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## India that is not a Hindu Rashtra

By: Manuraj Shunmugasundaram

What India needs now is not a 'Bharat' of 'Indic Consciousness', but a Union of States that will deliver gender equality, climate justice and social inclusion.

As J. Sai Deepak's book *India that is Bharat* unfolds, the reader finds herself traversing backwards in time in more ways than one. Navigating through the book's three sections on 'Coloniality', 'Civilisation', and 'Constitution' requires patience and indulgence, as it frequently introduces new theories and undefined concepts. A central but unwritten theme of the book is the resurrection of a Hindu Rashtra, a promised land built on the bedrock of "Indic Consciousness." This is the end game for Deepak's "decoloniality exercise" and the beginning of a rewriting of the Constitution of India.

Deepak advances his case by drawing upon select theories to suit his narrative, as he seeks to establish the foundational facts for recasting the Constitution of India from a new 'decolonial' perspective. While *India that is Bharat* references various sources, there is no attempt to deal with alternative theories that have been scientifically and empirically established. When questions start to build up in readers' minds, Deepak suggests – rather helpfully – that this is "Book 1 of the Bharat Trilogy."

To commit to writing two more books that require significant historical research around the impact and influence of "European colonial consciousness" on India is commendable. But before we move forward, we must deal with the shortcomings of the first volume.

### Overview

*'India, that is Bharat, shall be a Union of States' — Article 1 of the Constitution of India.*

For the title of his book, Deepak has used the first four words of Article 1 without referring to the six that follow. The first article of the Constitution draws the attention of *We the People* to the composition and constitution of India, which comprises several states and territories. The import of Article 1 is to establish the territorial jurisdiction of India. However, Deepak interprets this article to suit his narrative to distinguish "India" — which is influenced by European coloniality — from "Bharat," which represents "Indic consciousness."

The intent of the book's title lies perhaps in the "civilizational imperative" of the author to rewrite the Constitution from a "decolonial perspective". The use of the four words is an ironic tribute to the present-day document, which Deepak repeatedly contends, is vitiated by European (Christian) influences.

It is imminently apparent that Deepak's strength lie in interpreting legal nuances surrounding the tension between State and Temple through the conceptual lens of secularism. Deepak comes into his own in chapter 4 of the book, where he steers the reader through various historical documents to strongly state the case against the present-day understanding of the word "secular", arguing that what we currently believe to be secular is actually "Christian secular." He then proceeds to set up a case that the values of religious toleration and secularism were built based on a theological framework that was conceptually conceived during the Protestant Reformation in Europe.

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At the close of chapter 4, the book expects the reader to wonder if liberalism and equality can be built on a "non-Christian foundation." It attempts to convince us that the Constitution should be the primary subject of decolonial scholarship. While *India that is Bharat* thus sets the reader up to anticipate what a decolonised Constitutional text would look like, it instead labours on what Deepak calls the "Christian Colonial Consciousness."

This shift leads to much meandering around the concept of Indic consciousness, some vague attempts to explain the role of proselytisation in shaping the Indian education systems, and culminates in a parochial effort to showcase India ('Bharat') as a

civilisation state.

Deepak relies mainly on the theory advanced by the historian Radha Kumud Mookerji and others to declare “Bharat to be a melting pot of diverse sects that have coexisted within the Dharmic fold.” The book further argues for the centrality of the Vedas to the Indic consciousness that forms the civilisational state.

Such treatment cannot be classified as anything but parochial, unrealistic, discriminatory, and skewed. As [Shashi Tharoor has explained](#), anchoring Indian civilisation solely within Hindu dharma is limiting and divisive. As such, the section 'Civilisation' ends with an undercooked effort to portray Bharat's civilisational glory and comes across as little more than a futile initiative to advance an oft repeated and poorly substantiated myth that the caste system was a British Raj creation.

A significant portion of the book's final section, 'Constitutionalism', deals with the events in the British Parliament leading up to the passage of the Government of India Act 1919, which served as a foundational document for the Government of India Act 1935 and ultimately, the Constitution of India. Deepak rejects the notions of civilisation prevalent during the British Raj as they emanated from “Christian European coloniality,” which he finds to have vitiated Indic consciousness. Deepak uses the pop culture reference from the 1999 movie *The Matrix* — where the protagonist can see past the illusion that prevents the rest of the world from seeing the truth about themselves — to say that once the “Christian European coloniality” illusion is removed, the Indic consciousness method becomes obvious.

Here the book lays down Deepak's most far-reaching premise: that reforms under colonial rule were wrong, and the reforms that need to be undertaken must be carried out with decoloniality being the basis. It further suggests that “Bharat's institutions, whether executive, legislative or judicial, too would wear decolonial hats each time they preside over Indic traditions, faith systems and institutions.” These suggestions, if taken to their logical end, would effectively re-engineer the social fabric of the country we live in today.

### Critique of the central ideas

One of the critical shortcomings of *India that is Bharat* is that it fails to define “Indic Consciousness”, the key idea running throughout the book. Nor is there a description of the concepts that Deepak believes make up "Indic Consciousness." In today's India, where there is a substantial intermixing of cultures, belief systems, ethnicities, and languages, how can there be a common or standardised consciousness?

The book's central premise— the existence of a common "Indic Consciousness" during precolonial times — is also unsubstantiated and relies wholly on Vedic beliefs. Deepak has not considered and much less, not dealt with various traditions, including the “*Lokayata* tradition, a materialist school of thought” that refutes Vedic theories of knowledge and conduct (Manoharan 2022). He has also neglected examples of Tamil literature going back to the 5th century CE, including Silappathikaram and Tirukural, which provide rich historical context for the evolution of Tamil consciousness culminating in Tamil cultural assertion in the 19th century.

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Rather, Deepak draws strength from the work of scholars such as Anibal Quijano to argue that concepts such as “modernity” and “rationality” were introduced by colonisers for their own gain and were weaponised against the colonised. This view, in the Indian context — especially that of the development of the Dravidian Movement and the Self-Respect ideology — fails to appreciate the influence of thinkers such as Socrates, Rousseau, and Voltaire. Karthick Ram Manoharan, for instance, explains how Socrates emphasised that “the ability to reason was the key feature of humanity” and “helps us to be moral.” Manoharan argues that Periyar built on these thinkers and “considered *Pagutharivu*, reason, to be the attribute that separated humankind from animals.” Periyar's *pagutharivu* was “empiricism, the view that a concept is true only if it can be verified by experience or experiment, and historicism, the view that values suited for one age will not be suited for another.”

It is therefore apparent that *India that is Bharat* engages selectively with favourable scholarship and, consequently, is replete with citations from hand-picked authors such as Radha Kumud Mookerji, Har Bilas Sarda, and Jadunath Sarkar, whose works singularly support the propositions laid out in the book.

Given how the book is positioned as a germinal contribution to decolonial thinking, it does little to assess and examine the entire length and breadth of literature. Deepak has cherry-picked theories that suit his narrative and has failed to deal with alternative theories already in existence. Schools of thought considered inconvenient or undesirable to the cause of ‘decoloniality in action’ have been neglected or bypassed.

For instance, in Braj Raj Mani’s *Debrahmanising History* (cited in *India that is Bharat*), there is a strong argument that British colonialism supported and supplemented “Vedic-Brahmanic Nationalism”. Mani reproduces the writing of Radha Kumud Mookerji from 1956 wherein he, Mookerji, states that the “history of India is mainly that of the Aryans of India. Its source is the *Rigveda* which is the earliest book not merely of India but of the entire Aryan race” (Mani 2005: 193). Yet, as P.T. Srinivasa Iyengar (1985) shows in *Pre-Aryan Tamil Culture*, there is plenty of evidence from artefacts discovered by archaeologists, linguistic traits, and Sangam-era literature that establishes the continuous and contiguous presence of Tamil culture and people predating the age of the Vedas and rishis.

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Some portions of the book, inadvertently, reflect Deepak’s disappointment with the trajectory of judicial thinking, especially in matters pertaining to the conflict between the freedom of religion and the right to equality. For instance, he laments the requirement imposed by courts regarding codification of religious beliefs.

The undercurrent throughout the book is that the Hindu faith has been under attack from all sides, and that judicial interpretations and tests such as that of “essential religious practice” subjects Hinduism to unreasonable standards. On more than one occasion, Deepak advances the argument that Hinduism is treated differently than other religions.

This argument fails to note that even in the recent cases around [triple talaq](#) and the [hijab ban](#), the Muslim faith has also been assessed on the same threshold. Deepak has failed to appreciate the detailed exercise by the Supreme Court in recent times to strike a delicate balance between religious freedoms and fundamental rights.

In the landmark case *Indian Young Lawyers Association vs. The State of Kerala* (2018), the Supreme Court dealt with the entry of women into Sabarimala temple. It went on to uphold the “constitutional protection afforded by the trinity of dignity, liberty and equality.”

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In the Sabarimala case, the court applied the theory of transformative constitutionalism to hold that no personal law, custom, or usage could escape constitutional scrutiny. Building on this, the judgment authored by Justice D.Y. Chandrachud acknowledged the duty of a constitutional court to “recognize and transform the underlying social and legal structures that perpetuate practices against the constitutional vision.” Another point of contention that Deepak has is that “individual interests” must give in to “community interests”. This point too has been negated in the Sabarimala judgement. According to Justice Chandrachud, “the primacy of individual dignity is the wind in the sails of the boat chartered on the constitutional course of a just and egalitarian social order.”

Over the years, the Supreme Court has also laid down that the freedom of religion is subject to “public order, morality and health” as well as the other fundamental rights available under the Constitution. Therefore, the reformist intent of the Constitution and the subsequent judicial confirmation of these principles have provided the moral fabric of our society. In Tamil Nadu, the state constituted the Religious and Charitable Endowments Board, which was vested with control and supervisory power to administer temples. This measure has led to a series of reforms that have democratised temples, from the entry of subordinated castes to the appointment of non-Brahmins as priests.

## India, not Hindu Rashtra

Deepak has embarked on a journey to discredit prevailing constitutional principles and dismantle the structures holding up the country. *India that is Bharat* is a step in that wrong direction. What India needs now is not a Bharat of “Indic Consciousness,” but a Union of States that will deliver gender equality, climate justice and social inclusion. We, the people of India, must learn from our colonial experience to extend democracy to more nation-states. We must realise that our civilisational imperative cannot be limited to ensuring

that ancient cultures are safeguarded. It must also ensure that modern scientific temper is strengthened.

Finally, the robustness of our Constitution must spur us to extend constitutional morality along with values of liberty, dignity, and equality to transform societies for the better. That is what India must stand for over the next century as a rising global player.

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