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Reverence, Resistance and Politics of Seeing the Indian National Flag

This book seeks to understand the politics that make the tricolour flag possibly the most revered among symbols, icons and markers associated with nation and nationalism in twentieth-century India. While intertwined narratives of reverence and resistance offer a unique perspective on linkages between the sacred and the political, the emphasis on the flag as a visual symbol aims to question certain dominant assumptions about visuality. Anchored on Mahatma Gandhi's 'believing eye', this study reveals specificities of visual experience in the South Asian milieu. This account begins with a survey of the pre-colonial period, focuses on colonial lives of the flag and moves ahead to explain contemporary dynamics of seeing the flag in India. Delineating such a wide canvas, perspectives from macro history are matched with dense investment on certain key events, debates and elements which have shaped the shades of this history. The Flag Satyagraha of Jubblepore and Nagpur in 1922–23, the adoption of Congress Flag in 1931, the resolution for the future flag in the Constituent Assembly of India in 1947, history of the colour saffron, codes governing the flag as well as the legal cases are few such examples explored in depth in this book.

The tricolour in this history is a symbol of popular aspiration for freedom against colonial rule, a symbol of sovereignty as well as a site where claims of nationhood and citizenship are made, resisted and negotiated. At one level, the dynamics of claim making and resistance appears semiotic, and at another level, it becomes a fight for the participation, supremacy and control over the symbolic arena which is essentially public and visual in nature. The multilayered field is fraught with conflict between the colonial state and nationalist position, between dominant and dominated positions within nationalist domain, between state defined rituals of 'flag code' and popular practices and between dominant caste and dalit *sarpanchs* in post-colonial India, to name a few.

Sadan Jha is Associate Professor at the Centre for Social Studies, Surat. His research interests include history of visuality, history of symbols and icons like spinning wheel and the Bharat Mata, history of colours, and the contemporary urban experiences of Surat.

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Preface

Mahatma Gandhi once talked about 'believing eye'. This happened in 1926. Earlier, disillusioned by the violence of Chauri Chaura in 1922, he had withdrawn a widespread political agitation known as Non-Cooperation-Khilafat movement.[1] Shifting his ground from the political to social and organizational areas, Gandhi focused on constructive programmes in villages i.e. flood relief, national schools, promotion of khadi, anti-liquor campaigns and social upliftment of lower caste groups in this period. Like his other activities and programmes, these initiatives also provoked the ire of his belligerent critics. On national education, a correspondent from Gujarat questioned, 'Since some of the staunchest supporters of non-co-operation have lost faith in it and since the numbers attending national institutions are dwindling, what is the use of holding on to these tottering schools and colleges and wasting good money after bad institutions?' Mahatma replied in a language laden with faith, determination and symbolism:

> My believing eye detects a flaw in this argument. My faith in non-co-operation remaining as staunch as ever, I can find it possible to reconcile myself to the existing national institutions even though the attendance may be reduced to half a dozen. For the half a dozen will be the makers of Swaraj whenever it comes. When virgins are required to perform certain ceremonies, others are not accepted as substitute if no virgin

[1] In the first week of February 1922, a crowd had burnt down a police station at Chauri-Chaura, United Province (now Uttar Pradesh) killing twenty-three policemen. For an excellent account of this milestone episode, see Shahid Amin, *Event, Metaphor, Memory*.

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> is found. So will it be with the planting of the Swaraj flag-post. The flags will be unfurled with the unsullied hands of those, be they ever so few, who have remained true to their original creed. [2]

Here, it may be noticed that without skirting the core concern of this correspondent from Gujarat, Mahatma swiftly transferred the narrative weight from the national education to Swaraj by bringing in three elements: virgins, flag-post and the flag. The necessity of virgins in performing certain rituals, the sacred nature of the flag post and the flag are all wrapped here in a language of faith and patriarchy. Believing eye is the guide in such an ensemble of sacredness, politics and symbols.

Focused on the history of the national flag in India, current study aspires to explore this language which crucially shapes the contours of both politics as well as symbols. This is an investigation of those terms and conditions which determine the intertwined nature of the political and the symbolic; the manner in which these are displayed, visualized and resisted upon in a society.

In this sense, the believing eye enables me an entry into the web of politics, symbols and the language of faith. It is an embedded eye and quite different from an observer's eye or a rational eye. This distinction between the two will be elaborated in the course of this book. In brief, I have argued that the embedded qualities in the former case comes from its inseparable attachment with the experiences of both seeing an object as well as an inner belief in it. Here, vision has to be experienced in a multidimensional manner rather than merely perform the task of generating knowledge or indulge in the ceremony of seeing an object offered on display.

Looking at the Indian national flag through believing eye offers an opportunity to question certain dominant assumptions regarding the visuality, representation and the politics of nation making in India. By delineating a distinction between the embedded eye and the rational eye, between experience and knowledge, and between seeing and believing, this study of a symbol aspires to raise few questions on the relation between the nation and its markers on one hand and modernity and vision on the other. At this level, this study has tried to reconstruct visual experiences pertaining to a political symbol, the Indian national flag. The use of the term, visual experience, is based on insights drawn from the works of Giorgio Agamben who delineates 'the idea of experience as

[2] Mahatma Gandhi, 'National Education', *Young India*, 3/6/1926. In Mahatma Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (hence forth CWMG) 30 (Delhi: Publications Division, 1968): 519.

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separate from knowledge'; an 'alien' idea as 'we have forgotten that until the birth of modern science experience and science each had their own place. What is more, they were even connected to different subjects'. He further writes, 'In its search for certainty, modern science abolishes this separation and makes experience the locus—the 'method'; that is, the pathway – of knowledge.'[3]

At another level, I have argued that this account also reveals various fissures in the making of political culture in colonial and post-colonial India. It is through these ruptures that we find a germane territory of analysis, an intermediary zone between the nation and its symbol, and a fluid space between the aspirational finitude of information and practiced ambiguities of experiences. Moving a step further, the idea is to understand the politics that go into the making of various discourses and ways of looking at this representational site. Such an in betweenness of this symbol makes it imperative on our part to engage (even, in brief) with the idea of nation and nationalism and also show that far from being subsumed by the discourses of nation and nationalism, a history of such an indeterminate location in fact complicates the givenness of the equation between the nation and its markers.

'In an Anthropological Spirit', Benedict Anderson (probably the most influential and widely acknowledged thinker on the subject of nationalism) has defined nation as 'an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign'. He says, 'in fact all communities larger than primordial villages of face to face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined'.[4]

Unlike his predecessors, Anderson proposed nation's 'coming into being' as an ensemble of 'cultural artefacts' and significations.[5] Unlike such theorists who argued for the nation as a primordial unit existing since time immemorial, Anderson also situated its emergence in specific historical context—towards the closing decades of the eighteenth century and in western Europe where

[3] Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History*, 41.

[4] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 4–7.

[5] The history of nation and nationalism has been a matter of great interest among historians and social scientists of different generations. For some of the major signposts in this field that this study mobilizes see, Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*; Benedict Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons*; Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*; Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*; Homi Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration*; Eric Hobsbawm, *Nation and Nationalism since 1780*; Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*; Anthony D Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*.

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the nation 'was the spontaneous distillation of a complex "crossing" of discrete historical forces'. However, once created, 'they became "modular", capable of being transplanted, with varying degrees of self-consciousness, to a great variety of social terrains, to merge and be merged with a correspondingly wide variety of political and ideological constellations'. He has also shown 'why these particular cultural artefacts have aroused such deep attachments'.

While Anderson's thesis has been insightful, he has also become a target of severe criticism and provocations particularly by post-colonial intelligentsia for propounding a model (western in its origin) of national consciousness that was only to be followed by colonial societies in the non-western world.[6] These two basic characteristics—nation as cultural artefacts and modular nature of 'deep attachment'—also lead us to a fundamental contradiction and ambivalence in Anderson's framework. In the proposition of the nation as a cultural artefact, he appears closer to the 'anthropological spirit' (something he himself mentions in explicit terms) but denies the ground for the play of this spirit when he claims that terms of these cultural artefacts, the very form of 'deep attachment' is not determined by respective cultural contexts and instead fundamentally shaped from somewhere else (in Western Europe). By denying the basic premise of cultural relativism, he also freezes the essential dynamism of 'deep attachment' both in a specific historical time (late eighteenth century) and space (Western Europe). Nevertheless, what demands attention here is the merit of such a proposition. By pointing towards 'cultural artefacts' and 'significations' he has opened up different arenas i.e. print capitalism, language, museums, memorials, memories and forgetfulness for the study of nationalism across the world. These are also sites in Andersonian model shaping the nature of 'deep attachment'.[7] In these various forms, the representational dynamics acquire prominence for a study of nation and nationalism. The idea of representation, the symbolic and the sites of visual display become fields of play in such a framework. Yet, the emphasis on 'deep attachment' re-establishes old romantic yet influential ideas such as sentiment, feeling, spiritual principle, solidarity—an entire gamut of human traits that can be clubbed together as attachment or belongingness but are difficult to logically locate or demonstrate in the scientific language of modernity. Here we find, a reverberation of the idea of the nation espoused by Ernest Renan way back in 1882 who brilliantly brought out the raison d'être for such camaraderie by harping on commonality—'having suffered, enjoyed

[6] See Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought*; also see Manu Goswami, *Producing India*.

[7] For Anderson, this community is 'conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship'. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6–7.

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and hoped together' as the key behind large scale solidarity that constitutes a nation terming it as 'a spiritual principle'.[8]

One can argue that both in terms of the intellectual resources mobilized and their approach there's a century wide gap between Renan and Anderson. However, the similarity comes from their emphasis on a shared and collective consciousness that constitutes the core of the nation, nationhood and nationalism. Though this idea obviously has a deeper lineage yet, it has not followed the trail to avoid long and unwarranted detour.

Following Renan, it became pertinent to ask, how to approach people's belief in the shared past or what are the ways through which notions of glorious heritage and sacrifice get shared by a large number of people? In other words, how does a nation's common life enter into a 'daily plebiscite'?

For Renan, common past is crucial but primarily as a property of memory with a potential to give rise to consent. For him the past is summarized in the present and hence he calls nation's existence as a 'daily plebiscite'. It is this living reality, this dynamism, this frequent slippage from past to present, from memories to actual day to day affairs and from history to 'daily plebiscite' that also points to the incomplete nature of the process through which a nation comes into being. Such an incompleteness of the process then not merely points to the fissures and contestations in the idea of the nation as one supra community but also questions the very ground for the production of homogeneity—the core in the Andersonian model. The bond or the equation that one quite innocently presumes between a nation and its markers suddenly appears so complex and porous that we find ourselves 'staring out at different, obscure horizons then engaged in orderly hand to hand combat'.[9] Entering into this combat, the study of symbols is crucial as this exercise is premised on an understanding of nation's 'coming into being' as an ensemble of historically evolved and deeply contested 'cultural artefacts' and significations.[10]

[8] He said, 'A nation is therefore a large scale solidarity, constituted by the feeling of the sacrifices that one has made in the past and of those that one is prepared to make in the future. It presupposes a past; it is summarized, however, in the present by a tangible fact, namely consent, the clearly expressed desire to continue a common life. A nation's existence is, if you will pardon the metaphor, a daily plebiscite, just as an individual's existence is a perpetual affirmation of life'. Ernest Renan, 'What is Nation', 19.

[9] I borrow this phrase from Benedict Anderson who makes this remark pointing towards, uncertainties and disagreements that have been associated with the concept of nationalism. He asks, 'how is its universality to be reconciled with its necessary concrete particularity?' See, Anderson, 'Introduction', 1.

[10] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 4.

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Benedict Anderson locates these questions in 'fundamental change ... in modes of apprehending the world'. The historical genesis of the 'supra community', for him, goes back to a series of pre-conditions witnessed by Western Europe. These are fall of Latin exemplifying 'a large process in which the sacred communities integrated by old sacred languages were gradually fragmented, pluralised, and territorialised'.[11] These pre-conditions altered the nature of temporalities in a marked way. 'Medieval conceptions of simultaneity—along-time' gave way to an idea of 'homogeneous empty time', in which 'simultaneity is, as it were, transverse, cross-time, marked not by prefiguring and fulfillment, but by temporal coincidence, and measured by clock and calendar'.[12] As a result, 'a new way of linking fraternity, power and time meaningfully' coming together became logical and print capitalism 'made it possible for rapidly growing number of people to think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways'.[13]

For Anderson, print provided the ground for national consciousness in three distinct ways. First and foremost by creating 'unified fields of exchange and communication below Latin and above spoken vernaculars' so that fellow readers came into contact with each other through print and 'formed, in their secular, particular, visible invisibility, the embryo of the nationally imagined community'. Secondly, print capitalism gave new fixity to language helping (in long run) to build an image of antiquity that subsequently acquired centrality in the construction of the subjective idea of the nation. Thirdly, 'print capitalism created language-of-power of a kind different from the older administrative vernaculars'.[14] Once originated in Western Europe in post-Industrial late eighteenth century, this imagined community acquired a 'modular form' and three distinct modular types of nationalism emerged. The first was the 'Creole nationalism' of Americas built upon the ambitions of classes whose economic interests were ranged against metropolis. The second model was that of the linguistic nationalisms of Europe, a model of independent national states which henceforth became 'available for pirating' and the third model was provided by 'official nationalism'—typically, Russia involving the 'imposition of cultural homogeneity from the top, through state action'.[15] All these three models were available to the colonized world of Asia and Africa for copy and dissemination.

[11] Ibid., 19
[12] Ibid., 24.
[13] Ibid., 36.
[14] Ibid., 44–5.
[15] Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought*, 20.

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Benedict Anderson later modified this stance confessing his earlier 'short-sighted assumption… that official nationalism in the colonized worlds of Asia and Africa was modeled directly on that of the dynastic states of nineteenth century Europe'. He rectified, 'the immediate genealogy should be traced to the imaginings of the colonial state' and urged to look 'beneath colonial ideologies and policies to the grammar in which, from the mid nineteenth century, they were deployed'. For such a task, he identified three institutions—the census, the map and the museum. These, though invented before the mid-nineteenth century, changed their form and function as the colonized zones entered the age of mechanical reproduction. Together, these profoundly shaped the way in which colonial state imagined its dominion—'the nature of human beings it ruled, the geography of its domain, and the legitimacy of its ancestry'.[16]

In his later book, *The Spectre of Comparisons,* Anderson reframed the issue of the 'formation of collective subjectivities in the modern world by consideration of the material, institutional and discursive bases that necessarily generate two profoundly contrasting types of seriality'—unbound and bound.[17]

He emphatically poses the ideological creation of the nation as a core problem in the study of national movements, highlights the social process of creation of modern language communities and later, in *The Spectre of Comparisons*, he tries 'to understand the remarkable planetary spread, not merely of nationalism but of a profoundly standardized conception of politics, in part by reflecting on the everyday practices, rooted in industrial material civilization, that have displaced the cosmos to make way for the world'.[18] This is clearly moving away from his earlier approach and a move to 'dispose bogeys such as *derivative discourses* and *imitation*', two of the most vociferously critiqued aspects of his study.

Partha Chatterjee, a widely acknowledged critic of Anderson's thesis writes that in *Imagined Communities* instead of pursuing the varied, and often

[16] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 163–4.

[17] Unbound seriality has its origins in the print world particularly in newspapers and in the representations of popular performance and it is exemplified by 'open-to-the-world plurals' such as nationalists, anarchists, bureaucrats, and workers. Bound seriality emerges from within the spheres of governmentality, particularly in institutions such as the census and the elections and is exemplified by communitarian or ethnic networks like Asian-Americans, Beurs and Tutsis. Anderson, *The Spectre Of Comparison.* For a criticism see, Partha Chatterjee, 'Anderson's Utopia', 128–34.

[18] Anderson, *The Spectre Of Comparisons,* 29.

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contradictory, *political* possibilities inherent in the process of the formulation of 'modern language communities', Anderson actually seals up his theme with a sociological determinism.[19] He goes on to equate Anderson and Gellner (a precursor of Anderson and a key thinker on the subject of nationalism) on the same terrain and finds both of them pointing towards a fundamental change in ways of perceiving the social context for the emergence of nationalism. For Gellner the precondition was the requirements of 'industrial society'; for Anderson it became the dynamics of 'print capitalism'. Both described new cultural homogeneity sought to be imposed on the emerging nation. For Gellner it was the 'imposition of a common high culture on the variegated complex of local folk cultures'; for Anderson it was the formation of a 'print language' and the shared experience of the 'journeys' undertaken by the colonized intelligentsia. In the end, both these frames declared third world nationalisms profoundly 'modular' in their character, delineated by given historical models: 'objective, inescapable, imperative, too-marked deviations … impossible'.[20] For Chatterjee, Anderson's modular nationalism does not have space for 'the twists and turns, the suppressed possibilities, the contradictions still unresolved … . Like religion and kinship, nationalism is an anthropological fact, and there is nothing else to it'.[21]

Partha Chatterjee's criticism primarily rests on two interrelated grounds. For him, nationalist thought in colonial world operated 'within a framework of knowledge whose representational structure corresponds to the very structure of power it seeks to repudiate'. In other words, nationalism succeeded in liberating the nation from colonialism but not from the knowledge system of the post-Enlightenment West, which continued to dominate maybe even more powerfully in post-colonial period. Thus, post-colonial nation state forms that emerged after decolonization in the 1940s and 1950s actually ended up replicating quite consciously the forms of the modern state in the West. He, on the other hand, suggested that there were very strong strands within the anti-colonial movement pointing that the real task of the anti-colonial movement was not simply to replace the European ruler with local rulers but to think of completely different forms of rule. The example of Gandhi and his strategy of opposition became crucial in this context opening up new possibilities and alternate ways of thinking about spread of nationalist ideas in colonial world.

[19] Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought*, 21.
[20] Ibid., 21.
[21] Ibid., 22.

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Thus, while he agreed that in most cases, the nationalist movement sought to create a European style or Western style modern state, based on very similar constitutional principles, very similar technologies of administration, he also asked, were there possibilities that had been repressed in the course of these movements? Having raised the question and having produced completely new conditions through which people could be mobilized for the anti-colonial movement, the Gandhian intervention in effect completely failed to reach the sorts of objectives that it had placed before the nation. In this way, while *Nationalist Thoughts*... offered new possibilities and did disrupt the modular framework of looking at the spread of nationalist ideas in colonies yet eventually it remained caught up in big frames rather than local practices that shaped the intricacies of national movement in India. In his later book, *Nation and Its Fragments*, he shifted his focus to these local practices and experiences and forcefully rejected the modular frame of imagination for colonial world. In his view, Asian and African nationalism was based on the idea of difference and not derivation. By dividing the colonial imagination into two domains, 'inner' and 'outer' he argued that while the outer or the material domain was shaped by western thoughts and discourses it was the inner domain, the spiritual, the domestic where the colonial imagination articulated its difference with the modern post-enlightenment west.

Partha Chatterjee's notion of difference has informed this study to explore the history of imagining the tricolour flag of India not merely as another example in the universal history of flags but to invest deeper into the specificities which are embedded in the cultural life, social realities and historical trajectories of India. This emphasis on the cultural context and historical rootedness then also makes a compelling plea to invest focus on the category of 'imagination', a crucial yet largely ignored domain of scholarly investigation.

The idea of difference between the western and the colonial, in later years came to be translated at the terrain of the time of the nation. Partha Chatterjee in his article, 'Anderson's Utopia' says that the dominant strand of modern historical thinking 'imagines the social space of modernity (and nation is part of this process) as distributed in empty homogeneous time'.[22] This is a time of Capital which 'Anderson explicitly adopts from Walter Benjamin and uses it to brilliant effect in Imagined Communities to show the material possibilities of large anonymous socialities being formed by the simultaneous experience of reading the daily newspaper or following the private lives of popular fictional

[22] Chatterjee, 'Anderson's Utopia'.

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characters'. Chatterjee writes that this is a one-sided view of modernity or capital as it looks only at one dimension of the time–space of modern life. For him, *'People can only imagine themselves in empty homogeneous time; they do not live in it.* Empty homogeneous time is the utopian time of capital. It linearly connects past, present, and future, creating the possibility for all of those historicist imaginings of identity, nationhood, progress, and so on that Anderson, along with others have made familiar to us. But empty homogeneous time is not located anywhere in real space—it is utopian (emphasis mine)'. Drawing upon Michel Foucault's notion of heterotopias, he argues that the real space of the modern life is heterotopias where time is unevenly dense.

In Foucault's use of this concept the decisive element is the influence of modernity on our understanding of the spaces both in terms of production of spaces as well as in terms of lived experiences. Charting out a rough outline of the history of space in western experience he says that in the Middle Ages, there was a hierarchic ensemble of places in terms of sacred places and profane places; protected places and open, exposed places; urban places and rural places (all these concern the real life of men). This complete hierarchy, this opposition, this intersection of places constituted 'what could very roughly be called medieval spaces: the space of emplacement'.[23] Modernity redefined this relation between space and place and a 'thing's place was no longer anything but a point in its movement'. Modernity has produced a range of technologies for appropriating space and 'now the site is defined by relations of proximity between points or elements; formally we can describe these relations as series, trees, or grids'. However, despite all these techniques for appropriating space, despite the whole network of knowledge that enables us to delimit or to formalize it, contemporary space is perhaps still not entirely de-sanctified (apparently unlike time, it would seem, which was detached from the sacred in the nineteenth century). To be sure a certain theoretical de-sanctification of space (the one signaled by Galileo's work) has occurred, we may still not have reached the point of a practical de-sanctification of space. Foucault at this point accepts the influence and hidden presence of the sacred in day-to-day life particularly in terms of experiencing spaces. Using Bachelard's work on intimate spaces, he argues that 'we do not live in a homogeneous and empty space, but on contrary in a space thoroughly imbued with quantities and perhaps thoroughly fantasmatic as well'.

Given the emphatic reminder of Foucault that in modernity we cannot talk

[23] Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', 22.

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of spaces without a dense engagement with time this displacement of space with time in Chatterjee's framework appears difficult to accept. However, Foucault reminds us that he believed that the 'anxiety of our era has to do fundamentally with space, no doubt a great deal more than with time. Time probably appears to us only as one of the various distributive operations that are possible for the elements that are spread out in space'. Without going into the details of heterotopias and what Michel Foucault implies by this concept, this brief halt at Foucault's 'other spaces' makes it important to relocate the argument from nation's time to nation's space. It is in this sense, the national flag is approached in the current study as a symbolic space, an abstract representation of the nation. A shift from heterogeneous time of the nation to the intricacies of the space will also help understand what Foucault calls the hidden presence of the sacred in the everyday life of a nation or more specifically the hidden presence of the sacred in the history of the 'imagination' so central to Anderson's formulation of nationalism.

Unlike Partha Chatterjee's arguments, which are centred upon an autonomy to colonial imaginings, Dipesh Chakrabarty has questioned the concept of imagination itself for the dynamics of 'seeing the nation' in specific Indian context. He suggests that it would be 'impossible to gather up the heterogeneous modes of seeing the nation in the subject-centred meaning of the word 'imagination'. For Chakrabarty, in European thought, and Anderson has unquestionably used this thought process, imagination remains 'a mentalist, subject centered category'. On the other hand, (Chakrabarty points out) there is a whole family of viewing practices i.e. *darshan, divydrishti* (divine sight) etc. as they occur in modern Bengali nationalist writing, which are not subject-centred mentalist categories. He writes that 'One does not have to be believer to have *darshan*'. In Tagore's poetry, when Tagore sees the 'lovely *murti*' of mother Bengal, it is his language that refers to *darshan* almost as an unconscious matter of habit.[24]

Reading Tagore's poetry closely and an engagement with the land of Bengal, Dipesh Chakrabarty theorises, 'The nation in India was not only imagined, it may have been darshan-ed as well'. He further says that only under the term of *darshan* can one gather the heterogeneous modes of seeing the nation that is otherwise impossible in the subject-centred meaning of the

[24] Dipesh Chakrabarty writes, '*Darshan* here belongs to practice. To understand it we do not have to erect a category called the "mind"'. Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Nation and Imagination', 202–3.

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word 'imagination'. 'India or Bharat could become the mother because, long before there were newspaper and the novel, there was an age old practice of *darshan* which came to constitute a critical element in the "performative" aspect of Indian nationalism'.[25]

The term 'darshan' has received quite an academic attention in recent years in the analysis of visuality in Indian context.[26] For Christopher Pinney, '*darshan*'s mode of interaction (especially as practiced by the rural consumers) … mobilises vision as part of a unified sansorium, and visual interaction can be physically transformative'.[27] Religious cultures play a crucial role here, as 'seeing' in *darshan* is essentially seeing a 'sacred body' and seeing like a devotee. Centred around an icon, *darshan* defines a particular relationship between the icon and the devotee. Seeing as *darshan* also makes the body, the object of the gaze sacred, mythic and spectacular.

However, it is not a unidirectional exchange of gaze. In *darshan,* 'it is not only the worshiper who sees the deity, but the deity sees the worshiper as well'.[28] Seeing in *darshan* is also a form of touching. The gaze touches the object and the communication is performed. Seeing in this way becomes a form of knowledge.

Summing up this brief discussion on *darshan*, it can be safely stated that the concept of *darshan* leads us to heterogeneous ways of seeing the nation in India. It opens up the possibilities of looking at culture specific practices of belonging-ness of individual with the 'supra-community' in India. Yet, in a multi-cultural context of Indian experiences with its innate plurality, *darshan* comes more as an exclusionary category than offering a justification for a wide range of heterogeneous ways of visualising the nation. For example, as a concept rooted in Hindu religious traditions and as a practice centred around the relation between an icon and the devotee, *darshan* does not have space for a range of cultural practices in and through which individual's belonging-ness with nation and its markers takes shape. This is not to undermine the earlier mentioned claim that one can have *darshan* of 'mother India' or 'mother Bengal' as in the case of Tagore. However, *darshan* presupposes a direct relation between the object of worship and the devotee. It does not have space for practices in

[25] Ibid., 204–5.

[26] See, Diana L Eck, *Darsan*; Lawrence Babb, 'Glancing: Visual Interaction in Hinduism', 387–401; Christopher Pinney, *Photos of the Gods*. Denis P Vidal, *Darshan, Keywords in South Asia*.

[27] Pinney, *Photos of Gods*, 9.

[28] Eck, *Darsan*, 6.

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which sacred values are invested in the object without necessarily assuming a figure of the devotee. In other words, *darshan* presupposes the figure of a devotee. But, one does not need to be a devotee to believe in the sacred nature of the national flag. Yet, at a day to day level of experience and engagement, seeing the national flag may be 'an unconscious matter of habit' to borrow the words of Dipesh Chakrabarty.

Owing primarily to the vast and heterogeneous field of religious practices and traditions, *darshan* also does not capture wide canvas of religious vocabulary that structures ways of looking, coming in and through mass produced visual objects i.e. calendars, lithographic prints, cinema etc. Both Diana Eck and Lowrence Babb have, however, used the concept of *darshan* in a range of visual media formats including calendar and cinemas. It may be worth pointing out here that in their usage of *darshan*, the category remains largely ignorant of layers of claim making and stripped off social and linguistic moorings. Reflecting upon the role of religion in the context of calendar arts, Patricia Uberoi writes that 'the archive of the calendar art' and of the Indian cinema indicate towards 'a continual process of "resacralisation" over the last century'.[29] The *multifaceted process* of sacralisation through which we find the production and reception of mass media forms certainly goes beyond the parameters of *darshan* and reveals its contested and political layers. Patricia Uberoi's comment also points us towards the gendered characteristics of the multifaceted sacralization.

Thirdly, as a Hindu religious practice, *darshan* does not offer analytical framework to a wide range of Islamic experiences of associating with sacred images which is quite crucial in multi-cultural setting of India. Yousuf Saeed in his study of 'contemporary religious posters and calendar art, depicting Muslim themes, mostly in north India' points to the ambiguous attitudes among Muslims of north India on the status of images. A lot of these devotees (interviewed) come from poor or lower middle class or rural areas and many are probably not familiar with the concept of iconoclasm in Islam. They broadly conceive idolatry as unIslamic ('this is what differentiates them from the Hindus'), 'but the images of local saints, their tombs, other Islamic folklore, and many symbols of composite culture ingrained in their collective

[29] She further argues, 'In the "rescripting" of the past through the self-conscious promotion of feminine ideal types one has both a representation of India to itself, and of the India to outsiders as well'. Patricia Uberoi, 'Feminine Identity and National Ethos in Indian Calendar Art', WS–44.

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/folk memory, are openly accepted and venerated, without drawing any lines between Islamic and unIslamic – until someone with a Wahhabi /purist bend of mind comes and tells them that what they are doing is not right'.[30]

These limitations of the concept of *darshan* also force us to adopt a broad analytical frame to understand the South Asian particularly Indian experiences in the field of the visual. It is at this point, the 'believing eye' of Mahatma Gandhi offers us a unique perspective to capture the broadness and plurality which constitute heterogeneous ways of visual experience in Indian milieu.

[30] Yousuf Saeed, 'What You See is What you Believe'. Yousuf Saeed, *Muslim Devotional Art in India*; also see, Sandria P Freitag, 'South Asian Ways of Seeing, Muslim Ways of Knowing'.

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Initially this study was conceived as an exercise in the history of the nation making process in India. I wanted to study the politics that go into the making of symbols associated with this process. Very soon I realized that this history ought to delve into the politics of seeing. As a result, I found myself staring at three different yet interconnected rubrics—nation making in India, history of symbols and the politics of the visual. As the study progressed, the complexities of these three entwined processes grew manifold. In this journey, meanderings of the road taken and my own wanderlust as a researcher came entangled leaving me hugely in debt, both intellectual and emotive. It is difficult to name all those who helped me in innumerable ways on this venture.

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small article published as 'The Mythic (Non) Presence of the Other in the Text of Indian Nation-ness', in Anna Branach-Kallas and Katarzyna Wieckowska (eds.), *The Nation of the Other: Construction of Nation in Contemporary Cultural and Literary Discourses*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Mikolaja Kopernika, Torun (Poland), 2004. I am thankful to editors and reviewers of both the journals and the book.

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