

### Book review: B. D. Chattopadhyaya: The Concept of Bharatavarsha and Other Essays; Ranikhet: Permanent Black 2017, ISBN 978-8-17824-516-4

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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Rezension / review

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Kulke, H. (2018). Book review: B. D. Chattopadhyaya: The Concept of Bharatavarsha and Other Essays; Ranikhet: Permanent Black 2017, ISBN 978-8-17824-516-4. *International Quarterly for Asian Studies (IQAS)*, 49(1-2), 133-137. <https://doi.org/10.11588/iqas.2018.1-2.8716>

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tional) and contacts (instrumental), as mentioned in the work of Kathinka Frøystad (*Blended Boundaries. Caste, Class, and Shifting Faces of "Hindu-ness" in a North Indian Village*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005, pp. 129ff.). The work of Minna Saavala (*Middle-Class Moralities. Everyday Struggle over Belonging and Prestige in India*. Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2010, pp. 74 ff.) could also contribute here. Stocker herself writes: "As part of a 'modern' sphere, 'university friends' assume an esteemed status. However, they exhibit a functional character, in contrast to emotional ties experienced between 'village friends'" (p. 121).

As we all know only all too well from our own societies, social inequality can persist despite legal equality. To the great credit of this book, it shows that – and how – status differences can persist and reproduce, even in the face of egalitarian relationships.

*Gernot Saalman*

B. D. CHATTOPADHYAYA, *The Concept of Bharatavarsha and Other Essays*. Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2017. 238 pages, Rs 795. ISBN 978-8-17824-516-4

Prof. B. D. Chattopadhyaya's new anthology is a significant and essential addition to his previous publications. In his first anthology – his magnum opus from 1994, *The Making of Medieval India* – and in his successive studies he validated the existence and identity of the Early Middle Ages as a distinctly post-classical period of Indian history. In order to verify its actuality it was not enough for him to contradict the Indian History Congress's tripartite periodisation of Indian history into Classical, Muslim and Modern Indian History (and its predecessor of colonial historiography – Hindu, Muslim and British History). He had primarily to detect political, social and cultural processes in the time of the post-Gupta and pre-Delhi Sultanate that verified "certain fundamental movements within the regional and local levels, and not in terms of the crisis of a pre-existent, pan-Indian social order" (1994: 17). In other words, he emphasised the "positive" elements that finally emerged in regional state formation and regional cultures, the landmarks of Early Medieval India, without, however, completely neglecting conflicts and antithetical ideas.

In view of more recent political developments Chattopadhyaya focuses in his new anthology, *The Concept of Bharatavarsha and Other Essays*, on contradictory aspects of socio-political and cultural developments and on controversial concepts of Hindu nationalist historiography. He has focused his critical discourse on two essential Hindu-nationalist topoi – the imagined age-old

territorial and cultural unity of India – elucidating his concerns in detail in the two most essential essays in the volume: the title piece “The Concept of Bhāratavarṣa and Its Historiographical Implications” and “Interrogating ‘Unity in Diversity’: Voices from India’s Ancient Texts”, his address as general president of the December 2014 session of the Indian History Congress. It was certainly a deliberate move to place these essays at the beginning and at the end of the volume. This review will thus concentrate on these two significant key articles, which deserve detailed presentations.

Since the Indian Constitution came into effect in 1950, India and Bharat have been the two official names of the Republic of India. Bharatavarsha, the “land of Bharata”, refers to a legendary king of central northern India, who is praised of as the forefather of the epic dynasties of the Mahabharata. Contemporary Indian and in particular nationalistic historiography projects the unitary state of contemporary Bharatavarsha into the distant past of ancient India. Thus it marginalises or even denies the existence of historically arising independent local and regional identities and state formation. It is this situation in which Chattopadhyaya’s critical screening of the history and historiography of the concept of Bharatavarsha becomes very necessary. He emphasises that the idea of Bharatavarsha was not static but underwent contradictory development stages. Thus he observes that in India’s earliest textual phase “the term Bharatavarsha, even in a geographical sense, did not appear at all”. The Rigvedic tribes (*janas*) were communities without fixed territories. In the subsequent Brahmana texts they were associated with their larger tribal settlements (*janapadas*). But these, too, were still only vaguely defined dwelling places situated in different areas of North India. The early Buddhist texts integrated the meanwhile vaguely known separate territories of the subcontinent into their cosmographic concept of Jambudvīpa. Although it was associated and even, if rarely, identified with India, Jambudvīpa did not correspond clearly with the geography of any specific country such as present-day India. It is the merit of the early medieval Purana texts, such as the “description of Bharatavarsha” (*Bhāratavarṣa-varṇanam*) of the Visnu Purana, that they present for the first time a depiction of Bharatavarsha. But, as Chattopadhyaya points out, they highlight Bharatavarsha’s nine divisions, their *janapadas* and distinct communities, as different and unequal segments that also do not pertain directly to the geography of India.

In order to lend further insight into the controversial history of currently relevant spatial, religious and ideological concepts such as Bharatavarsha, Chattopadhyaya includes into his considerations also Kalidasa’s poem *Rāghuvamśa* and Rajasekhara’s *Kāvya-mīmāṃsā*. Kalidasa’s famous fifth-century depiction of Raghu’s *dig-vijaya*, “the conquest of the four quarters”, depicts the convergence of the geography and the ideology of space. The space over which an early Indian monarch aspired to have unrivalled dominance was praised as

the “place of the world ruler” (*cakravarti-kṣetra*). The desire to “conquer the [four] directions” (*dig-jigīṣā*) and their kingdoms confirms concepts of classical Hindu and Buddhist kingship ideology of an imagined politically united Bharatavarsha. Chattopadhyaya questions whether Rajashekhara’s tenth-century Kavyamimamsa is an “Exercise in Synthesis”. It largely follows the Puranic concept of Bharatavarsha with its nine parts and their various *janapadas* and communities. But significantly innovative is Rajashekhara’s design of Āryāvarta (“abode of the noble ones”). Due to its central position in North India and its rigid enforcement of the Brahmanical social order it was praised as Bharatavarsha’s sacred region, and its capital Kanyakubja was the point of departure for defining the cardinal directions. It was indeed an ideally constructed concept of Bharatavarsha, but with little meaning for India’s political geography, however.

Chattopadhyaya then finally refers to several inscriptions from the tenth to fourteenth centuries that praise several *janapadas* and sacred centres as ornaments of Bharatavarsha. He is certainly right when he regards this as “a device for valorization by relating it to a universally recognized cosmographical landmark, much in a same way as a new royal lineage would seek to validate its status through affiliation with an epic-Puranic genealogy” (p. 25). In this way, Bharatavarsha was also used by the colonial administration as a device for the revaluation of “British India”, through an ancient Indian sacred concept, as a unified and centrally oriented state. This misconception of Bharatavarsha as a unified state was a definite misinterpretation of its historical meaning. But, as is well known, it was adopted by early twentieth-century nationalist historical writing. Chattopadhyaya summarises his historiographical study on the concept of Bharatavarsha with the remark: “The idea of India, identified with Bhāratavarṣa, created in the colonial period, is a burden that we are forced to carry and perhaps further embellish in our increasingly neo-nationalist age” (p. 23).

In his general president’s address on “Unity in Diversity”, Chattopadhyaya also critically scrutinises the historical background of this essential building block of contemporary Indian national identity “that we carry with us throughout our lives”. He emphasises that it is not his intention to question it in principle. But he points out that unity, rather than diversity, designates the main essence of this phrase in hundreds of schoolbooks and scholarly treatises and thus circumvents diversity as an equal essence of this composite unity. His main concern is therefore not only to trace diversities already in ancient texts. The overdue question is “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?’” (p. 190).

In the Rigveda, the classical early example of binary opposites is the Dasyus. Because of their irreconcilably different culture lacking the four castes and

four stages of life, they were discriminated against and even had to be annihilated by the Aryas. Linguistic differences with various immigrant ethnic communities in the Northwest, such as the Yavanas and Sakas in the last centuries BCE, might initially have been less disjunctive. But these differences considerably elevated the rank of Aryan languages and created a linguistic and cultural hierarchisation on a significant scale. And as Chattopadhyaya has already pointed out in regard to the imagined unity of Bharatavarsha, the same sense of contrasting diversities and hierarchisation was caused by the dominant cultural position of Madhyadesa or Aryavarta in relation to other regions. In the Gupta and post-Gupta ages Aryavarta emerged as the holy land of Brahmanical learning, purity and ideal social order at the expense of outer regions, a development that has endured until today.

The same kind of diversification and hierarchisation emanated from normative texts such as the Manusmṛti as they accepted and justified disparate *dharmas* in politically and culturally separate and distinct spaces. Even Bharata's and Vatsyayana's famous "apolitical" texts, the *Natyasastra* and *Kamasutra*, also contain detailed depictions of the multifarious social and cultural differences of various regions and their manifold communities. They may even be considered as pre-modern anthropological studies. But they were mostly neither value-neutral nor even intended to be objective. For Chattopadhyaya it is particularly significant that "in almost all cases, characterizing differences also implied hierarchization and making value judgements in terms of perceived quality" (p. 201). And he even brought into consideration the fact that early texts usually do not point "in the direction of a consciousness of unity, but of mutually distrustful diversities" (p. 203). Moreover, he raises concerns about "the negative potentialities" of unity in the aftermath of "imperial" state formation. It "invariably implies select accommodation, marginalization, elimination or subordination" of local or sub-regional cultural identities. He therefore rightly asks again whether we then abandon the idea of unity altogether. But he cautiously contradicts his uneasiness with the ambiguous concession: "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" (p. 212).

The other six essays of this volume come off rather badly in comparison with the two more thoroughly discussed articles in this book review. Nonetheless, two further pieces supplement major issues of the volume in an exemplary manner. The second essay, "Festivals as Ritual: An Exploration into the Convergence of Rituals and the State in Early India", pertains to rituals as one of these reference points of heterogeneous elements. Since the early Middle Ages royally sponsored festivals have been significant in this regard. Orthodox Brahmanical texts prescribe royal adherence to orthodoxy in all ritual matters. But in reality, "the theorists and the monarchs, too, had, at the same

time, to reach out to the social, religious and ritual practices of public spheres and of ‘marginal’ communities which constituted the reality of the monarch’s domain” (p. 140). The strength of these ritual events was their wide social participation. Chattopadhyaya aptly calls them “ritual subversion”. And one can plainly agree with him to define these social ritual events as the result of the convergence of Brahmanical orthodoxy and popular tradition (*laukika*, derived from *loka*, “people”). This ritual convergence of orthodoxy and *laukika* indicates a successful facet of “Unity in Diversity”, although mostly only at the subregional level of early kingdoms. As a rare example at the regional level Chattopadhyaya refers to Puri’s famous Jagannath cult.

His seventh essay, “Accommodation and Negotiation in a Culture of Exclusionism. Some Early Indian Perspectives”, begins with a critical observation on the notion of “composite culture”, an expression conceived “in the context of a fast-paced growth of nationalist ideology”. According to Chattopadhyaya’s interpretation, this stands in direct contradiction to the early Indian, particularly Brahmanical, thinkers and their exclusivism. He reiterates the fact that notions such as the “fundamental unity of India” and “composite culture” are recent accomplishments. But he also emphasises the need to “understand how India as we observe it today, evolved with variations, contradictions and confrontations as a continuum” (p. 164). He concludes his essay with a statement that directly leads up to his address to the Indian History Congress. India’s cultural development was based not on “homogenization from a hegemonic source but [on] interpenetration in diversity and of emergence of symbols of universal recognition” (p. 182). This statement is of fundamental significance and paradigmatically represents the essence of this volume and its eight articles.

*Hermann Kulke*

KARL E. RYAVEC, *A Historical Atlas of Tibet*. Chicago / London: The University of Chicago Press, 2015. 202 pages, 49 maps, \$45.00. ISBN 978-0-226-73244-2

*A Historical Atlas of Tibet* by Karl Ryavec far exceeds expectations, in that it is not merely a set of maps depicting the geographical changes experienced by the Tibetan territories throughout different historical periods. On the contrary, the book presents a comprehensive analysis of the different eras that shaped the development of the region we now call Tibet, illustrating developments on the Tibetan Plateau since the first evidence of human activity, which can be traced back as far as 30,000 BC (Map 9) until the end of the 20th century, by