

Influences on Indian Strategic Thinking

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Abstract

India does not admit easily to broad generalizations. It is an extraordinarily complex and diverse society, and Indian elites show little evidence of having thought coherently and systematically about national strategy, although this situation may now be changing. Despite India's cultural greatness and longevity as a civilization, Indian history is often dimly perceived and poorly recorded; given an oral tradition in imparting past events and the destruction of most records, much of this history is difficult to verify. Until the middle of the eighteenth century, Indians knew little of their national history and seemed uninterested in it. Four principal factors help to explain Indian actions and views about power and security: Indian geography; the "discovery" of Indian history by Indian elites over the past 150 years; Indian cultural and social structures and belief systems; and the British rule.

The discovery of history underscores the primacy of culture in India's political development and world outlook. Brief periods of imperial unity strengthened the notions of an old and great India and provided rare examples of its political unity. In the fourth and third centuries

BC, indigenous leaders, the Mauryans, created an early model of national unity; in the tenth century AD, invaders, the Moguls, provided imperial leadership. This paper tries to highlight the various factors that influences on Indian Strategic Thinking.

Introduction:

Since it gained independence from British in August 1947 and began to assume a more prominent place in the international community, India has groped to define and articulate a coherent strategic identity. Deeply embedded habits of thought related to India's geography, history, culture, and British rule exert a powerful influence on the character and directions of the modern Indian state; they will in the foreseeable future help to shape its strategic thinking and its strategy.

Now on its own for the first time in centuries, India is undergoing a wrenching transition between its traditional culture and the practices and influences of the modern world. The crosscurrents of India's past continually converge on the present. An Indian intellectual remarked that one can stand in New Delhi and observe the simultaneous existence of many centuries of Indian history. One cannot, however, foresee

which elements of the past will persist and which new characteristic will penetrate the national ethos. The extraordinary diversity, the size of the country, and the dynamics of change sometimes make consensus over major issues difficult to achieve, and perhaps even more difficult to predict. Nevertheless although the process is discontinuous and uneven, rapid economic, technological, and social innovations are changing the fabric of Indian society and its ways of thinking.

Geography:

Geography has profoundly affected India's history and culture and therefore its strategic thinking and strategy. Perhaps even more important than geography itself has been the conscious and often unconscious attitudes and thought processes that geography has induced in the formulations of Indian Strategy. India's strategic location, size and tremendous population have contributed to Indian leaders' belief in its greatness, its preeminence in the Indian Ocean region, and its global importance. Geography, especially rivers and mountains, has divided as well as unified the Indian subcontinent. The Vindhya Range forms a north-south divide. To the north of it lies the great plain of the Indus and Ganges rivers, its fertile soil watered by the monsoons. These great rivers rushing out of the Himalayas make the northern plain the heartland of India. This rich agricultural area allowed the development of large kingdoms and often led to the domination of parts of the more fragmented south.

Over the centuries, invaders from the north, attracted by the riches of India, brought new cultures which added to and gradually adapted to Indian thought and society. Most of the invaders came from lands untouched by the sea, giving the dominant north a strong strategic land orientation with little attention to the ocean. The south occupied largely by peoples driven out of the Indian plain, was somewhat insulated from invaders and thus, has retained more of its original Dravidian language and culture. Although the south is also agricultural, it has a much richer maritime tradition than the north. Parts of southern India, especially along the Malabar and Coromandel coasts, participated in the important commerce of the Indian ocean, interacting by sea with Arabs and Europeans to the west and the southeast Asians and Chinese to the east. These factors have contributed to a southern regionalism and a strategic outlook somewhat different from that of the north. Whereas northern India sees the threat from the northwest (today, Pakistan) and the north (China), the south resents the dominant northerners in India and looks seaward in its strategic approach.

Smaller rivers and lesser mountains have further divided India, especially in the south, and have created small geographical areas that developed separate entities with their own language, history and local variation of the great Indian culture. Thus, geography has simultaneously unified and divided India, leading to its claim of unity with diversity and creating some of the tensions that plague India today. Indians have long regarded the mountains and seas as protective barriers against outside interference and invasion. Infact, however, the passes in the northwest have allowed invaders over the centuries to overrun much of India. In World War II, the Japanese threatened India from the northeast, through Burma, and in 1962 the Chinese

attacked across the mountains in the northwest and the northeast. This dichotomy- the simultaneous sense of security based on geography- is partially offset by India's ability to accommodate in various ways to the invaders, thus creating and strengthening an evolving culture that plays a crucial role in modern India's identity. The dichotomy has, however led to feelings of pride and confidence inter-mingled with feelings of insecurity and risk.

These same geographic barriers have played an even more important role in keeping Indians inside the subcontinent and allowing India to develop its own unique culture. In the view of Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, India's "Isolated evolution" is unique in the history of Indo-European peoples, although he acknowledges India's widespread contact and relations with most of the external world while retaining its unique culture.

History:

Indian's attempts in the nineteenth century to discover their history as a whole coincided with the growth of nationalism. Although this European concept was quite foreign to Indian views of political entities, its appearance at that particular time led many Indians to search for and interpret their history through the prism of nationalism. Until the mid-nineteenth century, while Indians knew their own local history, they knew little of the history of India as a whole and seemed largely uninterested in it. In fact, some scholars have claimed that Indians were not interested in their history at all. As Europeans uncovered and pieced together India's history and culture, they developed great respect for it. Indians also began to appreciate it, as they had never before viewed India from a complex perspective.

A renaissance of Hinduism, due in part to these historical discoveries, developed and blended with newfound nationalism, leading some Indians to develop a Hindu nationalism. However, Nehru and most congress leaders preferred a secular nationalism and a secular state. Because nationalism demanded deep historical roots, the Indian nationalist were among those most interested in the history of all of India, and they began to look for characteristics of the European national state in their own history,. They were forced to go all the way back to the Maurya Empire of the fourth and third centuries BC to find a suitable example of an India governed by a central, indigenous ruling authority. The Mauryan Empire, which covered almost all of India, had a vast and effective administrative structure that supported central authority and enhanced and encouraged loyalty to the emperor, though not to the state. The search for other periods of political unity and great national leaders proved less fruitful. Some 600 years later, beginning in the late tenth century, Muslim, Turks from Afghanistan began to make raids into India. Only in the early sixteenth century, however, did the Muslim Moughals, under Babur, begin to recreate a unified imperial state in South Asia. This new stability and order not only influenced India's own cultural development, but also led to Indian contributions to Islamic thought. Not accidentally, many Indian leaders pursued tolerance through

intermarriage or conversion. India is a dazzlingly diverse country, and no ruler or dynasty has been able to impose a single doctrine or ideology on its population.

Most of the modern Indian nationalist movement, especially the dominant congress Party, accepted Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim rulers as "Indians". That Indian nationalists accepted both Ashoka and Akbar is a tribute to their tolerance, pragmatism, and appreciation of greatness and also to their tradition of accepting and assimilating newcomers. Some nationalists, including Nehru, realized that the problems of integration that these emperors faced had continued into the twentieth century. Two important dissents from this tradition of tolerance came during the period leading to independence. Segments of the Indian Muslim community felt that they could not live as a permanent minority in a predominantly Hindu state. This view eventually led to the movement for Pakistan. At the same time, a militant orthodox Hindu Movement sought to make India a Hindu state. The Bharathiya Janata Party (BJP) holds this position today and did well in the election of June 1991.

Thus the discovery of India's political past, even through nationalist eyes, did not suffice to satisfy the needs of a vital nationalism. The infrequency of India's great and glorious empires only dramatized the absence of a lasting political unity. The nationalist therefore turned to the one continuous, powerful element in Indian history: its Hindu culture. This concept of national unity has translated into a special feeling of transcendent Indianness. Indianness implies more than political nationalism; it is an emotion or belief based on cultural identity; it is the deep, intense feeling of being an Indian. Asked the meaning of Indianness, Indians give various answers, all based on culture. Some say that they can go to a different region of India with a different language and feel at home because they will find their caste and fell compatible knowing its rites and social mores, even though they cannot speak to its local members. Others claim that Hinduism provides a bond despite its diversity, that most Hindus know and revere certain gods, ceremonies, holy days, and sacred places.

Indians also express pride in the spread of their culture and note that they have had the greatest influence abroad through ideas, rather than through military or political coercion. Although Hinduism spread to Southeast Asia in the early Christian period it does not diffuse easily, as it is based on the caste system and the associated belief in transmigration. In only a few instances in India through the northwest passes stopped or defeated. Although a few Indian leaders appreciated the need for a forward strategy, such as the control of Afghanistan, they seldom had such strategies. As a result, Indian forces were compelled to fight on the defensive, on Indian soli, after the invaders had already gained access to the rich north Indian plain. In addition, the many Indian states seemed unable or unwilling to unite their forces against the invaders, thus enabling the aggressors to defeat the Indians piecemeal. These military failures indicate that only infrequently did Indians give much thought or attach much importance to the strategic defense of India

as a whole. The small states were concerned about themselves, not the larger entity. This point has not been lost on modern India leader.

Indian campaigns against the assaults from the north also reveal that the Indian military technology through the ages lagged badly. For example, the Central Asians invented the saddle and stirrup and later used horse-mounted archers and developed tactics and maneuvers for their employment. Until the British period, Indian armies clung to largely static warfare based on a corps of elephants, with some cavalry and masses of infantry. Contemporary Indian naval planners have learned the lessons of India's severely limited naval traditions, and they are not unaware that most of India's trade was carried in foreign bottoms and protected by the Royal Navy during and briefly after the British raj. Although the Indians engaged in extensive international commercial activities, they themselves seldom sailed the ships. After independence, according to one observer, 'a new tradition had to be created'.

Culture:

Contemporary Indian society is built on a great civilization that extends back more than 2500 years. Although the caste system and India's extensive linguistic and cultural diversity have changed over the centuries, the basic social and cultural patterns described by early Greek and Chinese travelers portray an India that is recognizable today. Whether India will break up, as many countries are now doing, Indians usually answer that Indian culture is the binding force that will keep India united despite the strong regional subcultures and quarreling states that seem to threaten its existence. Many say also that democracy is the pillar of a unified India. Some add that the young and growing middle class is strengthening India and will support the Indian union.

The widely held perception that culture is a central feature of Indian life may be a greater force than the culture itself, which is slowly changing. Not surprisingly, Indian strategic thinking reflects and takes direction from this culture. The Brahminic tradition, based on the ancient Indian epics, has a few generally accepted tenets and characteristics that seem to have influenced Indian strategic thinking, or the absence of it. The caste system, an integral part of Brahminic Hinduism and one that developed several centuries before Christ has survived to this day. According to Brahminic belief, the caste system is divinely ordained and hence unchangeable by man. The system probably originated in occupational classifications and evolved into its present form after the system of the four major classes or Varna, emerged about 500 BC. Membership in one of the tens of thousands of castes, which are sub-divisions of the classes, is based on birth and circumscribed by endogamy, the largest group within which a person may marry. Some castes are found throughout India, while others are local. Although new castes may be formed and castes may move up and down the social ladder, the caste system has been much criticized because of its hierarchical nature and denial of individual liberties. It has nevertheless, been the bedrock of an amazingly stable society and a rich and lasting culture.

To Indians life is much more complex and less optimistic than in prevailing Western Thought. They accept logic as one influence on life, but only one. Other influences include emotion, tradition, institution and fate. Accordingly, life is unknowable, but man must strive to follow his dharma. Fate is something to be dealt with, but also to be accepted. The Indian view may be seen as a realistic and pragmatic approach to life, but it also can lead to a passive, almost fatalistic, acceptance of life. Many argue, however, that dharma requires that an individual strive to fulfill his moral obligations. Although most Indians deny that they are fatalists, the acceptance of life as it comes carries considerable weight among believers.

This complex view of life makes the future appear uncertain and less subject to human manipulation than it does to a Westerner. Rational analysis, so vital to Western societies, has less influence in Indian society, as so many other factors play important or dominant roles. The acceptance of life as a mystery and the inability to manipulate events impedes preparation for the future in all areas of life, including the strategic. The inherent pessimism and passivism of the cynical view suggests little likelihood of major improvement in life, though dharma demands that one strive to lead a moral life. Even doing good deeds and leading the good life do not end the cycle. Only through renunciation of all desires, many Indians believe, can one break the cycle and join the infinite in final peace and unity. That is, each individual has at man, or inner truth, which is one and the same as Brahma, the world spirit, the universal truth.

Thus, prevailing Indian beliefs, although changing in many ways, differ fundamentally from the Western views, which assume a faith in logic and human progress, the efficacy of individual efforts, a sense of history and continuity, and a future to be shaped and worked for.

The British Raj:

The British East India Company used the Mogul's imperial administrative structure for its own purposes as it spread over India. Following the Indian mutiny of 1857, the British government took over from the company, and Queen Victoria supplanted the Mughal emperor. Using Mogul structure as a starting point, the British began to mold India into a single administrative entity. The British brought modern technology, railroads, and the telegraph, thereby improving transportation and providing modern nationwide communications, important parts of the necessary infrastructure of a modern state. They introduced English as a common language for education and government and organized a more modern educational system open to a wider range of Indians, than was available under the Mughals. The Indian Civil Service, though predominantly British until the 1940s, was one of the World's best civil bureaucracies, and many of its skills were ultimately transferred to India.

All of these measures contributed to the development of a modern Indian Nation-State with a unified administration, individual rights, and representative government in the form of a parliamentary system. Some have argued that administrative unity produces the state, and then nationalism develops. India,

however, was simultaneously exposed to and influenced by the powerful nationalism at work at the time of Europe.

Thus, British efforts to develop unified colony laid the foundations for Indian unity, and the British concept of nationalism nurtured Indian nationalism. Indians realized, however, that the English applied their ideas of democracy and equality to themselves, but not to Indians. Because of this racism, the English became the focus of nationalist resentment, thus adding a third powerful factor to the developing Indian nationalism. The British did not develop an Indian navy. In World War II, a small Indian naval force served with the Royal Navy, but it lacked the necessary support elements to rank as an independent navy. Indian officers, being junior, gained only limited experience. The Indians inherited a small navy at independence but paid little attention to it.

As British naval power declined after World War II and withdrew from east of Suez in 1967, Indians realized the extent of their dependence on the British and began to organize their own navy. The lack of naval tradition, the possession of only a few old Royal Navy vessels, and the general lack of an interest in naval matters meant that the Indians had to start almost from scratch in the 1960's. The land defense of India presented a more familiar but still difficult problem. While the mountains served as barriers in most places, several passes in the northwest had served for centuries as the main invasions routes. The rugged terrain and independent tribesmen found in these areas added to the difficulties. Furthermore in the 19th century Russia was expanding into Central Asia and looking southward and the British began to view Russia as the primary land threat in the northwest.

However, neither Russia nor a weakened China threatened India from the northern and northeastern frontiers. Nevertheless, by the middle of the nineteenth century, The British had taken Burma, which they governed from India, as a defense against China. Although China also claimed Tibet, the British kept it in their sphere of influence. In the northwest, the British tried to develop a layered defense, using diplomatic as well as military means. They first sought to establish a buffer system as far out from India as possible. This meant keeping Afghanistan and Iran friendly and out of Chinese and Russian control in the north. The second layer of the plan called for employing the Moughals had before them, gained the tribesmen's support with subsidies.

Finally, the British planned for the defense of India itself if these other efforts failed. This eventuality materialized only in World War II. The British vacillated between a policy of forward employment of some army troops in the buffer areas and keeping them back in India for the direct defense of India. The British Empire at the end of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth had become a status quo power. Its main purpose was to protect what it had. Consequently, British strategy was defensive in general, and particularly so for India.

London decided imperial policy and goals, but Indian security strategy was formulated largely in India and was developed from an Indian perspective. The British formed the large, all-volunteer Indian army with a large contingent of British troops and British officers. This force was organized to protect Britain's most important colony and also to provide for internal security. India inherited about two-thirds of the Indian Army, minus the British troops and officer, at independence. The Indian Army, at the request of the new civil leaders, played a role in persuading reluctant leaders in Hyderabad and Kashmir from tribal and Pakistani attack in 1947-48. The Indian government has subsequently called on the Army to quell intermittent internal disturbances. It has acted as a strong factor for Indian unity.

After World War II, the world around India changed. India and Pakistan became independent, China grew more powerful than it had been, and England began to lose interest. At the time of independence, India possessed very limited resources for defense and no experience in strategic planning. It inherited much from the British raj, but it had to develop its own strategy and means of defense for the second half of the twentieth century. Neither effort has been completed, but strategic ideas are emerging, and considerable effort nor progress has been made in creating military forces.

Conclusion: The British raj provided India with a geopolitical frame of reference that continues to influence present-day Indian strategy. As the British built and nurtured their empire in India, they also evolved a strategy for India's defense. On land and sea, the British sought to deny other powers easy access to the sub-continent. They set up buffer states to secure the land periphery and help defend the core; sea control ensured that all other powers were denied the means to penetrate Indian waters or to challenge any strategic sea routes.

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