



As it happens now and then, papers published in reputed scientific journals receive media attention because the findings impact politics. Last month, two papers published in *Cell* and *Science* reopened debates about the origins of Indian civilization and consequently the cultural identity and belonging of contemporary Indians. The bone of contention was the 'Aryan migration' theory. In other words, the debate was whether Indian culture was indigenous or a result of foreign influence thousands of years ago. Surprisingly, while the written, peer-reviewed papers did not dispute the said migration theory, two of the authors, in a press conference, claimed otherwise. As embarrassing as the contradictory statements were for the professional reputation of the scholars, the incident also suggests the misuse of history and archaeology for political gains.

That India's history is being misused for political gains is a concern that is as old as the nation—which is to say, about 70 years. Scholars, public intellectuals, and lay citizens worry that communal readings of history may compromise the secular credentials of the Indian nation-state. For these intellectuals committed to secularism-as-religious-equality, the idea of belonging—that is, what makes one person 'Indian' in relation to other Indians—rests on fealty to a multicultural past. Even if it is true that the history of the subcontinent witnessed prolonged episodes of multicultural tolerance, the linking of this diversified history by scholars and public intellectuals to the present-day Indian nation-state may be hasty. While it may be true that ancient and pre-colonial history of India witnessed episodes of great cultural efflorescence in addition to tolerance, it is also equally valid that this history was marked by violence of various sorts.

That is why the present-day Indian nation-state, or, the Union of India, to use the technical term, was a political project aimed at extending civil liberties without the hindrances of religion, caste, class, creed, and ethnicity. Thus, the Constitution of India emerging out of an experience of anti-colonial struggles took its inspiration from models of western liberal democracies. The idea, then, was not to go back to an ancient and glorious past but to rectify centuries of injustice suffered by the marginalized through colonialism, caste, creed, and gender.

Many scholars forget the recentness of the democratic project in India when they suggest that the proper way to understand contemporary belonging in India depends on an accurate understanding of ancient history. In the last five years scholars such as Jonathan Gill Harris (*The First Firangis*, 2015) and Audrey Truschke (*Aurangzeb*, 2017), and writers like Manu Pillai (*Rebel Sultans*, 2018) and Siddhartha Sarma (*Carpenters and Kings*, 2019) write, in elegant and accessible prose, that pre-colonial India which contained persons of different identities

and belonging did not depend on narrow religious or sectarian conceptions like today. The lesson, therefore, is that contemporary India should emulate pre-colonial India. These writers are partly right, and the lessons they teach have value.

One of the key ways in which many recent authors talk about belonging is through the figure of the migrant. It may be the European migrant 'who became Indian' in Harris' work or the Persian or Central Asian migrants (or invaders as they are popularly called) who established the Mughal and Deccani sultanates in the works of Truschke and Pillai, or it could be a 'migrant' religion like Christianity in Sarma's book. The figure of the migrant provides historical evidence of a malleable pre-colonial culture, one that contemporary Indians need to emulate. Though, the extent of the malleability of this pre-colonial Indian culture is still open to debate.

While these authors are not wrong in making such an assertion, they run on the wishful hope that the political vision of the Indian nation-state must also be the political vision within pre-colonial polities, such as the Mughals or the Marathas. Only Truschke's work departs from such a view. This thinking is patently inaccurate as the political agendas of various polities of the past, separated by vast amounts of time, were different from the political agendas of the Indian nation-state. Merely by arguing that a secular and welcoming culture existed in the past does not strengthen the political vision of the Indian constitution, neither does it excuse shortcomings of the nation-state. On the contrary, such arguments only leave history vulnerable to misuse.

To understand the problems with present-day disputes regarding belonging, one needs to look no further than the various amendments to India's Citizenship Act, 1955. While the Act initially granted citizenship to all based on birth or *jus solis*, subsequent amendments have restricted this right to citizenship only if one's parents, either one or both, are Indian citizens. The amendment of this act, to the best of my knowledge, has so far hardly been part of debates on belonging in India. To state it simply, an eminently modernist project of granting citizenship under the nation-state is being eroded for several decades.

Debates about belonging or the 'Aryan' migration theory always contain an immediate political purpose, as seen in the politics surrounding the National Registry of Citizens across India. The observation that pre-colonial realities and belonging are different from the way belonging is conceptualized in present-day India, should make historians and public intellectuals ask different questions. Not so much "what makes an Indian *Indian*?" in a cultural sense but "why does religion or ethnicity or any other marker become the rallying point for conflict and legal exclusion at various moments in time?" By asking different questions, one would guard against the misuse of history – whether Indian or Goan.

(First published in *O Herald*, dt: 2 October, 2019)



## Identity and Belonging in India

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