"*FROM ATTOCK TO CUTTACK AND FROM KASHMIR TO KANYAKUMARI:*" UNDERSTANDING *AKHAND BHARAT* IN TERMS OF ONTOLOGICAL SECURITY

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Introduction

The conceptual understanding of India has been peculiar and, in its many iterations, complex, too. The answer to the question "What is India?" does not end with one constitutional-legal or political or cultural-historical narrative. Attempting to explain this, one can say that India, when contextualized through a spatial lens, is a conversation between its history and civilizational processes—at its best lived through the politics and constitution of the present day. It also becomes crucial to make sense of the political space we occupy, its myriad histories, and how history is becoming increasingly singularized in a politically and culturally monolithic environment.

Within this complexity, the following paper attempts to understand the idea of *Akhand Bharat*, how it came about, and how it relates to populist political rhetoric. In addressing these questions, we look at them through the lens of ontological security and argue how the current populist regime in India provides ontological security vis-a-vis the idea of space and geography.[1] Ontological security operates in the space of narratives; it seeks to redefine how we look at political security in everyday terms. This sense of security is concerned with carving out a political space for one, a "place" in a shifting world.[2] Populist leaders come into the picture by becoming the provider of this security. The paper looks at this notion by problematizing the concept of *Akhand Bharat* (undivided India) as promoted by the Hindu right—from time to time in different shades over a century—and looking at its various manifestations in the political landscape we inhabit. This paper looks at both 'theoretical' arguments made by the ideologues on the Hindu right and how those ideas are advertised and supplied to the public through various legal mechanisms. In addition, this idea has evolved over the past century or so, despite being materialized for electoral gains recently. Further, in arguing that such ontological security manifests itself through legal mechanisms and apparatus, the paper shows how this culminates in the creation of a legal regime that provides ontological security under the *Akhanda Bharat* narrative.

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[1] C. Kinnvall, "Populism, ontological insecurity and Hindutva: Modi and the masculinization of Indian politics," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 32, no. 3 (2019): 285, doi:10.1080/09557571.2019.1588851.

[2] Kinnvall, "Populism, ontological insecurity and Hindutva," 285.

Understanding *Akhand Bharat* as A Populist Message

Since Vinayak Damodar Savarkar is the earliest known Hindutva ideologue associated with the idea of an *Akhand Bharat*, we begin with understanding his ideas for the geographical space that India occupies today and how he came about formulating them. In his presidential address at the 19th Session of the Akhil Bhartiya Hindu Mahasabha, held at Karnavati (1937), he said, "We must declare, as an ideal at any rate, that Hindustan of tomorrow must be one and indivisible not only a united but a Unitarian nation from Kashmir to Rameshwar, from Sindh to Assam."[3] This statement is of significance for two reasons. First, it provided, in a complete territorial sense, what the nation should look like if constituted along the lines of the ideologue Savarkar. The idea seemed territorially simple, i.e., it would include everything from Sindh (today's Pakistan) to Assam and Kashmir (a land of contention between the two nations) to Rameshwar. Secondly, in using the word Hindustan, Savarkar was too invested in its literal meaning—one could argue that Savarkar's skewed reading of the term created a new reinterpretation of what Hindustan meant. A land for Hindus was his idea of territorial sovereignty. This is further bolstered by his agenda-setting statement for his party in the same address wherein he says that "the Hindu Mahasabha [works for] the maintenance, protection, and promotion of the Hindu race, culture and civilization for the advancement and glory of 'Hindu Rashtra' […] pre-eminently [as] a national body representing the Hindu Nation as a whole."[4]

The construction of both the legitimate citizen and the overwhelming hegemonic characteristic of the land as 'Hindu' is what a populist reading of Savarkar's speech would reveal. Here, attention should be paid to the concept of "the people" as explicated by scholars of populism as both ambiguous 'we-ness' and distinguishing.[5] The creation of the 'people' in these terms creates this sense of 'we-ness' which manufactures a watertight division between a set of people divided through explicit 'us' and 'them' othering. The creation of the other is mostly hinged on the presence of mutually exclusive identities that further the use of identification and differentiation mechanisms in populist discourse through various means to create a hateful discriminatory line. In turn, this also engenders a collective consciousness that is characterized by the cultivation of an unambiguous "we-ness" that is predicated on the exclusionary designation of the "other" as a means of fostering a cohesive social bond. This is similar to what Savarkar was trying to create, a sense of 'we-ness' through the construction of legitimate 'people' who will reside inside the polity. Savarkar's ideas

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[3] V. D. Savarkar, *Hindu Rashtra Darshan: A collection of the presidential speeches delivered from the Hindu Mahasabha platform* (Chnadrashekhar V. Sane, 1949), 4.

[4] Savarkar, "Hindu Rashtra Darshan," 8.

[5] M. Canovan, "Trust the people! Populism and the two faces of democracy," *Political Studies* 47, no. 1 (1999), doi:10.1111/1467-9248.00184.
C. Mudde, "The populist zeitgeist," *Government and Opposition* 39, no. 4 (2004), doi:10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x.

were carried forward and expanded upon by another ideologue of the Hindu right, Pandit Deendayal Upadhyaya. He, like Savarkar, begins by exploring the idea of geography to define the territorial boundaries of the 'Bharat Khanda'. For him, this territorial idea takes shape in the form of sacred geography, as he starts to define the contours of the nation by drawing upon Hindu mythology. He defines the nation as "one nation till the oceans" and also draws from the epic *Mahabharata* to stress that the nation includes everything from Mount Kailas to Kanyakumari and Kandahar to Kamrup (in Assam).[6] Upadhyaya is also very adamant about using the terms like 'unity,' 'single,' and 'one' nation.[7] Additionally, this is also reflective of his unitary and centralizing desire that comes to the fore when he addresses the contentious question of Kashmir. He is also very wary of federalism, and for him, "Any move towards federalism can only lead to the disintegration of the country."[8] This centralizing desire is strong among populists all around the world. The desire to be at the center of all the action and pomp is what populists thrive on, and therefore, they try to be at the helm of affairs. This goes in tandem with the fact that populists also seek to centralize their narrative(s), sometimes so much that no other narrative remains politically viable. While one might expect this kind of centralization to happen vis-a-vis domestic affairs, one can also see this happening in areas related to foreign policy and international affairs. For example, in India, after Narendra Modi came to power in 2014, wherein "The [Ministry of External Affairs] is often seen as an institution particularly devoted to Nehruvian ideals in foreign policy; [and] outflanking the MEA reflects...populism's anti-elitism and the populist leader's desire for personal representation."[9]

Back to Upadhyaya, on the question concerning the need for an *Akhand Bharat*, he claims it is necessary for three broad reasons. Firstly, the Partition inflicted more economic harm on India compared to Pakistan. He dedicates a considerable focus on explaining how it led to an increase in defence expenditure and loss of industries' productive capacity.[10] Secondly, he invokes symbols of geography and sacred territory when he points out how partition rendered India without Arya Samaj's property in Pakistan that was worth crores, alongside Gurunanak's birthplace Nankana Sahib.[11] He is also keen to highlight that due to Partition, Mahatma Gandhi's ashes were not immersed in the river Indus as they were in the other holy rivers across the subcontinent. Lastly, for Deendayal Upadhyaya, Partition had also invited the unnecessary risk of a more expansive Muslim invasion, wherein "the dreams of resurrecting the supposedly Golden Mughal Empire" was gaining currency.[12] This

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[6] D. Upadhyaya, *Complete Works of Deendayal Upadhyaya: Volume 2*, ed. M. C. Sharma (Prabhat Prakashan, 2019), 61.

[7] Upadhyaya, *Complete Works of Deendayal Upadhyaya*, 42.

[8] Ibid, 48.

[9] J. Plagemann and S. Destradi, "Populism and foreign policy: The case of India," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 15, no. 2 (2018): 295, doi:10.1093/fpa/ory010.

[10] Upadhyaya, *Complete Works of Deendayal Upadhyaya*, 78, 81.

[11] Ibid, 81–82.

[12] Ibid.

point is extremely crucial since it directly hits at the core of populist politics, i.e., the creation of "two homogeneous and antagonistic groups," or more specifically, the creation of the other.[13]

Ontological Security and the Idea of Imagined Geography

By now, it must be amply clear that the idea of *Akhand Bharat* hinges upon two ideas. Firstly, it seeks to create a polity solely and exclusively for a particular group of 'pure' people (the Hindus) in contrast to the 'other' (the Muslims). Secondly, the concept of *Akhand Bharat* is based on the premise of a mythologically traced sacred geography upon which the modern nation-state should be built and continue to exist.

In contemporary times, the Bharatiya Janata Party, having gained political and electoral legitimacy, does not shy away from creating a proper cultural hegemonic order based along ethnic-majoritarian lines. It must also be kept in mind that the creation of 'the people' in congruence with the said ideology, as Vinay Sitapati argues, has been a project that has been going on for almost a hundred years.[14] In this context, understanding the registers on which both Hindu Nationalism and populism operates is crucial: "Both posit an already constituted people in whose name the leader or the party speaks. Both operate on the assumption that there is a singular account of the public good, and the leader or the party is the custodian of that good."[15] The public good under consideration here is the creation of an imagined land that is historically selective in its chronology, disregards the boundaries of modern nation-states, and seeks to protect the purity of race/identity. The supply of this public good is intricately linked to the concept of security at two levels. First, it provides a physical sense of security by providing a space in which the target demographic feels 'physically' safe and can call its own home. The sense of security in this term is material, physical, and understood in relation to something tangible. Although this is the most rudimentary promise of *Akhand Bharat*, we are not concerned with this security here. The idea of security in consideration here operates on a second transcendental level. In other words, *Akhand Bharat* brings a sense of security that operates at the level of 'being' or ontological security, as mentioned at the beginning of the paper.

Since, at its very core, ontological security is concerned with providing security to the sense of *being* in an everchanging and uncertain world, the *Akhand Bharat* narrative precisely fulfils this by creating an imagined sanctuary for a specific group of people.[16] Kinnvall goes further to argue that "If ontological security is about finding a safe (imagined) haven, then ontological insecurity is about the lack of such a space in narrative terms."[17] Contextualizing the theoretical contours of ontological security, as

[13] Mudde, "The populist zeitgeist," 543.
[14] V. Sitapati, *Jugalbandi: The BJP before Modi* (Penguin, 2020).
[15] P. B. Mehta, "Hindu nationalism: From ethnic identity to authoritarian repression," *Studies in Indian Politics* 10, no. 1 (2022): 45, doi:10.1177/23210230221082828.
[16] Kinnvall, 285.
[17] Ibid.

defined earlier, in terms of our case, means that *Akhand Bharat* brings a sense of a "safe haven" that protects the sense of self of a Hindu being. The idea is then appropriated in a populist fashion to guarantee a sense of completeness and provide a 'historical' closure. In the Hindu nationalist imagination, this closure emerges from the historical disjuncture that came in the medieval era, when supposedly the Mughal invaders took over the 'holy land' and, the British colonizers later divided up the land. *Akhand Bharat*, in actuality, represents the need to go back to the "stories of glorious pasts, loss of territory and struggles against oppressors...to account for a lost empire," thus promoting the idea that "Hinduism is coterminous with the territory of India and that both inside and outside threats to the integrity of the Hindu nation are an offence against the Hindu body."[18] Therefore, ontological security is provided here both in concrete and narrative terms by (a) invoking the history of the lost glory of the great Hindu empires, and (b) territorializing the idea of *Akhand Bharat* by defining it in geographical terms. The idea of an undivided India is also important since it provides, at an emotional level, a sense of "one's place in the world," which is again akin to the idea of finding closure/stability/certainty in an uncertain and ever-changing world.[19]

Historical Revisionism and Citizenship: Understanding Ontological Security as a Legal Good

Having established how the idea of ontological security is linked to the concept of *Akhand Bharat*, it is imperative that we explore how this idea manifests itself as an ontologically assuring good via the current political regime in power. The paper argues that it is realized through the various laws directly or indirectly impacting the notion of space and geography, as well as who is a legitimate occupant of this space.

Let us first turn to look at how the politics of name-changing is linked to the narrative of *Akhand Bharat*. The politics of name change involves a series of changes in the names of cities and places that are not historically congruent with a Hindu-centric version of history. The Chief Minister of a consequential state in north India, Uttar Pradesh, Yogi Adityanath, is at the forefront of rewriting this history. His track record reveals that he has a particular discomfort with the Islamic names of the city that lie within his jurisdiction. To give a few instances, he changed the name of Faizabad to Ayodhya, Allahabad to *Prayagraj*, and Mughalsarai railway station to *Deen Dayal Upadhyaya* junction.[20] Furthermore, reportedly, a tweet by the chief minister a few months ago sparked a debate as to how Lucknow, the historic capital of Uttar Pradesh, can see its name changed to a variation of Hindu lord Laxman's name. The

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[18] Ibid, 290, 297.

[19] S. A. Sofos, "Space and the emotional topography of populism in Turkey: The case of Hagia Sophia," *Cogent Social Sciences* 7, no. 1 (2021): 05, doi:10.1080/23311886.2021.1982495.

[20] V. Singh, "'Attack on a dream': Muslims in fear as Indian democracy turns 75," Breaking News, World News and Video from Al Jazeera, last modified August 2022, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/8/15/attack-on-a-dream-muslims-in-fear-as-india-democracy-turns-75.

tweet that sparked the debate read, "*Sheshavatar Bhagwan Laxman ki pawan nagri Lucknow mein aapka swagat aur abhinandan* (Welcome to Lord Laxman's sacred city, Lucknow)."[21] Other state governments have started to follow Adityanath's example. The recent Maharashtra Government led by Eknath Shinde also renamed Aurangabad to *Sambhajinagar.*[22] These changes in names reveal geographical anxieties that can be traced back to the calls for the creation of a Hindu nation. While these cities have their histories of warfare, conquer, cultural, and interreligious exchanges, the need to change the names reveals pandering to a particular section of the anxious majority that, in turn, supposedly believes that the changes of such kind would bring in a sense of security. These changes also indicate how the chasm between real histories and fantastical versions of histories (as propagated by the Hindu right) makes space for populist politics to creep in by creating an urgent need for a public good that brings with it a sense of ontological security.

Article 370 of the Indian constitution gave special autonomous status to the state of Jammu and Kashmir since independence. For the Hindu nationalists, this was unfair since they saw the provision as a temporary and concessionary move, and thus, demanded a complete merger of Kashmir with India. They also argued that this kind of autonomy would mean that "the state of Kashmir will be virtually an independent republic inside a republic," thereby suggesting that in order to complete the integration of India, the revocation of Article 370 is crucial.[23] The Modi-led BJP government in 2019 took the step to materialize this long unrealized dream of their ideological ancestors by revoking Article 370 and voiding it of its special status. After the revocation, the state status of Jammu and Kashmir was downgraded to a Union Territory, more or less bringing it under the direct control of the central government. This then becomes the clear vindication of the BJP's raison d'être, i.e., establishing a political morality by disenfranchising the 'others' through snatching statehood from the only Muslim majority state in the country.

Such actions directly hint at two things. Firstly, the creation of *Akhand Bharat,* backed by a revisionist force, has been ideologically consistent since the 1920s.[24] At the core of this revisionist force is the idea of using the tools of history and memory to feed into the public consciousness only a single historical narrative that involves vilification of the Mughals and, consequently, Indian Muslims. In this case,

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[21] Firstpost, "Explained: The buzz over renaming Lucknow to Lakshmanpuri and the city's connection to Laxman," Firstpost, last modified May 19, 2022, https://www.firstpost.com/politics/explained-renaming-lucknow-to-lakshmanpuri-bjp-yogi-adityanath-laxman-statue-temple-10693301.html.

[22] India Today, "Plea filed in Bombay HC against Maharashtra govt's decision to rename Aurangabad to Sambhajinagar," India Today, last modified July 27, 2022, https://www.indiatoday.in/law/story/plea-bombay-hc-maharashtra-govt-decision-rename-aurangabad-sambhajinagar-1980667-2022-07-27.

[23] Upadhyaya, *Complete Works of Deendayal Upadhyaya*, 47.

[24] V. Sampath, "Savarkar wanted one god, one nation, one goal. Modi has fulfilled his dream with Kashmir move," ThePrint, last modified August 7, 2019, https://theprint.in/opinion/savarkar-wanted-one-god-one-nation-one-goal-modi-has-fulfilled-his-dream-with-kashmir-move/273447/.

the creation of the 'other' happens through the erasure of material, historical, and urban spaces that have a history of their own so as to create, in memory at the very least, a place that solidifies a norm-making based on exclusionary practices and xenophobia. Second, Article 370 and the routinization of changing the names of places reflect a strong impulse that aims to institutionalize hate. Both involve the usage of legal apparatuses to ensure that 'pure' geography is created based on hatred for Muslims. This legal turn is precarious since it not only provides legitimacy to a populist agenda at the current moment but also ensures that the party in power remains credible electorally for the foreseeable future. The link to electoral credibility is significant since these moves have either been an election promise (Article 370) or materialized in the run-up to some or the other elections (the name-changing saga of 2018).

Arguably, both Article 370 and the Sanskritization of places' names directly impact how we imagine these places and how we will continue to imagine them in the future. In other words, these changes bring us closer to an injunction, i.e., accept the 'right' history or face erasure. Such conspicuous changes—when seen in tandem with other laws like the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) of 2019 or the push towards a Uniform Civil Code (UCC)—reveal that these are parallel processes of redefining spaces and simultaneously deciding who can or cannot be a part of this new space. The CAA of 2019, in its most elementary form, decides who is a legitimate refugee based on the religion of those 'persecuted minorities' who wish to seek asylum in India. These 'persecuted minorities' should only belong to one of the Hindu, Sikh, Jain, Christian, or Buddhist communities. This fundamental change concerning how we think about citizenship in India is owing to "the move from soil to blood as the basis of citizenship and openly introduces a religious category into a religion-neutral law."[25] Now, when seen in the context of more tangible territorial changes due to the scraping of Article 370 and renaming of cities, this is an ignominious move towards (a) making the geographical space exclusive, and (b) deciding who can reside inside that exclusive space.

Thus, the creation of a legal regime that provides space for the idea of a monolithic *Akhand Bharat* to flourish is the form of ontological security that the current dispensation is providing through various means. By doing this, the populist narrative tries to construct the notion of 'the people' as something akin to an exclusive totality.

Conclusion

The conclusions one can draw from such a discourse are rather simplistic. The idea of *Akhand Bharat* is, at its core, an idea that sets to create a political morality devoid of any dialogue or conversation on the diverse histories of India. It denies the existence of these diverse histories and, in the process, creates a myth of a unified

[25] N. G. Jayal, "Reinventing the Republic: Faith and citizenship in India," *Studies in Indian Politics* 10, no. 1 (2022): 05, doi:10.1177/23210230221082799.

India that is repetitively *marketed* as a product of ontological well-being. Through its revisionist overtures, the proponents of this idea have manufactured a political exigency that claims to supply this myth as essential for reasons that transcend existence and survival, but for an imagined well-being that simultaneously snatches the historical existence of others.

In terms of theoretical contributions, this paper attempted to introduce a new epistemological framework of looking at populist manifestations of 'welfare' delivery in the form of a 'security' good that goes beyond the notions of some mere tangible physical security, i.e., territory, and argued that it is marketed in a way that appears to be central not only to the very existence of the nation-state but also to the metaphorical *buyers'* themselves.

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