splits’ removed. We must, then, think in terms of Indo-European languages coming to India not through mass migrations, but through the movement of small influential, dominant groups, a point well emphasized by Colin Renfrew in *Archaeology and Language* (1987).

These points are to be borne in mind while considering claims that certain sections of the Indian population, comprising a number of Scheduled Tribes, are “indigenous”, while the remaining Indian population is descended from later immigrants. This notion is obviously an import from the New World where the distinction between indigenous and immigrant is historically legitimate—a legitimacy not traceable for it in India. But the converse claim that the Indo-European languages are indigenous to India, along with their speakers, which historians and archaeologists linked to the Sangh Parivar are urging so loudly these days, is equally fallacious. The separation of the Aryan branch of the larger Indo-European family, by the canons of glotto-chronology, cannot go beyond the 4th millennium B.C.; and by this time, India must have been peopled for some thousands of years by our ancestors

speaking other, extinct tongues. Even if glotto-chronology is to be taken with some reserve as to the precise dating it suggests, the time-limits set by it cannot be stretched very much farther back. Nor is the fact that Hittite and Albanian are linguistically the oldest languages in the Indo-European group, congenial to the thesis of an Indian home for Proto-Indo-European. Our recognizing that as human beings our ancestors probably came from Africa, and that the languages most of us speak are descended from languages originally spoken elsewhere in Eurasia, need not imperil our self-respect in any way whatsoever. Human history, after all, forms a unity; and our present territorial limits are of relatively recent creation, so that when speakers of external languages moved over them in bygone ages they could hardly have felt that they were violating any sacrosanct boundaries.

When 'the idea of India', to borrow from the title of Sunil Khilnani's book, arose is, again, a historical question of some importance, for only then could have arisen a consciousness of what is Indian and foreign. Such 'Indian' consciousness is alien to the Rigveda and other Vedic texts whose geographical and cultural worlds intersect so much with those of the Avesta. The listing of the sixteen Mahajanapadas that existed in the 6th century B.C., in early Pali texts, begins to suggest the notion of a country to which all these principalities belonged. In the celebrated Mauryan emperor Asoka's Minor Rock Edict I (c.260 B.C.), there occurs one of the early names of India, Jambudipa, where men had now been "mixed" with gods. The lands of the "Yaunas" (Greeks) appear duly as foreign lands in his Rock Edict XIII, where it is said that these lacked both the *Brahmanas* and *Sramanas* (Buddhist and Jain monks). At that time the entire Iranian world bordering India was under post-Alexandrian Greek rulers, and it is, therefore, likely that Asoka's "Yaunas" comprehended both Greeks and Iranianas. He must have known them well enough, because he had Greek and Iranian officials who rendered his edicts in literary Greek and Aramaic and carved them in inscriptions that have been discovered within the last forty years. His distinction between Indians and foreigners was, then, one essentially of culture: foreigners do not have the same priesthoods. One is reminded of the saying attributed to the Buddha in early texts to the effect that there are no castes among the Yaunas, but only masters and slaves. We have in the *Manusmriti*, the Brahmanical legal text composed probably in the 2nd century B.C. or so, a loose definition of the boundaries of present day North India as Aryavarta, "where the black antelope naturally roams", contrasted with the lands of the "Mlecchas" where Brahmans could not perform sacrifices or the 'twice-born' dwell (II, 22-24). The hostility to Mlecchas is shown by their being classed as Dasyus, having not been created out of Brahman (X, 48).

Such statements show that the perception of India as a country marked by certain social and religious institutions begins to be present only by the time that the Mauryan empire (c.320-185 B.C.) was established. That empire embracing most of India, doubtless reinforced the process of cultural integration at least in the upper strata of the country. The recognition of the "foreigner" in friendly terms in Asoka, and hostile in the Manu, was a necessary complement of this vision of India as a country. To achieve such a

vision on the part of its own inhabitants (or the upper part of them) was an important achievement in itself. For India was not naturally a country from “times immemorial”; it evolved by cultural and social developments, and closer interaction among its inhabitants, in which geographical configuration helped, but was not necessarily decisive.

In the next thousand years Sanskrit literature becomes rich in allusions to the geographical terrain of India, such as in the listing of the conquests by Samudragupta (c.350) or in Kalidasa’s description of the cloud’s journey in *Meghaduta*. The stress on India is underlined further by a curious lacuna in ancient Indian writing: there is so little curiosity about what lies outside the limits of the Indian world. On this Alberuni, the Khwarizmian scientist, was to comment unfavourably in his remarkable book on India (1035). “The Hindus”, he said, in an oft-quoted sentence (as translated by Sachau), “believe that there is no country like theirs, no nation like theirs, no kings like theirs, no religion like theirs, no science like theirs”. He did, however, add that “their ancestors were not as narrow-minded as the present generation” and quoted from Varahamihira (c.550) the assertion that “the Greeks, though impure, be honoured, since they were trained in sciences, and therein excelled others.” The present-day tendency to derive Indian heritage from “Hindu” civilization, bereft of extraneous elements, thus accords, with only one phase of insularity in the development of ancient Indian culture, in which too the rejection of the external world was by no means shared by some of its great minds. Indeed, there can hardly have been a culture in any part of the world which grew to any stature that has not imbibed elements from the outside in constructing its own essential parts.

Even when Alberuni was writing his book a new wave of cultural diffusion into India was under way. It had its violent side, which the scientist recognized as he spoke of “the wonderful exploits” of Mahmud of Ghazni (1000-30) “by which the Hindus became like atoms of dust scattered in all directions and like a tale of old in the mouth of the people”. But the expansion of knowledge yet proceeded. Alberuni goes on to tell us that when at Lahore, in his conversations with Hindu scholars, he himself began to expound the principles of science and logic (derived from the Hellenistic-Arabic tradition), “they flocked together round me from all parts, wondering and most eager to learn from me.”

Such interaction, the expansion in due course of Muslim communities in India, the rise of Sultanates established on the basis of different levels of compromise between the courts and the local aristocracies, gave new enrichment to the concept of India.

As is well known the ancient Iranian use of the consonant ‘h’ for Indo-Aryan ‘s’, led to the Iranian form of ‘Hind(u)’ for the Sanskrit ‘Sindhu’; thereafter, to the use of the former name for the entire trans-Indus country, whence has come the form ‘India’ through the Greek ‘Indos’; and, finally, to the later Persian name ‘Hindu’ for the inhabitant of India, and ‘Hindustan’ for India itself, with the usual Iranian territorial suffix *-stan* added to ‘Hind(u)’. The suffix *-stan*, by the way, is general in Persian, e.g. Seistan, Gurjistan, Khuzistan, and Hindustan means simply ‘Indian land’ not ‘the land of (the religious

community of) the Hindus', as was construed by the leaders of the Hindu Mahasabha, who also tried to give it a Sanskrit form *Hindu-sthan*, although such a word never existed in that language. To the medieval Persian and Arabic users, then, Hind/Hindustan was one country, and they attributed to its people a single faith and culture overlooking its variety. The Hindus, to them, were all followers of a religion that was peculiar to 'Hind'; and there was an almost natural transition, already found in Alberuni from the sense of Hindu, as an inhabitant of India, to a follower of a particular religion. It was only by the 14th or 15th century that this absolutely alien name was being adopted by the people so designated. In a Jain inscription of 1438-39, Rana Kumbha is flatteringly described as the Hindu-suratrana ('the Hindu Sultan'). But almost simultaneously, from the 14th century onwards, a new word 'Hindi' (also 'Hindustani') began to be used for the general category of Indians, irrespective of religion, for now Muslims too were natives of India, and the term Hindu with its religious connotation would not serve to include them. So Amir Khusrau (d.1324), the famous Persian poet, would say with pride that he was "a Hindustani Turk", and that Hind was his "home and native land". In his *Nuh Sipih* he speaks of India's contributions to the world (the numerals, the *Panchatantra* and chess!), and of the several regional (Hindawi) languages, the Sanskrit of the learned and the common 'Hindi' tongue; but then Persian, he claimed, was now also a part of the Indian language-stock, having been brought hither by the Ghorians and Turks. We see here a conception, perhaps, for the first time, so explicitly propounded of a composite culture being the distinguishing feature of India. That religious barriers continued to exist is hardly to be contested: all cultures in the world have had internal tensions. Yet Kabir, the Muslim weaver (c.1510), was allowed in his strongly monotheistic verses to condemn both Hinduism and Islam and their sacred ritual in the sharpest terms; and Nanak, his younger contemporary, allowed to form a religion independent of both Hinduism and Islam. These are facts surely indicative of conditions in which religious freedom too was seen as part of the cultural milieu of India.

With Akbar (1556-1605), the great Mughal emperor, the perception of India as home to different traditions interacting and adjusting with each other, received a fresh reinforcement, notably under the dual impetus of pantheism and a revived rationalism. The officially organised translations of Sanskrit works into Persian were followed by a detailed account of the society and culture of India (inclusive of its Muslim component) in Abu'l Fazl's official record of Akbar's empire, the *A'in-i Akbari*. Akbar's attitude towards this cultural heritage is not, however, one of uncritical sympathy. He could not accept the inequities that he felt were built into the traditions of Hinduism and Islam, notably in the treatment of women (child marriage, *sati*, unequal inheritance) and slaves (especially, slave trade). Moreover, the influence of tradition (*taqlid*) was too strong, and this he thoroughly disapproved of. He therefore even tried to frame a secular and scientific syllabus for education in both Persian and Sanskrit. Such groping towards a combination of patriotism with reform seems to anticipate strikingly the core of the 19th-century Renaissance that was to spread out from Bengal. Despite the later

inevitable meanderings and partial disavowals, the Mughal Empire fostered a Persian and, in the 18th century, an Urdu literature in which the shared culture of India found recurring expression. One may remember that one product of that culture was Ram Mohun Roy, born and brought up in a family of former Nazimate bureaucrats. Ram Mohun Roy's very first book, the *Tuhfatu'l Muwabbidin* (Gift of Monotheists) (1803-4), in its rejection of image worship and its case for proximity between monotheistic Hindus and Muslims, clearly drew upon a tradition, to which Akbar, Abu'l Fazl and Dara Shukoh had already greatly contributed.

If by now India achieved a transformation where its culture was multi religious or supra-religious, one could indeed consider it as analogous to the transformation of Christianity into Europe in the twilight of feudalism. This was an important prerequisite for the evolution of India into a modern nation. A second pre-requisite was also possibly secured when the centralizing tendencies of the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal Empire repeatedly projected the sight of a politically unified India. As Tara Chand put it in his *Influence of Islam on Indian Culture* (1928), this helped "to create a political uniformity and a sense of larger allegiance". He might have added that the sense of political unity, actual or potential, was evidenced in clear terms by the writing of political histories of India as a country such as those of Nizamuddin Ahmad, in Akbar's reign (1592), followed by Firishta (1607) and Sujan Rai (1695). Written in Persian, they had no predecessors in any language.

Some pre-requisites of nationhood had thus seemingly been achieved by the time that the British conquests began: in 1757, the year of Plassey, India was not only a geographical expression, it was also seen as a cultural entity and a political unit. It is, however, important to realise that, notable as these advances were in the long process of the formation of India, these did not yet make India a nation. Different as various definitions of the term "nation" are, they emphasize that consciousness of identity must be widely spread. Stalin once described the national question essentially as a "peasant question", which implied a mass diffusion of the sense of belonging to one's country, pervasive over other loyalties. Then there was the further condition set by John Stuart Mill of the existence of a feeling widely shared that the country must be governed by those belonging to it. What perception existed of India as a country, a cultural and political unit, until the 19th century was one largely confined to the upper strata, the townsmen, traders, scholars and the like. It did not, moreover, override a series of parochial identities. With his great insight Ram Mohun Roy noted in a letter in 1830 that India could not yet be called a nation, because its people were "divided among castes". From the outside too, Karl Marx in 1853 identified castes as "those decisive impediments to Indian progress and Indian power."

It is in this light that the social reform movements which emanated primarily from Bengal, and with which the names of Ram Mohun Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Keshav Chandra Sen are so indissolubly connected, must be viewed. To varying degrees the reformers expanded the realm of reason, spoke of inter-religious unity under the banner of monotheism (e.g.,

the Brahmo movement), and condemned oppression of women and the barriers of caste. These ideas, as they were disseminated, provided the building blocks for India's nationhood. While there were some anticipations of these notions in our past, the main source of ignition was surely the West. Already in 1789, the French Revolution had made the slogan of "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity" resound throughout the world; other modern ideas, necessarily reshaped to suit religious polemics, came through Christian missionaries; but it was the English language, essential as its learning was for the maintenance of British rule, that opened the doors to the entire modern humanistic thought of Europe. This is the sum and substance of Marx's thesis of Indian "regeneration" under colonial rule ("a new class is springing up, endowed with the requirements of government and imbued with European science"). Current questioning of this thesis from an outspoken anti-colonial viewpoint seems to me to be largely misplaced, however much we may like Edward Said's *Orientalism* or the play on "colonial knowledge" and "colonial discourse" so fashionable these days. Marx himself had insisted, while speaking of colonial Britain's 'regenerating mission', that her role was blind and unintended, creating "the material conditions for the new world in the same way as geological revolutions have created the surface of the earth". This should answer most of his critics.

India's opening to the modern world was as momentous for its own growth as a nation as was the diffusion of modern ideas and social values among wider and wider sections of the people, giving an accelerating sweep to national consciousness. The two processes went hand in hand, whether in Gandhi's rurally oriented Constructive Programme (for Gandhi's ideas too, despite his own subjective views on the matter, had impeccable Western sources) or in the Kisan Movement led by the Left (where Marxism provided the impulse). But there was yet the second aspect to India's evolution into nationhood, of which Mill had spoken, and to which I have referred earlier: the urge of the people of a country to be governed by persons from amongst themselves.

It was this that the National Movement was about. The criticism of the economic policies of the British Government, the protest at the exclusion of Indians from the administrative apparatus and the aspirations for representation of the educated classes, formed the main elements of the Indian National Congress programme immediately after its foundation (1885). These in time grew into a vision of an independent state by 1931, when the Congress passed the crucial Fundamental Rights resolution, promising a secular democracy with universal adult suffrage, equality of women, state control of key industries, protection of national industry, workers' rights, and land to the tiller. The struggle against colonial rule thus involved the mass of the peasants and workers; and it was their entry into the National Movement that finally won India its freedom. Clearly, it was when the mass of the Indian people recognized in the process of the Freedom Struggle that British rule had to go, that Mill's final condition for a nation was met.

The Indian nation has thus emerged after a long process of creation, in which consciousness or the mental orientation of its inhabitants has played a

vital role. But a nation can, then, be also eroded and destroyed the same way it has evolved or been built. In modern times, just as national consciousness has grown, the same factors for its growth such as the press and communications, have also intensified feelings of religious identities over ever larger spaces. Communalism in India inevitably developed alongside nationalism. In *Hind Swaraj* (1909) Gandhi had warned that the “nation” could have no association with any religion, and people of different communities in India must live “in unity”. It was for this that he struggled without any respite and finally laid down his life: Secularism has been at the heart of our nationhood.

As Jawaharlal Nehru noted, once the majority religious community insisted on associating its religion with the nation, its communalism could masquerade itself as nationalism, whereas the minority’s communalism could always be identified for what it was. It happened that the Two-Nation theory developed on both sides: The “Hindu-Hindi-Hindustan” slogan of the Hindu Mahasabha and RSS was as subversive of national unity as that of “Pakistan” adopted by the Muslim League after the Lahore Resolution of 1940. Over fifty years ago the Indian people took a historic decision of rejecting a religious colour for their nation amidst the provocation of partition, the communal massacres, and the martyrdom of Gandhiji. Today, it seems that the decision is to be subjected to review by a constitutional commission or under some other colour. This is all the more reason, I submit, for centres of education and enlightenment, and all thinking people in general, to take up the cause of the nation’s true interests, and speak up for its true historic legacy.