

Where ants dig up gold: 'India', selfhood and the myths manufacturing a nation

As India seeks to define its identity in its 70th anniversary, *Bihani Sarkar* reveals that it has always been the subject of myth-making



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Ideas of country, nation and state emerge through a process of creating an essence or essences, of manufacturing a single identity and memory for a collectivity, however diverse. The formation of India, like other countries, has been complicit in this process – never more so than now, when legends of heroes from epic yore shape the ideology of divisive Indian politics. A young 'nation' born in 1947, 'India' is even today uncomfortable with the idea of nationhood, and many of the problems it faces – regional spats with the central government for example – arise, in one sense, from this intrinsic discomfort, from a fundamental inability to

square a modern political canvas with its heterogeneous, varied, segmentary past. And so it creates a new myth for itself, the age-old myth of the Kingdom of Rāma projected onto the modern principles of democracy, in an attempt to come to terms with ancient and modern while appealing to sources of authority and claiming parity with them.

But my aim in this piece is not political commentary. It concerns rather Art. When in the current political environment myth seems only to be propaganda, a sinister tool of refashioning nationhood to serve partisan politics, I wish to remind us by looking at ancient stories that what the modern nation-state has used as a mode of power and control was once a tale (*kaṭhā*) about making a homeland (*deśa*) in the absence of a land. Free of a political agenda, it could be beautiful, a dazzling play of the imagination, the ground of our emotional core, a

site where longing and identity were gently given form (*mūrti*). I wish to restore myths of homeland to the status of Art. By looking at grand stories by authors who envisage India as a totality, let us explore how that process of manufacturing an Indian homeland unfolded not within the realm of politics, but within the realm of history, poetry and storytelling – within, that is, the realm of thought, imagination and conversations between people. In searching for a homeland, our storytellers, historians and writers have created wondrous new entities, other 'India's, other myths. I am interested in tales and their creation, and India is a treasure trove of tales, including those about its own self (of country – *deśa*), of narratives entwined with words that, while containing allusions to other stories – as in the ripe prose of the Sanskrit writer Bāṇa – open up into other narratives about selfhood. My interest lies in these intriguing tales and the purposes they serve as figments of fantasy, such as those that children hear from parents and grandparents.

Persians and Greeks

When in 515 BCE Darius the Great, the Persian Emperor, conquered the river Indus – called Sindhu in Sanskrit – and the lands surrounding it, he called it Hindu. The ancient Greeks spelled the name of the river as Indos and referred to everything south of that river as India. And so the mythologising of an Indian space began. To Herodotus, India was the glittering if inchoate land of riches, in which gold-digging ants are to be found, of which everything east of the Indus was composed only of sand. According to him the tax that Indians, in his time the dwellers of the Indus basin, paid Darius was gold dust that those same ants had dug up. Here is ar-

guably our earliest perception of an 'India' (in the case of Herodotus the perception was indirect, based on reports from the Persian world).

What denoted the Indus basin to the Persians, the land of gold dust to Herodotus, became a much broader spatial entity to later interpreters. Megasthenes, a traveller to India, writing in the wake of Alexander's conquest of Punjab and the greater knowledge that that event imparted, considered India to extend right from the Caucasus mountains in Central Asia to the southern seas. His 'India' is a gigantic rhombus. This is a land of plenty, though now no more the autonomous yielder of gold but of the riches yielded by alluvial plains, mountains and the teeming basins of the Indus and the Ganges abounding in people, beasts and crops and watered by bi-annual rains.

The lands east to the town of Palimbothra (Pāṭaliputra), which was visited by Megasthenes during the early Mauryan rule, were called Prasii (Prācyā in Sanskrit). To Megasthenes, Prassii and everything east of the river Beas, the limit of Alexander's travels, had once in a distant time, been conquered by Dionysus, a Hellenisation of an Indian god, who remains obscure. This 'Dionysus' granted the people of those eastern parts knowledge of constructing cities, civic law as well as of storing fruit, wine-making and dance. He was also considered the mythic founder of Pāṭaliputra – a significant appropriation considering that Pāṭaliputra was at the centre of political eminence from 300 BCE, at the time Megasthenes visited India, till the 4th century CE. Subsequently, Megasthenes continues, India had been conquered by Heracles, perhaps a Hellenisation of the Indian Kṛṣṇa, who was revered by the Sourasenoī, people of the Śūrasena kingdom in the Gaṅgā-Yamunā doab, in their cities of Methora (Mathurā) and Kleisobora (Kṛṣṇapura). Herakles imparted martial knowledge as well as knowledge of pearl-fishery to the Indians. Herakles's daughter Pandaia was made queen of the land of Pandaia, perhaps a reference to the southern Pāṇḍya kingdom named as early as in the Aśokan edicts, and so his divine seed spread southwards unifying the great 'continent of Circe' into a single Hellenised realm.

This is perhaps the earliest portrait of an India which combined the North and the South of the country – though implicitly the age-old dichotomy between the two, present even today, still underlies Megasthenes' account. Primarily though, the Greek myth of India is an attempt to contain epic scale – revealed no doubt by the increase of Indo-Greek mer-

cantile contacts at this age – through the notion of conquest by divine kingship: the Greek gods, and the seeds of those gods, are the ones who discovered India and granted political order and shape to it. Their conquest extended to the waters of the southern seas penetrating deeper into what lies in it: pearls, symbols of the luminous, calcified, transportable essence of India that was shipped to Greece. From Darius' gold, the essence of India has now transmuted to these desirable white orbs. In both legends India, in spite of its unending girth and teeming swarms, is something that can be picked up from the bowels of the earth, carried, touched, used, admired.

Kālidāsa

Nature, as the essence of selfhood, as the *mūrti* of a *deśa* physical and spiritual, as order in the divine and on earth, remains at the heart of the great myth of an India even within legends of *deśa* created by Indian writers. To Kālidāsa, one of the greatest of Sanskrit poets, the essence of an India, in his poem the *Meghadūta*, is tied up with cycles of rainfall and the bounty that explodes at their commencement. Unlike the tactile objectivity of the Greek conception, longing and pathos permeate Kālidāsa's essence of the country, an image of the Imagination itself, which always seeks integration, and the natural, spiritual harmony implicit in the universe. The *yakṣa*, the semi-divine being who is the speaker of the poem, pines for his beloved, separated from him in the northern parts of India. But his message – delivered, perhaps in madness, to an insentient monsoon cloud, the *meghadūta*, the cloud-messenger of the title – will never reach her. In this sense the *yakṣa*'s conjuring of a *deśa* becomes a substitute for the journey to be united with love. The sentimental homeland conjured in the message of the *yakṣa* to the cloud is an illusion that attempts, in vain, to mask

the pain of separation (*vipralambha*); but it is also a metaphor for the giant, elemental scale of the mystical union that Kālidāsa envisages true Love to be. At one level, for Kālidāsa and his love-lorn *yakṣa*, India is the territorial trajectory revived by the moisture of the monsoon from the burning heat of the summer, as the nectar of love revives the torment of lovers. But at another level, it forms the thing that divides lovers, the giant something/someone obstructing the gaze, a mysterious overwhelming expansiveness that enters the range of vision of a searching frustrated eye looking for something else. And the gaze of the storyteller has travelled upwards to the sky, and he is looking down, as if from that imagined vantage point



This 1960 Indian stamp depicts the scene from Kālidāsa's *Meghadūta* in which the *yakṣa* appeals to the cloud to carry his message of love and pathos to his beloved.

things would become easier to identify, and the mammoth, corpulent India would become more minute, more manageable, so that its contours contain not country but Love, and the earthiness of its landmass grows into projections of the inner richness of Love's emotions and possibilities. *Deśa* becomes a playground for bringing to mind, recollecting, meditating, fantasising, all activities expressed by the root meaning to love *smṛ*. Myth making (granting form, symbol, meaning) again. In one sense the perspective of the cloud parallels the troubled perspective of the historian of an 'India', looking down at the ineffable object so that the act of looking becomes an act of containment and control. Myth making again?

The entire poem seems to be implicitly a conversation about perception as an abstraction, or, one might also say, about seeking knowledge. Images of union – to Kālidāsa the goal of knowledge – are projected onto the Indian landscape, which becomes the verdant image of erotic consummation. Rain is semen. Dried rivers are women yearning for sexual consummation. The cloud makes love to them as he sheds water, says the *yakṣa*, and fills their womb with liquid. The cloud will watch cranes commune with the fragrance of opening lotuses on his journey. Mountains are breasts over which he lingers. The lightning is his wife. From the city of Vidiśā in Madhya Pradesh, he will travel, the *yakṣa* says, to Ujjayini, the great ancient city in central India, and eventually to Kurukṣetra in the northern plains, to Gangotri, the source of the Ganges, further upwards to the Himālayas, then to Śiva's dwelling, Kailāsa and finally, to the legendary land of Alakā, on the slopes of Kailāsa, where his beloved dwells, making love to all these places on his way. 'India' represents an imagined progress towards the corporeal, emotional and divine union that all Love craves, and her physical body, which the *yakṣa* sees as cognate with Nature, is really the larger symbol of that great union, the symbol of one reaching home. At the last resort though this 'India' is a myth created by a mythical being told to a cloud, who will inevitably diminish and disappear. Kālidāsa's 'India' is elusive, untruthful, the ramblings of a love-maddened being. The only truth that Kālidāsa imbeds in the poem is Love, and the rapturous grief at the centre of true love.

Modern perspectives

On to contemporary histories of India. Teleological perspectives – such as those by Burton Stein, Herman Kulke, Dietmar Rothermund, and Romila Thapar – have also been complicit in the construction of the idea of a single nation, for they tell stories of how a single entity began, progressed and culminated in modernity. There have been in recent years many narratives (and I use the term deliberately) of the 'great India'. Adopting the *longue durée* view has become part of the historiography of our many Indias, in spite of the fact that as a singularity India lacks a gravitational force. Some

historical/mythicising strategies have not changed from those discussed above. Grand discussions of an Indian nation, beginning with Herodotus, Megasthenes and even today by serious historians of India, all start with a scansion of geology and ecology. The physicality, the palpable materiality of a *deśa* seem to have always served as points of comfortable entry in the act of creating a story, a *kathā* about an Indian selfhood. Further enabling the modern historians' view of the single great Indian nation is the great burden of perception. Historians of India warn of the baggage of colonial perceptions that have shaped our imaginings: India as chaos, as the land of mystery and religious awakening, of orthodoxy, of ritual, of unchanging essences, of despotic kings and rigidly stratified societies. Cutting across these is the image of India as the great Civilisation. Scholarship has shown that this civilisation, its political lineages and languages interconnected an area stretching from as far away as Syria, where Indo-Aryan words have been found in the records of the ancient Mitanni people, to Cambodia in the east, where impressive Śaiva, Vaiṣṇava and Buddhist temple complexes and inscriptions composed in literary Sanskrit have been recovered. We are told that we are contending with not just a varied geographical landmass, nor only a political unit with shifting outlines, nor indeed a staggering range of languages, ethnicities, religions and scripts, but a sprawling segmented idea, an intersection of concepts that encompassed a wide geographical extent, that arose over time.

The idea of India has also assumed the form of a living personality. Just like people, that personality can be full of contradictions: an expansive enough concept that could accommodate tensions arising through cultural variety and political autonomies. In 19th-century Orientalist perceptions, India evoked on the one hand a seductive perfumed bejewelled 'woman', filled with ancient lore and mysticism that could enrich the modern European drive for civilisational perfection, and on the other, the very heart of darkness, a chaos to be governed, a brutish, pitiable antediluvian Caliban. The very opposite image was held by the indigenous anti-colonialist movement of the late 19th century. It projected the young nation it was fighting to reclaim as the wholesome, ennobling 'Mother India', and further granted mythic persona to her by casting her as a sexually desirable but virginal goddess along the lines of the all-encompassing Goddess or Devī of the classical age to whom heroic sacrifices were made by warriors.

And these days, the persona of India seems to be reiterated by its political contours. As a student of geography studying an outline political map of the subcontinent, along with many others of my generation in Indian schools, I was, in routine introductions to the physical contours of the country, confronted by a human, or humanoid, shape, a visual representation of India as a body. Students still see this same strangely suggestive body.

As a singularity
India lacks a
gravitational force

A crested head crowns it swallowed by the gargantuan breadths of Central Asia; arms embrace on either side the countries and coastlines of Western and South East Asia; a thick trunk tapers off into expanses of sea. Pakistan, Afghanistan, Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh form the muscles and sinews of its shoulders. The rhombus of Megasthenes is now a horned monster.

Stories and histories

Let me now end with myself. In spite of being a well-intentioned historian, my language too creates poetic form in the act of recovery (I use the feminine pronoun when speaking of India). Already the boundary between history and story blurs, and I ask myself: am I a historian or am I a storyteller? The same can be asked of all the other storytellers and modern historians we have assessed so far. Paradoxically the methods that scholars learn in all good faith so that they can diminish myth-making nevertheless lead to, in the sober act of recovery and analysis, a construction. Those sources and means and questions that we are required to ask in the name of rigour form the tools and craft putting flesh on those constituent images dancing before our gaze. But perhaps we place too great a distinction these days between story and history. According to the classical Indians, whom I study, *fabula* and history were one and the same: telling something from the past – as also something from philosophy – was poetic speech; and historicising – and telling in general – involved granting form, rhythm and aesthetic expansion to the spectator, conjured through the entertaining ability of a raconteur-artist. Moreover, the word *kathā* carries within itself the sense of natural, informal dialogues, which lingers to some extent in modern vernacular usage. (*Kathā balā* in Bengali means for instance to have a conversation.) So the conception of history, or tale-telling, contains within itself the sense of informality, of everyday conversations containing the germ of truths, but self-proliferating with dynamic magical energy so factual conceptions become, with an organic life force of their own, acts of fashioning, making, manufacture, artistry.

And so one can argue: was there ever an India that historians have made the focus of their gaze? Or were there stories – enchanting, shimmering if chimerical phantasms, in the absence of anything secure – sto-

ries of making nationhood, of granting shape, of limiting, defining, prescribing, of search and discovery of a *deśa* of one's own. In writing histories of ancient India, are we not to some extent doing the same as those early fabulous stories of country – painting portraits, creating shapes from the furnace of facts of what was? Are history and art not bedfellows, even though their relationship is thought to be – at least in the present day – contradictory?

And here are some conclusions that our survey about the process of mythologising about the homeland lead to. There are many different Indias, many different encapsulations. All are fabrications that spiral with their own life-essence into glorious *kathās*, the kindred-image of which is impregnated in themselves as the icon of the majestic country. The roots of self and nation lie in the entanglements between history and storytelling. History shows us that there never has in fact been a stable India. Communities that have peopled the sub-continental landmass have always projected their beliefs onto the surroundings they encountered and the spaces they imagined to lie beyond. It is through a process of interpreting environment, of naming and mythologising space that the idea of an India begins. What is 'India' is in fact an expansive network of systems, patterns, symbols and expressions – the constituents of figurative

formation itself – that various peoples and communities have created, partaken of, and shared in common. The stories of a homeland have always seemed to be an attempt to locate the ideal points that contain her, to cast a network encompassing infinite microcosms. Nevertheless, the perceivers have not been ideologues. They have been potently aware, even in undertaking that attempt of story-telling, of the unstable, illusory nature of their vision embedding in their descriptions of permanence intimations of mistrust, hollowness and the unreliable nature of structures micro- and macrocosmic. And in the year of India's 70th anniversary let us hope that modern political myth-makers are as aware as them of the imaginative dynamism underlying the tales they abuse as static ideology to impose power. ■



Bharat Mata, or 'Mother India', by Abanindranath Tagore (nephew of the poet Rabindranath Tagore), watercolour, 1905.

Heroic Shāktism: The Cult of Durgā in Ancient Indian Kingship, by Bihani Sarkar, is being published in summer 2017 as a British Academy Monograph.