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Revisiting Hindustan: The Precolonial Roots of Modern Indian Identity

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Abstract
This paper delves into the evolution of the concept of nationhood in India, focusing on the dynamic of national homogeneity and its influence on nationalist ideology. Employing a postcolonial lens, the study scrutinizes the transformation of India from 'Hindustan' - a form of precolonial national collectivity, to 'India' - a postcolonial nation-state. Drawing on definitions by sociologist Anthony D. Smith, the paper investigates the acceptance of India as a geopolitical entity where political and cultural boundaries align. Through this examination, the paper not only unpacks the processes that led to the acceptance of India as a national entity but also highlights the role of 'Hindustan' in this journey, a concept often politically overlooked. Through this exploration, the study underscores the intricate intertwining of history, culture, and politics in the formation of modern Indian identity. Ultimately, the paper encourages imagining collective futures outside the nation-state paradigm, suggesting alternative visions of collectivity that resonate with the subcontinent's complex realities.
Keywords: Nationhood, National Homogeneity, Postcolonial Perspective, Hindustan,

Introduction:

Nation or Nation-State, as terms, emerged during the 19th and 20th centuries, in what many scholars term the "Age of Nationalism" (Smith 1). Anthony D. Smith, a British sociologist and historian, defines a nation as "a named human population sharing a historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy, and common legal rights and duties for all members" (Smith 13). The idea of a nation-state extends further, it is a geopolitical entity where the political and cultural boundaries align, and the people within its borders share a common identity (Smith 23).

This paper will investigate the intricate evolution of India as a nation, emphasizing the dynamic of national homogeneity and its role in nationalist ideology. We aim to conduct a comprehensive examination of the concept, tracing it from the past, denoted as "then," to the contemporary era, referred to as "now". The discussion will include both colonial and precolonial perspectives on human collective units and extend beyond mere political aspects to social and cultural dimensions to offer a holistic understanding (Hall 29). The choice of "India" as a national name of the republic has rarely been questioned, but we intend to delve into the predecessor to the current National Episteme, unpacking the process through which India became accepted as a national entity (Hall 43). In this context, we will examine the politics of this process from a postcolonial perspective. The primary goal is to shed light on the idea of 'Hindustan', often politically forgotten, as a significant concept that predated the current national collectivity (Asif 19). The study will evaluate various narratives of Nationalism across the political landscape and examine their contribution to the discursive formation of India in the twentieth century (Anderson 60).

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Etymology of 'India' and 'Hindustan'

The etymology of both "India" and "Hindustan" has been a subject of ongoing scholarly debate, with each term being rich in historical implications. The term "India" originates from the Greek, influenced by the Iranians' adaptation of the name for the river Sindhu, where 's' was transmuted to 'h', resulting in "Hind(u)" (Thapar 37). This name extended to the region beyond the river, forming the basis for the Greek 'India' (Thapar 38). The term 'Hindustan' emerged from Iran's post-Hellenistic tradition of suffixing territorial names with 'stan,' which signifies 'place' or 'land' (Thapar 39).

Linguistically, 'India' is considered to have Greek roots while 'Hindustan' is often perceived as a composite of Sanskrit and Persian, but this is not entirely accurate (Habib 20). Irfan Habib, an eminent historian, points out that 'Hindustan', seemingly Sanskrit and interpreted as 'land of the Hindus', is an anachronism, unfamiliar to classical Sanskrit. Instead, its origins are deeply entrenched in the Iranian language (Habib 21).

In the modern context, the meaning of 'Hindustan' is heavily contested. Different sections of the populace interpret it differently based on their historical understanding, religious beliefs, and political alignments. For instance, a study by sociopolitical researcher Ayesha Jalal reveals that for many Hindu nationalists, 'Hindustan' embodies an ideal Hindu nation, while for others, it refers to the historical geographical entity that encompassed present-day India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh (Jalal 52). The interpretations of 'Hindustan' thus are varied and shaped by the sociopolitical context, reinforcing the complexity of these terms and their multifaceted historical and contemporary meanings.

National Narratives and Their Influence on History

National narratives have a powerful influence on the way we understand and interpret history. Historian Benedict Anderson argues that nations are "imagined communities" - constructs created and sustained through shared narratives and collective memories (Anderson 6). This process involves selecting, interpreting, and presenting historical events in a way that supports a particular national identity. Anderson asserts that such narratives tend to overlook diverse experiences, voices, and identities within the nation, contributing to the creation of a homogenized national history (Anderson 13).

However, this process becomes particularly complex in colonised regions where the authentic past is often obscured. In the Indian context, postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak argues that colonialism resulted in "epistemic violence," a distortion of the indigenous culture and history through the imposition of European ideas and systems of knowledge (Spivak 276).

Historian Dipesh Chakrabarty supports this argument, asserting that colonial narratives often perpetuated a sense of historical and cultural inferiority among colonised peoples (Chakrabarty 18). This issue is especially salient in the case of India, where the historical narrative was significantly reshaped by the British, who sought to present their rule as a 'civilizing mission' and justify their imperial project. The resulting historical narrative often downplayed or ignored the complexities of India's precolonial past, including the concept of 'Hindustan' and the diverse political, cultural, and social systems that existed prior to British rule (Chakrabarty 24). This has major implications for how we understand India's national identity and the evolution of the concept of 'Hindustan' in the modern context.

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'Hindustan' as a Precolonial Political and Cultural Collectivity

Historian Manan Ahmed Asif has intriguingly suggested that a robust political and cultural collectivity predated the modern conception of 'India.' He argues that the term 'Hindustan' encapsulated a sense of territorial integrity encompassing the entire subcontinent, a place where diverse communities coexisted (Asif 14). This assertion challenges the conventional understanding of precolonial South Asia as a fragmented region without a unifying identity.

Historians Richard Eaton and Sheldon Pollock provide valuable insights into the nature of Hindustan as a non-national collective. They argue that precolonial South Asia was characterised by a complex political landscape with a multitude of kingdoms, empires, and other forms of polity (Eaton 27; Pollock 35). Yet, despite the political fragmentation, they suggest that shared cultural, linguistic, and religious traditions contributed to a sense of interconnectedness among the people of the subcontinent (Eaton 30; Pollock 37).

Historical events such as the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 had profound implications for the Hindustani identity. The rebellion marked a moment of unity among diverse Indian soldiers who, regardless of religious or regional differences, fought against the British rule (Bayly 211). This event, according to historian Christopher Bayly, helped in crystallising a collective identity that reflected aspects of 'Hindustan' as a unified entity (Bayly 214).

The proclamation of Queen Victoria as the Empress of British India in 1876 marked another significant milestone. It signified a shift in the nature of British rule and its impact on the collective identities of the subcontinent. As historian John R. McLane points out, the proclamation of Victoria as Empress reinforced the sense of India as a single entity under the British Empire, while also beginning a process that would gradually eclipse the pre-existing collective identity of 'Hindustan' (McLane 155).

Indian nationalists held varying interpretations of the transition from 'Hindustan' to 'India.' Secular nationalists like Jawaharlal Nehru perceived 'India' as a continuation of the historic 'Hindustan,' stretching back into antiquity (Nehru 69). For Hindu nationalists like V.D. Savarkar, 'Hindusthan' represented a Hindu nation that should reclaim its Hindu identity from foreign influences (Savarkar 87).

The concept of India before the advent of Nationalism was tied largely to the region's geography, and the diverse cultures and religions that flourished there. With the onset of Nationalism, especially during the struggle for independence from British rule, the notion of India as a unified nation became more pronounced (Chandra et al. 125). This evolution was crucial in shaping contemporary understanding of India as a nation-state.

Reflecting on the shift from 'Hindustan' to 'India' raises important questions about national identity, collective memory, and the politics of naming. In today's world, these names not only refer to geographical entities but are also loaded with political, religious, and cultural connotations that impact people's perceptions and experiences (Asif 23).

The concept of 'Hindustan' as a model of a precolonial transnational identity serves as a reminder of the subcontinent's diverse and interconnected past. This research not only aims to unearth this forgotten past but also encourages imagining collective futures outside the nation-state paradigm. It suggests that looking beyond the contemporary understanding of national identity can reveal alternative visions of collectivity that resonate with the complex realities of the subcontinent.

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