

## AKHAND BHARAT MURAL AGAIN BETRAYS INDIA'S EXPANSIONIST DESIGNS

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*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*



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**Amid a boycott by several opposition parties for not inviting President Droupadi Murmu on the occasion of inauguration of India's new parliament building, Prime Minister Narendra Modi went ahead and inaugurated it on May 28, 2023.<sup>1</sup>**

The entire affair of Parliament's inaugural was engulfed in a number of controversies. First, the new Parliament building was inaugurated on the birth anniversary of V D Savarkar, pioneer of the divisive 'Hindutva' ideology. For Congress, the fact that Savarkar's birth date was chosen to inaugurate the new building was a "complete insult" to India's founding fathers.<sup>2</sup>

Second, Mr. Modi came under fire for holding puja according to Hindu rituals on the occasion. The Communist Party of India (M) leader, Sitaram Yechury, observed that the Constitution gives the right and protection to all Indians to practice and profess their faith. However, at the same time, the Constitution also clearly stipulates that the State does not profess or practice any faith or religion. The CPI (M) advised that religion must be kept separate from national functions.<sup>3</sup>

- <sup>1</sup> "New Parliament: PM Modi Inaugurates Building amid Opposition Boycott," BBC News, May 28, 2023, sec. India, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-65718127>.
- <sup>2</sup> 'Parliament Building Inauguration on Savarkar Birth Anniversary: Cong Says "Complete Insult" to Country's Founding Fathers', The Indian Express, 19 May 2023, <https://indianexpress.com/article/political-pulse/parliament-building-inauguration-savarkar-birth-anniversary-cong-complete-insult-countrys-founding-fathers-8618780/>.
- <sup>3</sup> 'Opposition Criticises PM Modi's Unveiling of National Emblem Cast on New Parliament; BJP Hits Back', The Times of India, 11 July 2022, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/opposition-criticises-pm-modis-unveiling-of-national-emblem-cast-on-new-parliament-bjp-hits-back/articleshow/92810602.cms>.

Third, and the mother of all controversies and criticism, was a mural displayed in the building that depicts the map of ancient India which includes Pakistan in the north and Bangladesh and Nepal in the east. In other words, the idea or the desire of *Akhand Bharat* (Greater Unified India) found an expression in the form of this mural.

The idea of Akhand Bharat goes back to the times of Chanakya, the famous Indian politician, strategist, and writer in 350 BC-283 BC. Chanakya, also known as Vishnugupta or Kautilya, was the prime minister to the first Maurya Emperor Chandragupta (340-293 BC). In his pursuit of building a strong and thriving India, Chanakya was the first person to float the idea of the first Indian empire or *Akhand Bharat*.<sup>4</sup>

This idea of *Akhand Bharat* is as old as the 'civilization' spread over the area that constitutes present-day Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal, Burma, Tibet, Bhutan, and Bangladesh. In recent times, the idea has found a place in the ideology of 'Hindutva' peddled by V D Savarkar. He believed that to be a Hindu, it was important that one inhabits the land from the 'Indus to the seas' and below the Himalayas "so strongly entrenched that no country in the world is more closely marked out by the fingers of nature as a geographical unit."<sup>5</sup> This 'Hindutva' ideology also deemed this land as the Hindu holy land, and, therefore, rejected Muslims and Christians contending that their holy land is somewhere else instead of the geographical unit marked by Savarkar. This idea of Hindu land was adopted by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and, in fact, Nathuram Godse, a member of RSS and mentored by Savarkar, had assassinated Mahatma Gandhi for alleged 'vivisection' of India.<sup>6</sup>

The concept of *Akhand Bharat* remains entrenched in the RSS ideology as is evident from the statement made by RSS Chief, Mohan Bhagwat, when he, while supporting the idea of *Akhand Bharat* said: "...But ultimately it (partition) happened. What seemed to be impossible happened, so it cannot be ruled out that *Akhand Bharat*, which may seem to be impossible, will not happen... because there is a need for *Akhand Bharat*."<sup>7</sup> He also said that there was unhappiness in the terrains of *Akhand Bharat* that do not call themselves Bharat anymore. "There is unhappiness. They did all

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4 Syed Hussain Shaheed Soherwordi and Fazal Wahid, 'Balance of Power in South Asia: The Politics of Nuclear Deterrence between Pakistan and India', *Journal of Security & Strategic Analyses* 2, no. 2 (2016): 96–113, <https://doi.org/10.57169/jssa.002.02.068>.

5 Christophe Jaffrelot, 'This Land, This Nation', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, accessed 6 July 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2016/01/12/this-land-this-nation-pub-62446>.

6 Jaffrelot.

7 'RSS Chief Advocates "Akhand Bharat", Says Pakistan in Distress Ever since Partitioned from India', *The Times of India*, 25 February 2021, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/rss-chief-advocates-akhand-bharat-says-pakistan-in-distress-ever-since-partitioned-from-india/articleshow/81208750.cms>.

they could but did not find any remedy. And the remedy is only one which is reunification (with Bharat) and all their problems will get resolved.”<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, in an interview with *Al Jazeera*, the BJP General Secretary, Ram Madhav, advocated *Akhand Bharat* saying: “The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) still believes that one day these parts, which have for historical reasons separated only 60 years ago, will again, through popular goodwill, come together and Akhand Bharat will be created.....As an RSS member, I also hold on to that view.”<sup>9</sup>

Hence, it is beyond any doubt that the idea of *Akhand Bharat* has always captivated the minds of the Indian political elite particularly those belonging to far-right groups and organisations like RSS and its political wing – the BJP - which is currently at the helms of affairs in India. It was precisely for this reason that when the mural of *Akhand Bharat* appeared in India's newly inaugurated parliament building, there was a wave of anger and opposition in the neighboring countries.

The controversy was further amplified when parliamentary affairs minister Pralhad Joshi tweeted the photo of the mural with the caption that read “Resolve is clear – Akhand Bharat.”<sup>10</sup> BJP lawmaker Manoj Kotak also expressed similar sentiments in his tweet that read, “Akhand Bharat in (the) New Parliament. It represents our powerful and self-reliant India.”<sup>11</sup>

Responding to this development, Pakistan while expressing its regret over the *Akhand Bharat* mural stressed: “It is a matter of grave concern that the idea of Akhand Bharat is being increasingly peddled by individuals belonging to the ruling dispensation in India. The Indian politicians are well-advised not to indulge in rhetoric against other countries merely to further their divisive and parochial political agenda.”<sup>12</sup> Expressing its shock over the statements issued by some BJP lawmakers, Pakistan also said that the assertion of ‘Akhand Bharat’ is a manifestation of a revisionist and expansionist mindset that seeks to subjugate the identity and culture of not only India's neighboring countries but also its religious minorities.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> ‘RSS Chief Advocates “Akhand Bharat”, Says Pakistan in Distress Ever since Partitioned from India’.

<sup>9</sup> ‘BJP Official Backs India-Pakistan-Bangladesh Unity’, 25 December 2015, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/12/25/bjp-official-backs-india-pakistan-bangladesh-unity>.

<sup>10</sup> ‘Mural of “Undivided India” in India's New Parliament Building Sparks Diplomatic Row’, *The Independent*, 7 June 2023, <https://www.independent.co.uk/asia/india/india-parliament-building-akhand-bharat-mural-b2353016.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Rhea Mogul, ‘Why a Map in India's New Parliament Is Making Its Neighbors Nervous’, *CNN*, 14 June 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/06/13/india/india-akhand-bharat-map-parliament-intl-hnk/index.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Iftikhar A. Khan, ‘BJP's “Akhand Bharat” Narrative Angers Islamabad’, *Dawn*, 2 June 2023, sec. world, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1757424>.

<sup>13</sup> Mogul, ‘Why a Map in India's New Parliament Is Making Its Neighbors Nervous’.

In Nepal, too, the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist) Chair and former Prime Minister KP Oli, former Prime Minister Baburam Bhattarai, and some other lawmakers expressed their concern and urged the government to take up the matter with New Delhi.<sup>14</sup> Pro-monarchy party Rashtriya Prajatantra Party's youth wing also organized demonstrations in front of the Indian embassy in Kathmandu against the mural and raised slogans like, "We love our country more than our lives," "Stop Dominating/Insulting Small Nations", "Take down the mural of Akhanda Bharat", "Down with Indian expansionism" and "Kalapani, Lipulek, Limpiyadhura are ours".<sup>15</sup>

In Bangladesh, the matter was first raised by the leading opposition party – the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) - which described the mural as a "threat to the freedom and sovereignty of Bangladesh." This was followed by the Bangladeshi government tasking its mission in New Delhi to seek clarification over the mural.<sup>16</sup>

When faced with protests and criticism from neighboring countries, the Indian officialdom moved to defend its act. India's External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar was quoted as saying that the mural of undivided India shows the spread of the Ashoka Empire and the idea of responsible and people-oriented governance.<sup>17</sup> However, no matter what the Indian government says about the mural, the fact that it was displayed and many BJP leaders lauded it yet again betrays the desire and design of expansion over sovereign South Asian neighbors that the ruling dispensation in New Delhi harbors. This is also evident from the fact that in November 2019, India released a new map that showed Pakistan's Azad Jammu and Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan areas as part of the so-called Union Territories of Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir<sup>18</sup> as well as Nepal's Kalapani area as Indian territory,<sup>19</sup> prompting both these countries to release their respective new maps. As far as Dr. Jaishankar's fanciful comments regarding the mural illustrating responsible and good governance is

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<sup>14</sup> 'Nepal Tells Its Envoy to Take up Mural Issue with India', Kathmandu Post, 21 June 2023, <http://kathmandupost.com/national/2023/06/21/nepal-tells-its-envoy-to-take-up-mural-issue-with-india>.

<sup>15</sup> 'After Protests in Nepal, MEA Clarifies Controversial Mural in Parliament Not of "Akhand Bharat"', The Wire, 2 June 2023, <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/after-protests-in-nepal-mea-clarifies-controversial-mural-in-parliament-not-of-akhanda-bharat>.

<sup>16</sup> 'Bangladesh Government Seeking Clarification from MEA on "Akhand Bharat" Map in New Parliament Building', The Hindu, 6 June 2023, sec. India, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/dhaka-minister-seeking-clarification-on-akhanda-bharat-map/article66938997.ece>.

<sup>17</sup> 'Pak Can't Understand: S Jaishankar Defends Akhand Bharat Mural in New Parliament', India Today, 8 June 2023, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/s-jaishankar-akhanda-bharat-mural-new-parliament-building-pakistan-2390486-2023-06-08>.

<sup>18</sup> 'Govt Releases New Map, PoK's Muzaffarabad in UT of J&K', The Indian Express, 3 November 2019, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/govt-releases-new-map-poks-muzaffarabad-in-ut-of-jk-6100176/>.

<sup>19</sup> 'Kalapani an Integral Part: Nepal Objects Inclusion of Unresolved Territory as Part of India in New Maps', India Today, 7 November 2019, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/nepal-objects-kalapani-inclusion-new-india-map-jammu-and-kashmir-article-370-1616458-2019-11-07>.

concerned, the relevant regional countries can only be convinced when India recognises the established political realities, gives up mythical notions of past glory and future expansionism, and respects the territorial integrity of modern nation states in South Asia. India's credibility will also be enhanced when it peacefully resolves all outstanding disputes with neighbouring countries and contributes to building an environment of trust, peaceful coexistence and regional cooperation. Short of that, no amount of Indian gloss or sophistry on this subject will convince other South Asian nations and assuage their well-grounded concerns about the RSS-BJP designs.