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# Interrogating 'Unity in Diversity': Voices from India's Ancient Texts

Brajadulal Chattopadhyaya

The problem – which, if I am allowed to call it a 'historian's puzzle' (as it appears as a contradiction in terms) – has come to me in the form of the expression 'Unity in Diversity'; it is an expression with which we all are familiar, and which, for long, has been taken to be an apt characterisation of what India represents. This is an expression inherited from our predecessors and embellished by the elected representatives of our country, with which our introduction to our own country begins at an early age, and this is an image of the country that we carry with us throughout our lives. If I have chosen to revisit this phrase on this august occasion, it does not necessarily mean that it would be to question the validity of what is nuanced in the phrase. It seems nevertheless necessary to ask afresh, since even recent commentaries on such issues fail to do so: (a) what the meaning of 'unity' in the expression is, or what its limits are, implied by its juxtaposition with 'diversity'. In other words, if diversities are taken to constitute 'unity', at what state do 'diversities' remain when the reference is to 'unity'? (b) A more contingent historical question relates to the context in which the idea of unity emerged and continues to get embellished, for whatever purpose. Since it is often found that the country's ancient civilisation, or at the most pre-colonial Indian civilisation, is invoked to buttress the idea of unity, it becomes necessary to examine the kind of empirical material from the past the spokesperson of the idea of unity were drawing upon; (c) if 'diversities' of a country (in whatever sense the term 'diversity' is used) are seen to have coalesced into a structure of unity, how do networks of diversities function within what is perceived as 'unity'? And, how indeed did they function in the past?<sup>1</sup>

Many more questions may be raised, but the sense of the apprehension that I am trying to articulate should be immediately understandable from what I have raised. If India does indeed represent the historical functioning of 'unity in diversity' (one is entitled to wonder: in some sense or the other, which country does not?),<sup>2</sup> then it is time that we revisit the history of its hold on our imagination to the extent that the current slogan of 'One India' – without the essential caveat of its diversities – sounds almost like a threat.

The idea that India is one territorial/cartographical unit in the sense of

an administratively governable country is colonial.<sup>3</sup> I am prepared to make minor qualifications to the statement, but would still retain it in essence. The idea of the unity of the country is of course attractive, and could be as appealing to a newly emerging indigenous nationalist intelligentsia of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as another invention of the period: the ethno-civilisational category of the Aryans, an invention which was lapped up – and continues to be lapped up – by status-starved Indian citizens, most of whom may live far beyond Aryavarta as it was delimited by Manu and others.<sup>4</sup> It is understandable why in the early and more mature phases of the crystallisation of our national consciousness, the idea of unity was unfailingly attractive not only to political thinkers and activists, but to creative writers and artists as well. The opposition to the ‘foreigner’ as political master required a spontaneous amnesia of differences,<sup>5</sup> at least partly, in the vindication of the imaging of a country and its peoples. The country could be conceived and represented as a ‘motherland’,<sup>6</sup> a country conceived as a goddess and acquiring an iconography.<sup>7</sup> Its inhabitants too could be conceived as a unity of inhabitants of that country (*bharatvasi*).<sup>8</sup>

One among the early historical statements of the idea of unity was R.K. Mookerji’s *The Fundamental Unity of India*, which assembled mainly early (and not so early) textual evidence to suggest the presence of the consciousness of unity as a fundamental essence of Indian civilisation.<sup>9</sup> The idea of unity, rather than diversity, is projected as a normal Indian condition, unless deviation from it has taken place in some periods of its past. In hundreds of our school textbooks, written in the past and being written now, ‘unity’ rather than diversity is thus assumed to be India’s self-born quality, defying and dispelling the need for any enquiry about the past of the achievement of unity.

Historiographically, it seems curious that even recent attempts to deal with a concept such as the ‘Cultural Unity of India’ end up,<sup>10</sup> not by subjecting the concept itself to any critical query, but trying to find ways of rationalising it in terms of the process of interaction between what is considered a ‘Great Tradition’ and ‘Little Tradition(s)’, or by evoking the old notion of a perpetual oscillation between the trend toward centripetalism and centrifugalism. Only, the terms have been sought to be indigenised, centripetalism having been Sanskritised into *Kendrabhimukhi* and centrifugalism into *Prantabhimukhi*. It seems as though there was some kind of central agency in the past consciously ordering things about, and deciding upon the elements of diversity to be subverted and the measure of unification or centralism to be achieved.

What is indeed curious is that in perpetuating the use of such terms as centripetal and centrifugal, or of ‘Great Tradition’ and ‘Little Tradition’, we perpetuate a notion which is not only value-loaded but also unhistorical, despite the casually interjected caveat that it is ‘useful to think of the cultural unity of India not as a thing out there somewhere, but as a *process*’

(emphasis in the original).<sup>11</sup> What is conceived as 'Great' must have had a history of becoming so, as 'Greatness', like 'Littleness', is not self-born. As for considering 'centripetal' as the desired goal and 'centrifugal' as its undesirable aberration, the *a priori* assumption of its linkage with the idea of a unified country, perceived by its inhabitants as their country, is too obvious to be elaborated. The necessity of underlining the idea of unity, despite the cognitive compulsion behind admitting that differences were many,<sup>12</sup> in a particular historical context may be understood in terms of an emergent nationalist inspiration, but what appears indeed curious is the continuing reluctance to examine how Indians of the past (at least some of them) looked at themselves and articulated their voices about those who they considered to be others. The nature of the perception of diversities and of differences in a society is an indicator of how its various constituent elements would interact with one another. If such diversities and reciprocal perceptions and interactions are found to constitute a design for unity for the complex reality of Indian society even in the past, then too it would perhaps necessitate a fresh thinking regarding the sense in which the idea of Indian unity can be sustained. Further, even if we proceed with the idea of a pervasive culture, spread like a veil over the disparateness of diversities, the processes through which such a veil came to be woven require, if not an empirical validation, at the least, some form of reasonable speculation. It is a requirement of History as a discipline, and to this requirement, I may turn now, with a great deal of diffidence.

### Perceptions of Diversity and Difference

Even at the risk of appearing to draw a hasty, unwarranted design, what seems to characterise the thinking of early text writers is that the social situation was perceived as consisting of binary opposites, or as a combination of multiples. The relationship between binary opposites could be simply stated in clear terms of irreconcilable opposition, whereas among multiples the relationship could be expressed, in various ways, as of differences which were a part of the social reality. If the binary opposition was expressed in such terms as *Arya* and *Dasyu*, as in the *Rigveda*,<sup>13</sup> the opposition was stated not simply in terms of the simultaneous existence of two groups, but also of the need of the *Aryas* to annihilate the *Dasyus* because of the vastness of cultural difference between them. The difference between the *Aryas* and the *Mlecchas*, a kind of generic term which could include diverse ethnic groups such as the Yavana, Saka, Tushara, Cina, Huna, may have originated in linguistic difference, but the theoretical impracticability of the two categories merging into one remained throughout. The text-writer's preference for whatever was associated with *Arya* (since the text-writers at the early stage belonged to this category) made the *Arya's* image as nobler in relation to others, leading to differentiation and hierarchisation between cultures on a significant scale. This could be

extended to creating other cultural categories, which could be taken to represent other types of binary opposition: urban–rural, *janapada*–*aranya* (forest), *margi*–*desi* and so on.

The notion of value assigned to binary opposites was very much present in which geographical space, inhabited by groups of peoples, was conceived. Whether it was the five-fold division, seven-fold division or nine-fold division of *Jambudvīpa* or *Bharatavarsha* (both terms taken to correspond to India), space, consisting of a number of separately specified inhabited spaces, carried with it clearly the sense of difference between *Madhyadesa* or *Aryavarta* and the other quarters (*di*). An indication of this difference is to be found in the *Baudhayana Dharmasutra*.<sup>14</sup>

The region to the east of where the Sarasvati disappears, west of Kalaka forest, south of the Himalayas and north of Pariyatra mountains, is the land of the *Aryas*. The practices of that land alone are authoritative.

*Madhyadesa* or *Aryavarta*, in relation to other quarters, carried the same sense of difference as between *Arya* and others. *Madhyadesa* or *Aryavarta* was a land of purity with an ideal social order; other quarters were qualitatively impure and inferior. The perceived boundaries of the sacred land may have differed from one period to the other, but the distinction in terms of purity remained. Manu, around the beginning of the Common Era, defined the country between the two divine rivers, the Sarasvati and the Drsadvati as the Land of Veda, and ‘the conduct of the (four) classes in that country ... the conduct of good people’. Similarly, the Middle Country [*Madhyadesa*] and *Aryavarta* were both sacred in the sense that they were ‘fit for sacrifices’. ‘The twice-born should make every effort to settle in these countries; but a servant may live in any country at all if he is starved for a livelihood.’<sup>15</sup> In fact, Manu’s land ‘fit for sacrifices’ was sharply distinguished from the land of the barbarians (*Mleccha*), impure in the absence of the *Aryas*. If the early *Smṛiti* writers considered space in terms of sacredness and profanity around the beginning of the Common Era, we find Rajashekhara continuing with the same notion in the tenth century of that era. To him too, in his *Kavyamīmamsa*, *Madhyadesa* was the ‘source of good behaviour’ (*tan-mulasca sadacara*), and ‘the mode of the poets was derived from that region’ (*tatratyo vyavahara prayea kavnam*).<sup>16</sup>

The origin of the idea of difference between what was perceived as sacred or pure in contrast to what was profane or impure, in the same way as *marga* defined divine and *de* worldly or futile, may have derived from purely Brahmanical order of thinking, but any social reality has to be perceived, in terms of the empiricity of it, as variable, inconsistent, and prone to conflict, change and individual agency.<sup>17</sup> With regard to space, the binary division between sacred and not so sacred spaces could further be stretched to appreciating the empirical reality of the existence of numerous *janapada* units which were the basic habitat units of a community or a combination of communities. It was *janapadas*, *nadus* or

whatever else the expression was, which defined the spatial identity of those who resided in them.<sup>18</sup> However, even a specified unit like a *janapada* was not undifferentiated. If one is permitted to take *Tamilaham* of early Tamil poems as a space of the magnitude of a macro *nadu*, comparable to a macro *janapada*, it was the poets' perception of differences which represented its landscape. The differences did not relate to topography alone; the poems bring out the different landscapes of moods and responses corresponding to the physical landscapes – the hills and forests (*kurinji*); the coastline (*neytal*); the riverine plains (*marutam*), the pastoral land (*mulai*); and the dreaded arid, wasteland (*palai*).<sup>19</sup> It is however not mentioned in the majority of texts, including the *Puranas*, how the *janapadas* mentioned in them differed from one another except in their location in their respective quarters (east, west and so on). The *janapadas* or *nadus* were many; with the passage of time, several *janapadas* could merge to become a *mahajanapada*, a *rashtra* or a *desa*. Only a comprehensive attempt at preparing a chronologically designed historical geography of India could reveal the changing number and distribution pattern of *janapadas*, *nadus*, *mahajanapadas*, *ashramas* and other habitat/political units across the space which was conceived as *Bharatavarsha* in our early texts.

The reason for making reference to the *janapadas* and *nadus*, and to the possibility of supra-*janapada* spatial/political formations, is that they were recognised, each consisting of its forest-village-and-city landscapes,<sup>20</sup> as spaces where human communities lived, by which they identified themselves and were identified by others. If the *janapadas* were many, so were the ruling powers. Although the possibility of the emergence of a sovereign – a *chakravarti* (whose chariot-wheels moved on ever-unhindered) was theoretically recognised and, was in fact, expected, the sovereign ruler did not rule over the country (or over what was conceived as the *chakravarti-kshetra*). Sovereignty lay in the recognition of sovereignty by multiple rulers, in their acts of submission to the 'world-conqueror'.<sup>21</sup> It is not that actual conquests and territorial annexations did not take place or that historical empires did not adopt severe measures to bring out some measure of administrative homogeneity in their territories. Even so, when historical rulers, in their lengthy *prasastis* written for them by their panegyrists, claimed victories over an impressive list of their contemporary rulers and kingdoms, the conquests boasted of were mostly cases of required rhetoric. Their claims to sovereignty and to performance of all major sacrificial rituals (sometimes thousands in number) were in conformity with the requirements of a *chakravarti* king,<sup>22</sup> linked in a close relationship with a multiplicity of subdued and submissive rulers. The relationship was ever-oscillating because of the presence of the enemy in the scheme of polity envisioned by political thinkers, and any analysis of the concept of the circle of kings (*mandala*) has to be premised on the presence of a host of kings, hostile or friendly, positioned as if in a circle

around a king intent on acquiring a sovereign status through conquests (*vijigishu*). Both the *Manusmriti*<sup>23</sup> and Kautilya's *Arthashastra*<sup>24</sup> enumerate the large number of elements which went into the making of the various limbs of a kingdom. Kautilya furnishes also an idea of the structure of the circle of kings in the following terms.<sup>25</sup> 'Making the kings separated by one (intervening territory) the felly [*nemi*] and those immediately proximate the spokes [*ara*], the leader should stretch himself out as the hub [*nabhi*] in the circle of constituents.' For the enemy situated between the two, the leader and the ally, becomes easy to exterminate or to harass, even if strong.

The imagery of the wheel with a centre notwithstanding, Kautilya or any other *Arthashastra* thinker certainly did not think of one centre or in terms of political 'centripetality' or 'centrifugality'. The conqueror's status was an open one, as is evident in Kautilya's assurance:<sup>26</sup> 'One (king) possessed of personal qualities, though ruling over a small territory, being united with the excellences of the constituent elements [*prakriti*] and conversant with (the science of) politics, does conquer the entire earth, never loses.'

#### **Dharma, Riti, Pravritti and Other Differences**

*Janapadas*, it was argued, were many, and they denoted spaces an individual or a community belonged to, whatever the size or the shape of the *janapadas*. Early texts remained largely silent on what distinguished one *janapada* from the other – Magadha from Anga, for example – apart from their approximate and sometimes incorrect geographical location. There is a suggestion of a measure of difference in references to the existence of a multiplicity of *dharmas*, not necessarily varying from *janapada* to *janapada*, but nevertheless suggestive of the currency of different policies, practices and customs. However, the impression that *dharma* in one sense related to communities and localities is suggested by a saying found in the sixteenth-century text *Yogini Tantra*:<sup>27</sup> *Dharma* in *Yogini Pimha* [Assam] is of *Kirata* origin, *Kirata* being more or less a generic term for people of the northern mountains. *Dharma* in the end being incomprehensible, it was the practices followed by the wise<sup>28</sup> in different localities which could be taken to represent *dharma*. When a king is forced to fight and conquer other countries, this is one of the policies that Manu advocates,<sup>29</sup> probably because of the enduring strength of local practices: 'He should make authoritative their own laws, and they have been declared, and with jewels he should honour (the new king), together with important men.' Manu goes on to add: 'A (conquering) king increases his power not so much through obtaining gold and territory as through gaining a firm ally, who, even though weak (at present, may become) capable in the future.'

Manu is not alone in suggesting the continuity of multiple *dharmas*; other *Dharmashastras*, such as *Yajnavalkyasmriti*,<sup>30</sup> go to the extent of suggesting:

Whatever *dharma* is of the king in ruling his own country [*rashtra*], the same *dharma* goes to the king in protecting the other countries [*para-rashtra*] brought under submission. Whatever be the *acara*, *vyavahara*, *kulasthiti* (of the country brought under submission) are to be retained as they are.

The recommendation is further clarified by reference to *bheda* (distinct character) and *vritti* (mode of living) which needed to be preserved.

If the normative texts such as *Manusmriti*, *Yajnavalkyasmriti* or *Naradasmriti* were talking in terms of disparate *dharmas* in political spaces which were obviously separate and distinct, then texts which can be considered apolitical, such as *Natyashastra* and *Kavyamimamsa*, also underlined, by drawing up schemas, the differences in the nuances of lifestyles and in the ways men and women conducted and expressed themselves. In these schemas, how one *janapada* or a locality or a region related to another has to be seen as relationships of difference.

There are very obvious difficulties in handling textual schemas; statements one comes across in texts are not necessarily factual, but are indicative of perceptions and attitudes embedded in them. If one text makes derogatory comments on a particular cultural feature of a *janapada* or a community, another may say exactly the opposite. In handling texts of this kind, and in fact, texts in general, what one needs therefore is to try and trace regular attributes and elements of culture figuring in them, which are put forward to mark out the difference between one *janapada* and the other. This is to say that texts do not make a statement of cultural relationship, but rather of relationship of difference. Language and the ways in which it was articulated in both speech and writing were regular reference points for demonstrating difference, but there were other sites where differences were located and pointed out.

Differences, articulated in the form of divergent modes of cultural expressions, can be traced to the text of *Natyashastra* of Bharata, whatever be the date assigned to him by scholars. Bharata, writing on the origin of *natya* (drama), deals in the beginning<sup>31</sup> with the problem of applications (*prayoga*) and lists *Bharati*, *Satvati*, *Arabhami* and *Kaisiki vrittis*, and it has been suggested that differences between them derived from different *janas* or communities in which the practices originated. Among the many *apsaras* or nymphs created by Brahma for the successful rendering of *Kaisiki vritti*, figure such names as Magadhi and Kerala, further suggesting diverse origins of what Bharata was trying to synthesise. With reference to *pravrittis*, Bharata further groups them into categories named after regions such as Avanti, Dakshinatya, Panchali and Odra-Magadhi. 'What is *pravritti*?' Bharata asks.<sup>32</sup>

The answer is: that which tells us, that on this earth there are various countries with different dresses, different languages, and different customs. True, there are various countries. But how can you classify them into only four groups?

The answer is: because of features which are common (to countries grouped together). Though there are those differences, looking to the *vritti* (style of production), the four-fold division has been accepted by the people (*lokanumata*).

Speaking of varieties of dramatic languages, apart from the references to intonations of Sanskrit and Prakrit in forms of *Atibhasha*, *Aryabhasha*, *Jatibhasha* and *Jatyantari-bhasha*, the regional dialects listed by Bharata are seven: *Magadhi*, *Avanti*, *Pracya*, *Shauraseni*, *Ardhamagadhi*, *Bahalka* and *Dakshinatya*.<sup>33</sup> These of course are variations of Sanskrit and Prakrit, obviously suitable for use in the plays, but a recognition of the existence of other languages too does exist in Bharata. For example, 'for persons of Barbara, Kirata, Dravida and Andhra tribes, instead of their own language, dialects of Surasena may be given.' Bharata goes on to specify the exact dialects to be used for different roles, and in that context hints at the existence of additional language communities: 'For warriors and (police) chief of the city, the dialect should be *Dakshinatya* and for Khasas who live in the north, *Bahliki*. For Shabaras and Shakas and tribes of that type, *Shakari* dialect, and *Chandali* dialect to Pulkas[as] and the like must be assigned.'<sup>34</sup> The *Shabara-bhasha* similarly, along with a measure of *Vanaukasi*, was applicable in cases of charcoal-makers (*angarakara*), hunters (*vyadha*), those who live by collecting wood and leaves (*kashthapatropajivinam*); for those who live near the enclosures for elephants, horses, goats, lambs and camels, *Abhiri* and *Sabari* were applicable. *Magadhi* was to be used for diggers of tunnels and of holes (for purposes of theft) and for damsels in distress.<sup>35</sup>

The recognition and accommodation of differences in the production of plays by Bharata was not intended simply to list them; they also implied hierarchy and status. Thus, of the four kinds of language to be used, *Atibhasha* was intended for use only by those enacting divine characters and *Aryabhasha* by kings. *Jatibhasha* was of various kinds, mixed with 'foreign' words, common in *Bharatavarsha* (*Mlecchadeshaprajukta ca Bharatavarshamashrita*). *Jatyantari-bhasha* (alternative reading: *Yonyantari-bhasha*) 'was for rustics, foresters, and animals, birds, etc. which are characters in a drama'.<sup>36</sup>

Elaborating on Bharata's concept of *vritti* and *pravritti*, Rajashekhara too talked of *pravritti*, defined by him as *vesha-vinyasa-krama*;<sup>37</sup> *vritti*, defined as *nritya-gita-kalavilasa-paddhati*; and *riti* as *vacana-vinyasa-paddhati*. In talking of difference, it is these features which appeared relevant to both Bharata and Rajashekhara. However, viewed even from these specific features the diversities appeared so enormous that Rajashekhara posed the inevitable question and answered it: 'If the countries are so innumerable, how could they all be accommodated only within four categories?' To this, Rajashekhara's answer, similar to that of Bharata, was: 'Even if the countries are countless in relation to *chakravarti-kshetra*, they are imagined as four-fold. Thereby, it becomes irrelevant to think of endless number (of

countries).<sup>38</sup> This attempt on the part of both Bharata and Rajashekara to resolve the immensity of varieties available goes only to highlight their anxiety for the necessity of bringing some order into a situation of chaotic disparateness.

Let me turn to another kind of text, the *shastra* of *kama*, although by now it should be clear that texts have a tendency to readily construct schema on the basis of assumed character traits and attributed attitudes. Nevertheless, even such an unsubstantiated assumption of attributes would be based on experience of the existence of difference. In the area of *kama* (desire as well as physical love), one of the essential pursuits of human life, theoreticians such as Vatsyayana, the author of *Kamasutra*, also define differences in attitudes and mores of sexual behaviour under the category of 'Customs of Different Regions' (*deshasatmyacca yoshitah upacaret*).<sup>39</sup> A man should treat a woman according to the nature of the region she comes from. The text characterises *Madhyadesa* women, along with women of Bahlika and Avantika, as opposed to kissing, scratching and biting, 'although they are fond of unusual sexual acts'. Similarly, women from Malava and Abhira have their own preferences, while women 'who live in the land watered by the Indus and the other five rivers like oral sex'. The text goes on to dwell on the sexual habits of the women of Konkana and Lata, of those of *Strirajya* and Kosala, and those of Andhra, Maharashtra, Dravida, Vanavasa, Pataliputra in Magadha and of Gauda. A contrary view, incorporated in the text, may assert that the nature of the individual is more important than the region, that 'local customs are not relevant to the matter' and 'that in course of time, practices, styles of clothing, and games move from one region to another';<sup>40</sup> even so, recognition of differences, which of course could be overcome, was an embedded perception which needed to be invoked whenever any classificatory schema came to be constructed.

It is also necessary to stress that enumeration and classification of regions in the texts, even if they were not wholly or empirically verifiable schema, were neither value-neutral nor even intended to be objective. In almost all cases, characterising differences also implied hierarchisation and making value-judgements in terms of perceived quality. Since such generalisations covered a really wide range and included character-traits of *varnas*, of regions, ethnic groups, sexual proclivities, social customs, speech, affiliations to religious beliefs and practices, it would be almost impossible to attempt a mapping of the possible patterns of interaction in society, in this maze of differences and differentiated qualities.

Perhaps the best available early examples of perceptions of difference, either in linguistic or in ethnic terms, are to be found in genres of texts that may be considered as non-sectarian – even irreverent – in character. The monologue plays or *bhanas*, generally dated to the middle of first millennium of the common era,<sup>41</sup> are examples of this genre. Set in one major city or the other, such as Ujjayini, Pataliputra and so on, the play

would be in the form of observations and observances on the peculiarities of human characters of diverse origin, made by the sole observer–narrator of the play. The *Bhaga Padataditaka*,<sup>42</sup> for example, refers to representatives of different communities and localities such as Shaka, Yavana, Tushara, Parasika, Kirata, Kalinga, Vanga, Magadha, Anga, Mahishaka, Cola, Pandya, Kerala, and so on.

The observer–narrator of the play, the *Vita*, harps on the theme of customs of localities (*sva-deshaupayikam*),<sup>43</sup> and in that context, makes fun of how different communities behave. Referring to the Dindikas of Lata, he remarks:<sup>44</sup>

[They] are not much different from the Pisacas. For all of them bathe naked, always wash their clothes themselves even amidst a crowd, keep hairs dishevelled, go to bed without washing feet, eats this or that thing while walking, wears tattered clothes, even after striking one when the latter is in difficulty, they always boast of their bravery.'

With reference to an official in the play, the *Vita* observes:<sup>45</sup>

... who with a top-knot of hairs and jar-like ear-pendants, behaves like the Lamas by speaking to the people with *ja*-sounds (in places of *ya*). ... All the *Latas* have their *uttariya* put around their two arms, cloth tied round the waist, they greet men who meet them with *sha*-sound (in place of *sa*) and take steps with slight stooping.

The *Dindis* come in for more derogatory remarks from the *Vita* to whom they are not very different from the monkeys. Referring to the Dasherakas in the same city, the reaction of the *Vita* finds expression in the following terms:<sup>46</sup>

Here is a man with the face of a he-goat, whose loins are covered with a piece of cloth, and whose shoulders are full of thick hairs ... he comes biting a radish. If he is not a Dasheraka, then he must be a devil ... where shall I wash clean my eyes polluted by seeing this Dasheraka?

Similarly, 'men of Surashtra and monkeys are of the same class' with preference for a Barbari courtesan who is described as 'a goddess of darkness with whiteness in the teeth and eyes only'.<sup>47</sup> A Yavana courtesan in the same city, a female monkey, a man from Malava, and one addicted to amorous passion, a donkey, and a singer – are all considered to have a common nature.<sup>48</sup> Brahma, the text explains, is always apt to bring similar things together. Clarifying further, the *Vita* goes on to add:

... will listen to the Yavana courtesans' words which are like the chattering of monkey, full of shrill sounds, and of indistinguishable consonants, and which are interspersed with the occasional display of forefingers.<sup>49</sup>

category of *hasti-murkha*<sup>50</sup> (an elephantine fool), in the same manner in which a character from *dakshina Radha* (southwest Bengal) was branded as an incarnation of conceit (*ahamkara*) in an allegorical play of the eleventh century: *Prabodha-candrodaya*.<sup>51</sup> As can be expected, he too, in his turn, had branded 'the entire world as full of idiots' (*aho murkhavahulam jagat*).<sup>52</sup>

If all that has been cited so far points in the direction not of a consciousness of unity, but of mutually distrustful diversities, then extension of this perspective of mutual perceptions to the field of doctrinal and sectarian differences would reveal the same pattern, despite the stereotype of tolerance that marks Indian religious historiography. The tradition of contestation between different *vadas* or doctrines is fairly old, and already by the time of the Buddha, the existence of a really large number of doctrines and world views, all claiming to be the only true one, possibly in north India alone, is attested by the textual sources.<sup>53</sup> One can of course point to the fact that although differences did exist, it was the recognition of differences and respect for them, as advocated by emperor Ashoka in the third century BCE,<sup>54</sup> that ensured the coexistence of pluralities in society. Ashoka's message for mutual understanding and toleration of differences was however unique; looking at it from an opposite perspective, it was also a recognition of the absence of tolerance, necessitating imperial intervention. The entire history of Indian philosophy starts by making an initial distinction: *vadas* or doctrines which were believed to be based on conformity to the authority of the Vedas;<sup>55</sup> this of course should not be taken to mean that all doctrines, seeking valorisation with reference to the vedas, constituted an undifferentiated category.

The 'others' of the Vedic, which were non-Vedic, or rather un-Vedic, were represented not only by the *Nastikas* or the *Carvakins*, the *Saugatas* or the Buddhists, and the *Nirgranthas* or *Kshapanakas* or the Jainas; they each split up, in the course of history, into many fragments, and there was still enough space left for new doctrines and new sects to emerge. The ground reality of the sectarian scenario in early India, or for that matter in other periods of Indian history as well, was that in the absence of a hegemonic faith or doctrine (which too could split up into irreconcilable segments), the differences could be variously articulated in terms of opposition, antagonism, ridicule, physical violence, and also in terms of amicable dialogues. There can be no simple formula for making intelligible the pattern/patterns of interrelationship between different faiths, religious practices and institutions and groups of practitioners in a situation of incomparably complex juxtaposition. Characterising it simply as an expression of religious tolerance or as synthesis and syncretism among different faiths would be negated by historical examples of acrimony, persecution and violence.<sup>56</sup>

Evidence of expressions of ideological distances and of acrimony abounds in texts but that need not lead us to a jungle of details. All that

I shall limit myself to, in order to underline the point about differences, would be to cite a few examples from the early texts. The first example is provided by a south Indian Jaina text, titled *Nilakeshi*,<sup>57</sup> assigned by its editor to about the fifth century CE. The text is about Nilakeshi, a female Jaina doctrinaire, who is out on a mission, at different locations, to prove the falsity of various doctrines or *vadas*, and the *vadas* which are demonstrated to be false, one after another, are: *Kundalakeshi-vada*, *Arkacandra-vada*, *Mokala-vada*, *Buddha-vada*, *Ajivaka-vada*, *Samkhya-vada*, *Vaisheshika-vada*, *Veda-vada* and *Bhuta-vada*. The text also narrates the story of a beautiful Jaina girl who is duped into marriage in a Buddhist household. Her misery at having to live with meat-eating Buddhists gets compounded when a Buddhist monk appears as a guest, and she is asked to cook a meat dish for him. To alleviate her misery she cooks a delicious meat dish by using the leather footwear temporarily left by the monk. The deception is discovered, and, as a measure of reprisal, her husband's household puts her under the stigma of being the most unchaste woman in town. The story concludes with divine intervention which shows her up as really the most chaste among all the women of the town. Deception, when it is used for the vindication of one's own faith, becomes a virtuous act and is, by implication, shown to be justified in establishing the superiority of one's own doctrine, which is, in this case, Jaina. If a brahmanical saying provides the advice<sup>58</sup> that even when chased by a mad elephant, one should not enter a Jaina temple, Jaina narrative stories in their turn emphasise that those led along the false path by *brahmanas* and the *baudhas* can find the true one only when they come under the protection of Jaina *acharyas*.<sup>59</sup>

A telling evidence of contestation between different doctrines, resulting in an allegorical fight between good and evil, is the text of the eleventh century play *Probodhacandrodaya* of Krishna Misra written during the time of the Candella rulers.<sup>60</sup> In the play, evil is represented by such negative characters as Kama–Rati (male and female versions of physical love and desire), *Maharaja Mahamoha* (great delusion), *Vibhramavati* (blunder), *Mithyadrshiti* (false perspective), *Dambha* (egoism), *Ahamkara* (boastfulness), *Krodha* (anger), and so on, as also by Carvakas, Digambaras, Shaivas, Pashupatas and Somasiddhantins or Kapalikas. Virtue is represented by Vishnu-*bhakti*, *Mati* (reason), *Shanti* (peace), *Karuna* (compassion), *Maitri* (friendship), as also by Sarasvati, Upanishad, *Yajna–Vidya*, etc. When, as expected, virtue defeats vice or evil, the forces of evil flee in different directions: the Saugatas or the Buddhists to Sindhu, Gandhara, Parasika, Magadha, Huna, Vanga, Kalinga – all far off from virtuous *Madhyadesa*, as do Digambaras and Kapalikas in the direction of Malava and Abhira, to hide among the illiterates. The Shaivas and Pashupatas similarly flee in the direction of Turushka-*desha* where 'people do not receive their venerable guests even with offering a seat and water to wash their feet.' Good behaviour, in 'proper' texts, continues to remain a preserve only of *Madhyadesha*.

I would like to close this discussion with a brief reference to a well-known satirical play *Mattavilasa-prahasana*,<sup>61</sup> attributed to Mahendra-Vikrama-Varman, Pallava king of the seventh century, who is believed to have shifted his allegiance from Jaina to Shaiva faith. The location of what happens in the play is Kancipuram, and the *dramatis personae* consist of a Kapalin (a Kapalika ascetic) Satyasoma, his female companion Devasoma, a Shakya-*bhikshu* (Buddhist monk), a Pashupata ascetic and a madman. The play is about the loss and recovery of the Kapalin ascetic's skull-bowl (*kapala*), containing roasted meat. The Kapalin feels frustrated at having lost the skull-bowl as he considers the bowl to be central to his vocation: 'Ruined is my *tapas*! How can I be a *Kapali* anymore!' (*bhrashtam me tapah / kenahamidanim kapali bhavishyami!*) He has also just been dissuaded by his female companion to desist from giving up drinking, as that would seriously affect his *tapas* and amount to *vrata-bhanga*. The Kapalin suspects that either a dog or a Buddhist monk has stolen the skull-bowl with the meat in it (after all, both the dog and the Buddhist monk are meat-eaters). He accuses not only the Buddhist monk for stealing but also brands Buddha himself as a bigger thief than the author of *Cora-shastra* (Manual on the Art of Stealing) because 'when the Brahmanas were blinking', Buddha enriched his own treasury with ideas from the *Mahabharata* and the *Vedantas*. At the same time, his attitude towards the vedas themselves was no less irreverent; in his state of perpetual inebriation, this is how the Kapalin compares a liquor-vend (*surapano*) to a site of vedic *Yajna* (sacrifice):

Look! Look, dear! This liquor shop resembles the splendour of a sacrificial hall. The sign-post [*dhvaja-stambha*] here is the sacrificial post; the liquor is the *soma*; those who drink are the priests [*rtvijah*]; the jugs are the *soma* bowls [*camashah*]; the roasted meat [*shulya-mamsa*] and other delicacies are the special savoured offerings [*upa-damsha-havir-visheshah*], the drunken-talk is the *Yajur* words; their songs are the *Sama* hymns; the thirst is the fire; and the owner of the shop is the *yajamana* of the sacrifice.

The play *Mattavilasa-prahasana* (satire) ends on a surprisingly amicable note, but the points of difference between the characters were not of the nature of play-acting, they were real. If reconciliation and resolution of differences was one side of reality, a complementary reality would be represented by its opposite: that of tension, conflict, contestation and even violence.<sup>62</sup>

What has been said above is based only on perceptions articulated and expressed in words; this ought to have been supplemented by varieties of other perceptions of individuals and communities whose voices, unfortunately for historians, have gone unrecorded. One can only wonder their variety, imagining the cacophony which such contending voices would have created and sounded as vibrant as a once-a-week village market place.

### Return to the Issue of Unity

According to an informed opinion,<sup>63</sup> ‘the essence of Tradition has to exist in the medium of language’. One may demand, equally legitimately, that the essence of unity, to be easily understandable, has to exist in the form of a concept in a language. A single word, expressing the ‘idea of unity’ in modern times in the Indo-Aryan languages would be *aikya*, derived from *eka* or one. But the concept of *eka*, encompassing *bahudha* or the diverse, or the many, as found in a hymn in the *Rigveda*,<sup>64</sup> actually equates *eka* (one) with several other gods, named differently as Indra, Mitra, Varuna, Agni, Matarishvan, etc., and this equation in any case does not have any bearing on the idea of Indian unity. Even the limited samples of textual evidence that I have cited should suggest that those who wrote our early texts appear not to have been terribly concerned with the idea of unity as a hallmark of their society and culture. The texts, in fact, seem to provide an opposite impression.

It is therefore somewhat curious that the insistence on the image of India alone representing unity in diversity has to figure in all varieties of Indian historiography: Colonial–Orientalist, Nationalist, Marxist, and what one may perhaps call post-Marxist.<sup>65</sup> The presence of the ‘idea’, despite the mandatory accent also on diversity, in all brands of writings is so pronounced that one is inevitably led to ask, once again, questions which seem to have so far remained unasked in clear terms. (i) If India indeed represents diversity, how did the diverse elements dissolve their own innate characters to come together to construct or constitute an entity called unity? In other words, what was that magic formulae which India alone could conceive to transcend all differences to emerge as a united body? (ii) Is there a historic moment/juncture which represents the achievement of that unity? For, if there is, then the possibility of any new elements further contributing to that unity seems to get automatically precluded as post-facto appendages external to the achievement of that unity. Alternatively, is it that what we assume as unity is really an ongoing process toward a new formation, and, has it always been so in the past as well, necessitating that we reconsider – and reorient – the entire idea of unity in our mindscape, to speculate new alternatives?

Before I can think of even facing such basic questions, in addition to the ones I posed in the beginning, let me consider briefly the views of two well known thinkers who both subscribed to the notion of India’s unity in diversity: Tagore and Kosambi. Two of Tagore’s memorable writings project this idea as their essence: his long song *Bharata-tirtha*<sup>66</sup> (i.e. the pilgrimage space that is Bharata) and his short essay: ‘*Bharatavarsher Itihas*’<sup>67</sup> (‘History of India’). In *Bharata-tirtha* two major metaphors are employed. One is that of an auspicious pilgrimage site, on the shore of the ocean of great humanity (*Mahamanava*) where people, from diverse locations and diverse origins converge, obviously in their quest for a final

resting place. The other metaphor is of the body: Bharata is conceived as a body in which the Aryas and Anaryas (non-Aryans), Dravidas, Cinas, Shakas, Hunas, Pathans, Mughals all merged. The metaphor of the body is significant because as a living and vibrant organism, all parts of the body are interconnected in a functional relationship, in which no organ or tissue could be discarded as redundant. This is precisely the idea that Tagore projects also in his essay '*Bharatavarsher Itihas*' when he says: 'Bharatavarsha has not discarded anything.' Tagore's idea of Indian history being not just a chronicle of genealogies and battles, but of persistent search to forge unity among diversity, of ways of reconciling between seemingly irreconcilables, again underlines the almost inexhaustible range of cultural ingredients which all fused to emerge as recognisably Indian. Tagore, in talking about unity, did not insist upon unity being a *fait accompli*. His use of the term 'search' (*sandhan*) rather pointed to the quest for unity as an ongoing process, without the predictability of an inevitable, final accomplishment. Tagore's accent on the dynamic process of the move to achieve equilibrium between different cultural elements cannot be taken to mean triumph of one cultural form or expression over the other; all that it can perhaps mean is interaction, shorn of cultural value judgement.

To D.D. Kosambi, India's unity in diversity is almost self-evident. The first sentence of his *The Culture and Civilisation of Ancient India in Historical Outline* starts thus:<sup>68</sup>

A dispassionate observer who looks at India with detachment and penetration would be struck by two mutually contradictory features: diversity and unity at the same time. The endless variety is striking, often incongruous. Costume, speech, the physical appearances of the people, customs, standards of living, food, climate, geographical features all offer the greatest possible differences.

The varieties specified here almost reproduce those articulated in ancient texts, but it is not varieties as such which are significant to Kosambi, 'Africa or the single province of Yunnan in China offer as much diversity'.<sup>69</sup> What distinguishes India from other countries is 'the continuity that we find in India over the last three thousand years or more. The continuity of Indian culture in its own country is perhaps its most important feature.' Kosambi's notion of continuity implies the simultaneous presence of all cultural forms from the most primitive hunting-gathering to the most technologically recent: 'the survival within different social layers of many forms that allow the reconstruction of totally diverse stages'.<sup>70</sup> Continuity, which thus took the form of survivals and of the process of tribal societies becoming parts of the general (in other words, of more complex society) may be taken to correspond to Tagore's idea of the all-accommodating nature of India's unity, both notions precluding the necessity of seismic tensions toward achieving that unity.

The presence of diverse elements, at different stages of historical change

and in ever-dynamic states of equation, however does not necessarily define unity; the symbol/ symbols of unity – as also its meaning (although conceived as an apt characterisation of Indian society across historiographical ideologies) – have remained really unspecified. What needs therefore to be understood – and this is precisely why I chose to present this question before you – is how diversity of elements present in Indian society and culture relate to one another and to the complex structure which may be taken to represent unity. Do these diverse ingredients exist in a relationship of perfect equilibrium and harmony as a static structure, or, is the balance fragile, uncertain and in a perpetual state of tension? I cannot even presume to provide an answer to this question; I can only offer my own modest views on the issue of unity in diversity in so far as the concept relates to the formative stages of Indian society and culture.

Before I attempt to do so, let me once more refer to the early texts. If the space, conceived in the puranas and other texts as *Bharata-varsha*, is taken to correspond to India, then there is puranic opinion also on what distinguished this *varsha* from other *varshas*.<sup>71</sup> The distinction from other *varshas* was made by stressing that *Bharata-varsha* was the only *varsha* where *karma* (action) bore its fruit, and, causally related to it, where the inhabitants were organised in a four-fold social division. The ideology of *karma*, in essence related to the ideologies of *dharma*, *phala* (fruit of action) and rebirth, was, according to the puranas, the unique hallmark of *Bharata-varsha*. While some may like to take *karma* ideology as the puranic version of Indian unity, there is a major difficulty in accepting it as what transcended the vast range of diversities in the country. Despite the pervasive reach of the ideology in the Indian mind and the fact that it was one of the cornerstones of brahmanical ideology of *varnasramadhárma*, it was not necessarily subscribed to by all communities.<sup>72</sup> More importantly, the problem of understanding interrelationship between disparate culture and social traits across the space of India at historical and existential levels still remains unanswered. Although the puranas, as also other literature, point to the multiplicity of *janapadas* which constituted *Bharata-varsha*, which in turn was one of the components of an elaborate cosmographic structure, the problem of interaction or interrelationship between them is not a theme with which the texts were really concerned.

### In Defence of Diversity

What does Indian unity mean, particularly when it is projected back into India's early past? In empirical and theoretical terms, Bharatavarsha was not a politically unified space; the ideal, sovereign ruler's sovereignty hinged upon the subordination of multiple other rulers.<sup>73</sup> The *shastras* I have cited point to diversities of *janapada* cultures and also to the existence of attitudes of mutual derision, real or concocted, among them. Imagining the existence in the past of a 'common history, common heroes, a common literature,

common art, a common law<sup>74</sup> may be a satisfying assertion of a colonised 'patriot', it can hardly pass empirical scrutiny. Do we then abandon the idea of unity altogether? Approached from a historical perspective, the idea of unity, it seems, may at best be considered as a process of interaction – as a process of transformative but unequal dialogue– among varied local, sub-regional and regional elements of culture (in other words, of *janapadas*, *nadus*, etc.) across time and across spaces. Transformative dialogue could imply sharing, borrowing, interpenetration, rejection as also synthesis, and the intensity or otherwise of such active interaction would depend on the proximity or the distance between the spaces involved in such interaction. I have argued on another occasion<sup>75</sup> that as a geographical space India can be viewed as a land of interlocking regions, the cultural implications of which would be that geographically contiguous and interlocking regions – would have greater cultural affinity – in terms of linguistic and similar traits – than would two distant regions. Of course, communication and pervasive reach of major symbols of trans-regional cultural affinity were not geographically determined; the agency was human, and historians keen to decipher the nature of Indian unity may do well to look for both such agencies and those enduring symbols of cultural affinity which are not exclusive to a single segment of Indian populace. The most that I shall be prepared to speculate for the present is that the interactional process developed over time a reference point to which heterogeneous cultural elements and geographical spaces could relate. This reference point was the idea of *Bharata-varsha*, or any term such as later-day Hindustan, which could substitute *Bharata-varsha*. This idea of a country could and did accommodate as a single reference point the vast range of diverse, even contradictory, traits of different localities, sub-regions and regions. Thus, when a fourteenth century inscription from coastal Andhra – one among many such inscriptions – refers to the location of Tilinga country within the *varsha* of *Bharata*, divided into nine parts, and consisting of many languages and customs, it was both recognising its affinity with *Bharata-varsha* and its other *janapadas*<sup>76</sup> as well as asserting its own separate cultural identity in the fourteenth century context. This identity too would have emerged out of, and still contained, many differences, and the assertion of a particular identity ought to be seen as an expression of a contingency of that particular historical moment.

The point that I think needs to be stressed is that our insistence on idea of unity generally tends to ignore the implications of the formation of unity.<sup>77</sup> 'In pre-modern times too the establishment of a particular way of life generally was accomplished by the subordination or marginalisation of other world-views and practices. ... Unity, in corporative and hierarchical social orders is based on the inequality of its constituents.' If the meaning of unity is homogeneity, oneness without variations, without contradictions, and without space for dissent, then that would be a meaning which, I doubt,

anyone would like to apply to India, either of the present or of the past.

In fact, unity or even formation of a civilisation, is in a sense destructive. It brings together disparate elements through the decimation or annihilation of a large number of such elements. Even when pre-civilisational, essentially local and community elements get into the process of civilisation formation, through interaction, appropriation, universalisation, or any other means, the structure of the new formation invariably implies select accommodation, marginalisation, elimination or subordination. For example, in the process of the emergence of major religious cults, when the *vana* (forest) merges into the *kshetra*<sup>78</sup> (settled agrarian space with a complex social organisation), it is not the *vana per se* which continues to remain present. Despite the presence of tribal, *vana* elements in the cult of Jagannath of Puri, the cult emerged as so thoroughly brahmanised and identified with brahmanical notion of social hierarchy that it was inevitable for an egalitarian socio-religious movement such as Mahima *dharma* to make it a target of attack.<sup>79</sup> More recently, although the community of Bengali *bhadraloks* continue to invoke their goddess Kali as *digambari* or *digvasana* ('one whose garment is the sky or 'one who is without a garment'), as an idol for worship she is made to conform to the norms of *bhadralok* propriety by being clad in a *shadi*.

Thus, those who attempt to invoke concepts such as *dharma* and 'Sanskritic paradigm' to conjure up an image of Indian unity appear to be unaware of the negative potentialities of unity. Consider the following statement, recently made, in relation to a possibly timeless India,<sup>80</sup> 'a multilingual, a multi-racial, a multi-religious, a multi-cultural India had some kind of an integrative framework of a nation governed by *dharma*'. The projection of *dharma* as an integrative framework fails to recognise that *dharmas* were multiple, and, in any case, in the event of failure of *dharmas* to resolve an issue, it was the *rajashasana* (royal) which ultimately prevailed according to textually prescribed procedures.<sup>81</sup> *Dharmas* could and therefore did clash. As for 'Sanskritic paradigm'<sup>82</sup> symbolising Indian unity because of its pan-Indian reach as a sacred language and its ideological underpinnings, it is perhaps necessary to recall what linguists have told us.

Writing way back in 1954, M.B. Emeneau remarked, by way of explaining the initial reluctance of linguists to accept the possibility of Sanskrit borrowings from Dravidian:<sup>83</sup> 'Indian civilisation itself, with its enthronement of Sanskrit at the expense of other languages, taught western scholars to think this way about Sanskrit.' That the enthronement of Sanskrit was at the expense of Dravidian and other languages, has been stressed further by Emeneau:<sup>84</sup> 'The geographical distribution, and the nature of boundary in Central India between Dravidian speakers and the speakers of Indo-Aryan languages that descend from the invader language Sanskrit, are good evidence that Dravidian has been steadily retreating before the Indo-Aryan.'

More recently, an overview of the 'linguistic prehistory of South Asia' postulates the following about the Austro-asiatic Munda languages in relation to its distribution in South Asia:<sup>85</sup>

The Munda languages are spoken primarily in north-east India with outliers encapsulated among Indo-Aryan languages in Central India. ... The geography of Munda does suggest that it was once more wide spread in India and has been pushed back or encapsulated by both Indo-Aryan and Dravidian. Indeed the early literature detected Munda influences far to the west of the Indo-Aryan zone even in the Dardic languages of Pakistan, an idea still countenanced in recent publications.

Whatever may have been the changing prehistoric geography of Austroasiatic or other language groups in India, there is no reason to doubt that the triumphant expansion of Sanskrit towards representing a 'cosmopolis'<sup>86</sup> was secured at the expense and marginalisation not only of what have been called other language 'phyla' and 'language isolates'<sup>87</sup> but also of other Indo-Aryan languages such as Prakrit and Pali. One also ought not to be oblivious of the fact that in addition to being the vehicle of exquisite literature and subtle philosophical thought of wide reach, Sanskrit has for long been the purveyor of a most pernicious ideology of social inequality through the concepts of *varna*, *jati* and *varnasamkara*, condemning a major chunk of Indian humanity to degraded segregation and untouchability.<sup>88</sup> 'Sanskritic paradigm' was pervasive, but it was a symbol of ideological dominance, not of shared participation without which the meaning of unity remains hollow.

It is an irony of history that movement of diverse cultural spaces to come together, to integrate, to function as a united entity, happens invariably by sacrificing a multitude of such spaces, the nature of their sacrifice depending on the historical context of their disappearance. In India, many did not disappear, but went nevertheless through a process of change or of metamorphosis. Many others survived, giving the country a unique appearance of continuity. History too has gifted us new cultural forms which have entered into new relationships of interaction. In my ode to diversity, which I fear may turn into an elegy sooner than later, I simply plead for the survival of diverse cultural spaces in a world which is fast becoming a victim of dangerous global homogenisation; we have started to experience the diverse splendours of our vast universe in our neighbourhood mega-malls instead of learning to experience it all around us. In our own country, the massive spread of what I call maggi-mania, from Kinnaur to Kanyakumari,<sup>89</sup> simultaneously combined with increasingly persistent threats to our personal and community culinary preferences,<sup>90</sup> is paralleled by the increasing centralism and autocracy of today's *madhya-desa* and the steadily growing imperialistic ambition of a single language in a multi-lingual terrain. The evidence that I cited above from our ancient

texts of cultural differences, tensions, and even of conflicts was evidence of dynamic interactions in a heterogeneous society. Keeping the heritage of that glorious, if contentious, heterogeneity in mind, let us hope that today we do not deliberately consign that country – our many Indias – to the blackhole of robotic uniformity in the name of integration and unity.

I would have found it difficult to complete this address on time without a Fellowship and without the facilities that came with it at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla. I am deeply thankful to the community of Fellows, including its Director, for allowing me to be a part of the culture of questioning at the Institute over the last several months. For essential technical help and for encouragement I remain indebted to Dr. Arura Bommareddi and Susmita Basu Majumdar.

#### Notes and References

- 1 See for example, S. Bhattacharya, *Talking Back: The Idea of Civilization in Indian Nationalist Discourse*, New Delhi, 2011. Being mainly of the nature of historiographical analyses, and based on the writings of such major thinkers as Tagore, Gandhi and Nehru, *Talking Back* is not really concerned with early textual perceptions. See also idem, 'Introduction' which is the editorial introduction to the collection of essays titled *Cultural Unity of India* (Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Kolkata, 2013), pp. XI–XLI.
- 2 See entries in <http://www.wikipedia.org> under 'Unity in Diversity'.
- 3 For details of early enterprise to map the empire, see M. Edney, *Mapping and Empire: The Geographical Construction of British India, 1765–1843*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1997, *passim*.
- 4 *Manu-Smriti*, II. 17–24. The English translation of the *Smriti*, titled as *The Laws of Manu*, used here is by Wendy Doniger and Brian K. Smith (Penguin Books, New Delhi, 1992).
- 5 Bankim Chandra perceived many differences (*bheda*) in Indian society in the form of major ethno-linguistic groups, in the form of different *jatis*, religious, languages, customs and so on. He was, in view of such compartmentalising differences, led to compare *Bharata-bhumi* (Land of India) to a bee-hive full of bees. See J.C. Bagal, ed., *Bankim Rachanavali*, Vol. 2, Calcutta, 1964. The essay is titled 'Why is India Unfree?' pp. 234–41.
- 6 Bankim Chandra, who wrote about differences in India in terms of varieties of regional groups, was also among the early conceivers of the country as 'Mother'. His 1882 novel *Ananda Math*, considered to be the earliest patriotic novel in India, offers homage to the 'Mother' constructed in the image of Puranic Durga; see *Bankim Rachanavali*, Vol. I, Chapter 10. In answer to the layman's doubt that the song refers to the country, not mother, the ascetic asserts that the country of birth is indeed Mother.
- 7 Abanindranath Tagore's *Bharat-Mata* (Mother India), painted in 1905, showed the goddess with hands holding, in each, a manuscript, sheaves of paddy plant, a rosary, and a piece of cloth, symbolised her as the provider of *shiksa-anna-diksa-vastra* to her children, the inhabitants of the country. *Bharat-mata's* iconography was however not a fixed one, as can be seen from Sumathi Ramaswamy, *The Goddess and the Nation*, New Delhi edition, 2011, pp. 15–17 and *passim*.
- 8 *Bharatavasi* (the residents of India) were all invoked in an extremely popular song (believed) to have been composed to commemorate the hanging, by the British, of the young revolutionary Khudiram Bose in 1908. The song continues to be

- immensely popular in Bengal; for different versions of the song and their analysis, see Arun Kumar Nag, 'Dwipantari Abhiram', in *Galpa o Tar Goru* (in Bengali, Calcutta, 2005, pp. 109–27.
- 9 Radhakumud Mookherji, *The Fundamental Unity of India*, London, 1914; New Delhi edition, 2003, *passim*.
  - 10 S. Bhattacharya, *Talking Back*, *passim*; also, idem, 'Introduction'.
  - 11 S. Bhattacharya, 'Introduction', p. xxi.
  - 12 If Bankim Chandra could perceive difference in the existence of many *jatis*, and in other terms, contributing to the absence of the feeling of unity, others could sing of *mahan milan* (noble union), despite the existence of many languages, many dress habits, many beliefs and opinions. Cf. Atul Chandra Gupta: *nana mat nanaparidhan, vividher majhe aache milan mahan*. This reference has been supplied to me by Sriman Sabir Ali.
  - 13 *Rig Veda*, 10.22.8, See also B.D. Chattopadhyaya, 'Accommodation and Negotiation in a Culture of Exclusivism: Some early Indian perspectives', in Bipan Chandra and Sucheta Mahajan, *Composite Culture in a Multicultural Society*, National Book Trust, New Delhi, 2007, pp. 145–65.
  - 14 *Baudhayana Dharmasutra*, 1.2.9–14.
  - 15 Manu makes a distinction between *Madhyadesha* and *Aryavarta*, the latter being somewhat larger than the first, 2.21–22, Doniger and Smith, p.19.
  - 16 *Kavyamimamsa*, 17 *adhyaya*. The edition used is of Nagendranatha Chakravartu, *Rajashekhara o Kavyamimamsa*, Santiniketan, 1960, p. 269. Other citations from the *Kavyamimamsa* would also refer to this edition.
  - 17 See Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, 'The Nature of 'Folklore' and 'Popular' Art', in Rama P. Coomaraswamy, ed., *The Essential Ananda Coomaraswamy*, The Bloomington World Wisdom, Bloomington, 2009, pp. 215–22. This is how Coomaraswamy distinguished between what he called 'constituted' (*samskruta*) and provincial (*desi*) [or 'highway' (*marga*) and a local or by way (*desi*): 'looking at from the Brahman's point of view (who are 'gods' on 'earth'), whatever is geographically and/or qualitatively removed from the orthodox centre, from holy land (*Aryavarta*) where the heavenly pattern is accurately imitated will be at the same time geographically and spiritually 'provincial'; those are pre-eminently *desi* who are outer barbarians beyond the pale, and in this sense *deshi* is the equivalent of 'heathen' or pagan ...'.
  - 18 For a fuller discussion of this, see B.D. Chattopadhyaya, 'Space, History and Cultural Process: Some Ideas on the Ingredients of Sub-regional Identity', in H. Kulke and G. Berkemer, eds., *Centres Out There? Facts of Sub-regional Identities in Orissa*, New Delhi, 2011, pp. 21–38. See also B.D. Chattopadhyaya, *A Survey of Historical Geography of Ancient India*, Calcutta, 1984, *passim*.; idem, 'The Concept of *Bharatavarsha* and its historiographical implications' (unpublished).
  - 19 K. Sivathamby, 'Early South Indian Society and Economy: The Tinai concept', *Social Scientist*, Vol. 3, No. 5. (1974), pp. 29–37; G.D. Sontheimer, *Pastoral Deities in Western India*, translated by Anne Feldhaus, New York/Oxford, 1989, Chapter 2.
  - 20 B.D. Chattopadhyaya, *Aspects of Rural Settlements and Rural Society in Early Medieval India*, Calcutta, 1990, Chapter I.
  - 21 The performance of *Vishvajit* sacrifice signified the 'conquest of the world' after the successful completion of a victory march, although the 'world' need not be taken in a geographical sense. Kalidasa portrays the victory march of Raghu '*digjigisu*', who set out to conquer the quarters beginning in the east and also ending in the east, before he performed the *Vishvajit* sacrifice: *Raghuvamsham*, in C.R. Devadhas, *Works of Kalidasa*, Vol. 2 (Poetry), New Delhi, 2002, 4th Sarga.

- 22 See D.C. Sircar, 'Cakravarti-ksetra', in *Studies in Geography of Ancient and Medieval India*, Delhi, 1971, Chapter I.
- 23 *Manu Smriti*, 7.154–158; Doniger and Smith, pp. 143–44.
- 24 *Kautilya Arthashastra*, 6.2.39–40. The text of the *Arthashastra* used is that of R. G. Basak, *Kautilyam Arthashastram* in two parts (Calcutta, 1964). The translation is by R.P. Kangle, *The Kautilyam Arthashastra*, Part 2 (an English translation with Critical and Explanatory Notes, University of Bombay, 1963).
- 25 Kangle, *The Kautilya Arthashastra*, p. 371.
- 26 *Arthashastra*, 6.1.18. Kangle, p. 367.
- 27 Cited in S.K. Chatterji, 'Contributions of Different Languages–Culture Groups', in H. Bhattacharya, ed., *The Cultural Heritage of India*, Vol. I, Calcutta, 1958, p. 90.
- 28 *Mahabharata*, *Vanaparva*, *Araneya-parvadyaya*. In answer to Yaksha's question to what *Dharma* is, Yudhisthira gives an answer which is very telling: 'Vedas are different, *Smritis* are different; there is no *Muni* whose opinion is not different in essence, in trying to answer it (from that of others). The concept of *Dharma* lies in a cave (i.e. remains mysterious); that indeed is the path (which is) traversed by the wise.' In essence, in trying to answer Yaksha's question as to what the meaning of *Dharma* is, Yudhisthira is referring to the body of customs to which a community may be seen to adhere to.
- 29 *Manu Smriti*, 7.203 and 7.208; Doniger and Smith, p. 149.
- 30 *Yajnavalkya Smriti*, 1.342–343.
- 31 The text of the *Natyashastra* used here is edited by Suresh Chandra Bandyopadhyaya and Chhanda Chakrabarti, Kolkata, 4th reprint, 2013, in two parts. *Natyashastra*, 1.41–45.
- 32 *Natyashastra*, Chapter 14.
- 33 *Natyashastra*, Chapter 18.
- 34 *Natyashastra*, Chapter 18.
- 35 *Natyashastra*, Chapter 18, 52–55.
- 36 *Natyashastra*, 18.26.
- 37 N.N. Chakravarti, *Rajashekhara o Kavyamimamsa*, third *adhyaya*.
- 38 *Ibid.*: *anantan api hi desamsh caturdha akalya kalpayanti cakravarti-kshetram samanyena tad anantara-vishesaih punarananta eva iti yayavariya*.
- 39 See Wendy Doniger and Sudhir Kakar, *Vatsyayana Mallanada: Kamasutra* (A new complete English translation of the Sanskrit text), New York, 2002, 5.12, pp. 49–50. Doniger and Kakar, p. 50.
- 41 Manomohan Ghosh, *Glimpses of Sexual Life in Nanda–Maurya India* (translation of the *Caturbhani* together with a critical edition of text), Calcutta, 1975. Ghosh's dating of the tests of the *Bhanas* in the Nanda–Maurya period is not supported by any convincing corroborative evidence.
- 42 M.M. Ghosh, *Sexual Life*, pp. 103–67; 71–118 (text).
- 43 *Ibid.*, p. 111; also p. 76 (text): *Yatha desha – jati-kula-tirtha-samaya-dharma ...*; p. 87 (text).
- 44 *Ibid.*, p. 126.
- 45 *Ibid.*, pp. 131–33; p. 91 (text).
- 46 *Ibid.*, p. 135; p. 93 (text).
- 47 *Ibid.*, p. 155; p. 108 (text).
- 48 *Ibid.*, pp. 156–57; p. 110 (text).
- 49 *Ibid.*, p. 157; p. 110 (text): *vanari-nishkujitopamani cit-kaa-bhuyistam vanari-niskujitopamani cit-kaaa-bhuyistham apratyabhijneya-vyananani kincit-karnentaranani pradeshini-lalana-matra sucitan*.
- 50 *Ibid.*, p. 165; p. 116 (text): *Gandharakena Hastimurkhena*.

- 51 S.K. Nambiar, *Prabodhacandrodaya of Krsna Mishra* (Sanskrit text with English translation, a Critical Introduction and Index), Delhi, second edition, 1998, p. 26: *daksina-raha-pradeshad-agato*.
- 52 Ibid., p. 26. Ahankara is demonstrably proud of his vast learning, and referring to 'animal-natured heretics, Saivas and *Pasupatas*', expresses his own opinion that even by conversation with them, people go to hell. They should be avoided even from a distance from coming into one's line of vision' – p. 29.
- 53 The term *vada* having derived from *vad* (to speak), would imply debate, originally verbal, as the centrepoint of a doctrine.
- 54 Having stated, in his major rock edict 12, that he honoured all sects (all *pasadas*) in his kingdom with gifts and other offerings, Ashoka enjoined all sects to practice restraint of speech and desist from promoting one's own sect, by denouncing those of others. In his opinion, this practice did not benefit one's own sect either. For the text and its Sanskrit version see D.C. Sircar, *Select Inscriptions bearing on Indian History and Civilization*, Vol. I, second edition, Calcutta University, Calcutta, 1965, pp. 32–34.
- 55 S.N. Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, Vol. I, Cambridge University Press, 1963, pp.67–68.
- 56 In negating the communal version of Indian history initiated by colonial history and taken over by a substantial number of South Asian historians, we sometimes tend to go to the other extreme of projecting an idyllic image of religious peace in pre-colonial India. Tension and violence, which however were one dimension and not the only motif of social life, existed in different periods of Indian history. For some examples, see B.D. Chattopadhyaya, *Representing the Other? Sanskrit and the Muslims: Eighth to Fourteenth Century*, New Delhi, 1998, *passim*.; idem, 'Other or the Others? Varieties of Difference in Indian Society at the Turn of the First Millennium and Their Historiographical Implications', in *Studying Early India, Archaeology, Texts and Historical Issues*, Delhi, 2003, pp. 191–214.
- 57 A. Chakravarti, editor and publisher, *Neelakesi*, second edition, Jaipur, 1994, *passim*.
- 58 Cited in Nagendranath Chakravarti, *Rajashekhara o Kavyamimamsa*, p. 60 (section on Bengali translation and commentary). The sectarian undertone of the following statement is also self-evident in Rajashekhara, who cites a verse invoking *kama* with the assurance that he need not fear revealing his own form because the company consists of Vaishnavas alone, and Sankara would not be around (*rupam darshaya natra sankara-bhyam sarve byam Vaisnavah*). Ibid., chapter 16, p. 134.
- 59 Phyllis Granhoff has commented on the 'Sheer abundance and variety of medieval Jain story literature', *The Forest of Thieves and the Magic Garden* (An Anthology of Medieval Jain Stories), Penguin Books, New Delhi, 1998, p. 5. The stories, despite their diverse plots, were in the end didactic in nature. In addition to the anthology *The Forest of Thieves and the Magic Garden*, see also *The Clever Adulteress and other stories (A Treasury of Jaina Literature)*, edited by Phyllis Granoff, 1st Indian edition, 1993, *passim*.
- 60 S.K. Nambiar, *Prabodha Candrodaya*, *passim*.
- 61 *Matta-vilasa: A Farce by Mahendravikramavarman*, translated by L.D. Barnett, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies*, Vol. 5, 1930, pp. 697–710. For an insightful discussion on this *prahasana*, see G. Subbiah, 'Matta-vilasaprahasana: Countering a Counter Culture', in *Pathways to Literature, Art and Archaeology*, Pandit G. N. Bahura Felicitation Volume, Jaipur, n.d., pp. 50–58.
- 62 For a recent study of such tensions and conflicts, see D.N.Jha, ed. *Contesting*

- Symbols and Stereotypes, Essays on Indian History and Culture*, Delhi, 2013. See in particular Chapters 2 and 3.
- 63 Hans Georg Gadamer, cited in M.G. Phillips, 'What is Tradition when it is not 'invented?' A Historiographical Introduction', in M.G. Phillips and G. Schochet, *Questions of Tradition*, Toronto, 2004, pp. 3–32.
- 64 R.T.H. Griffith, *The Hymns of the Rig-Veda*, second edition, 1896; 1.164.46: 'They call him Indra, Mitra, Varuna, Agni and he is heavenly noble-winged Garuda. To what is one, sages give many a title [;] They call it Agni, Yama, Matarisvan.'
- 65 The presence of the same idea in the same vocabulary in the writings of V.A. Smith (1919), Rabindranath Tagore (1902) and D.D. Kosambi (1965) should be considered significant. For bibliographical references see S. Bhattacharya, *Talking Back*.
- 66 Rabindranath Thakur [Tagore], 'Bharat-tirtha' (1910), in *Gitanjali, Rabindra Rachanavali*, Birth Centenary Edition, West Bengal Government, Calcutta, 1961, pp. 280–82. In this edition, the song is however numbered, not named.
- 67 Rabindranath Thakur [Tagore]: 'Itihas' (in Bengali), compiled by Prabodh Chandra Sen and Pulin Behari Sen, Calcutta, 1957, pp. 1–11. It must be admitted that 'great humanity' is not a satisfactory literary translation of *mahamanava*.
- 68 *The Culture and Civilization of Ancient India in Historical Outline*, Delhi, reprint, 1975, p. 1.
- 69 *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- 70 *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- 71 *Vishnu-Puranam*, 2.3.2, 5: 'Karma-bhumir-iyam'; also, *na khalv-anything martyanam karma bhuma vidhiyate*. See also note 76.
- 72 See the discussion in A.K. Ramanujan, 'Is there an Indian way of Thinking? An Informal Essay', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 23.41 (1989), pp. 410–58. This paper is included in Vinay Dharwarkar, General Editor, *The Collected Essays of A.K. Ramanujan*, Oxford University press, New Delhi, 1999, pp. 34–61.
- 73 The concept of *dig-vijaya* (conquest of quarters; often also called 'world conquest', used in numerous early texts, including the *Mahabharata* and *Raghuvamsam* of Kalidasa, underlines the necessity of such subjugation for attainment of the status of universal monarch. See, for example, *Sabhaparva* (25–32) of the *Mahabharata*, translated by Paul Wilton, Clay Sanskrit Library, New York University Press, 2006.
- 74 V.D. Savarkar, cited by Michael Gottlob, 'India's Unity in Diversity as a Question of Historical Perspective', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 42, No. 09 (2007), pp. 779–89.
- 75 B.D. Chattopadhyaya, 'Space, History and Cultural Process: Some Ideas on the Ingredients of Sub-regional 'Identity'', in Herman Kulke and Georg Berkemer, eds., *Centres out There? Facts of Sub-regional Identities in Orissa*, pp. 21–38.
- 76 N. Venkataramanayya and M. Somasekhara Sharma, 'Vilasa grant of Praloya Nayaka', *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol. 32 (1959), pp. 239–63; in particular, p. 260. The record uses the following expression in relation to *Bharatavarsha*: *Phalanti Karmani yatra/ Bhasha-samacara-bhida vinhinnair-deshair-anekair-vibhakte* (i.e. 'where deeds done bear fruits and which, divided by many languages and customs, was divided into many countries').
- 77 Michael Gottlob, 'India's Unity in Diversity', p. 780.
- 78 For the use of these two contrasting terms see G.D. Sontheimer, 'The *Vana* and the *Ksetra*: the tribal background of some famous 'cults'', in G.C. Tripathi and Herman Kulke, eds., *Religion and Society in Eastern India: Anncharlott Eschmann Memorial Lectures*, Vol. I (1978–86), Bhuvaneshwar, 1987, pp. 117–64.
- 79 For a detailed study of the movement, see Ishita Banerjee-Dube, *Religion, Law and*

- Power: Tales of Time in Eastern India 1860–2000*, London–New York–Delhi, 2012, particularly Chapters I and II.
- 80 Indranath Chaudhuri, 'Fundamental Unity of the Indian Polity', *Bulletin of the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture*, Vol. 65, no. 6 (June 2014), pp. 264–70.
- 81 R.S. Sharma, 'Rajashasana: Meaning, Scope and Application', in *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 37th session, Calicut, 1976, pp. 76–77.
- 82 For the explication of the expression, see S. Bhattacharya, Editorial 'Introduction', in *Cultural Unity of India*, pp. xxii–xxiii.
- 83 M.B. Emeneau, 'Linguistic Prehistory of India', in Anwar S. Dil, ed., *Language and Linguistic Area: Essays by M.B. Emeneau*, Stanford University Press, 1980, p. 90.
- 84 Ibid. See also the following remark: 'The historical relationship between the three families [Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Munda] are largely a matter of reconstruction. It is clear from the geographical nature of boundaries between the three families in Central India that the northern boundary of Dravidian is and has been for a long time retreating south before the expansion of Indo-Aryan, and that the small islands of Dravidian speech north of the main boundary are isolated patches that have not yet become extinct. Similarly with the Munda languages, they are all islands of greater or less extent surrounded by and *pressed upon* [emphasis added] by Dravidian or by Indo-Aryan. This should mean a much greater spread both for Munda and for Dravidian at an earlier period.' M.B. Emeneau, 'India as a Linguistic Area', in Anwar S. Dil, ed., *Language and Linguistic Area*, p. 100.
- 85 Roger Blench, 'Re-evaluating the Linguistic prehistory of South Asia', in Toshiki Osada and Akinori Uesugi, eds., *Occasional Paper 3: Linguistics, Archaeology and the Human Past*, Kyoto, 2008, pp. 159–78.
- 86 The expression has been used by Sheldon Pollock in 'The Sanskrit Cosmopolis, 300–1300: Transculturation, Vernacularization, and the Question of Ideology', in J.E.M. Honben, *Ideology and Status of Sanskrit: Contributions to the History of Sanskrit Language*, Leiden, 1998, Chapter 8. Also, Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture and Power in Premodern India*, University of California Press: Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 2006, part I.
- 87 For the use of these terms, to signify respectively the 'grouping of languages' (such as Indo-European, Dravidian, etc.) and 'individual languages', see Roger Blench, 'Re-evaluating the linguistic prehistory'. The hegemonic hold of Sanskrit on elite and bureaucratic mind comes out clearly in the following statement: 'the people of India love and venerate Sanskrit with a feeling which is next only to that of patriotism towards Mother India', *Report of the Sanskrit Commission 1956–57*, cited in Sumathi Ramaswamy, 'Sanskrit for the Nation', *Modern Asian Studies*, 33.2 (1999), pp. 339–81.
- 88 Sometimes that *varna* was sacrosanct and *varna-samkara* was evil was abundantly made clear by Manu (Chapter 10); Manu's Candala, the 'fierce' untouchable, considered to be among the 'worst' of men, has been called by F. Nietzsche as a 'hotpotch human being', cited in Doniger and Smith, p. xx and p. 236. In the poem '*Bharata-tirtha*' cited above, Tagore invoked Brahmins, along with other social groups, to join together in the celebration of Mother (land)'s consecration by suggesting: 'Come Brahmin, purify your mind and hold the hands of all'. The suggestion that the Brahmin purifies his mind is a complete reversal of the position that had put him at the top of the purity order.
- 89 This is based on personal experience of a visit to the remote village of Chhitkul in Baspa valley in Kinnaur in Himachal Pradesh in June 2014.
- 90 For those who persist in the belief that non-vegetarianism is antithetical to Indian tradition and is a *tamasika* abhorrent practice instigated by the west, historical

evidence, adduced in such works as Om Prakash, *Food and Drinks in Ancient India*, New Delhi, 1961, *passim* and Appendix VII, in addition to abundant archaeological material, may not suffice. One may however suggest to such pious minds that they read the *Ramayana* of Valmiki (*Ayodhya-kanda, sarga 85.21–77*) for an account of the ways the army of Bharata, on his way to meet Rama in exile, was entertained by sage Bharadvaja at his *ashrama*.

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