

SCROLL

Harvard scholar says the idea of India dates to a much earlier time than the British or the Mughals

It wasn't just a cluster of regional identities, and it wasn't ethnic or racial, says Diana L Eck, as she talks about her latest book, 'India: A Sacred Geography'.

[Mridula Chari](#) · Jan 20, 2016 · 01:30 pm



Did the British really invent India or did Indians always have a sense that this land was united? It is a question that has puzzled nationalists and historians alike, with ideology often feeding into the answer.

Diana L Eck, a professor of comparative religion and Indian studies at Harvard, wanted to change that. In her newest book *India: A Sacred Geography*, published in 2012, she turns her attention to how Hindus in India evolved a cultural imagination of a land unified through pilgrimage and myth despite political and regional separations over time. She drew on texts with the dry eye of a scholar, but also travelled on old, arduous pilgrim routes, gathering pamphlets and talking to people about what these stories meant to them.

Eck is perhaps best known for her seminal book *Banaras* that maps in painstaking detail the myths, rituals and sites of worship in the north Indian city. She began

research for her latest book *India: A Sacred Geography* in the 1980s, when studying Varanasi, before Hindu nationalism had begun to redefine how Hindus looked at sacred spaces. This was in part why she finished it only three decades years later. In conversation with *Scroll.in*, Eck speaks of how this old idea of a "sacred geography" collides with Hindu nationalism and why it really should not.

I am fascinated by how you began to think about mapping the sacred geography of India, how you got interested in it, because the book itself took a long time to be written...

It did take a long time and it's partly because I enjoyed it so much that it took so long.

I first got interested in Varanasi, in Benares – and that city and the various places, you know. I was trying to associate those places with texts that I was reading. And I realised that most of the places in the city were referenced in other places in India. So they were looking to a broader understanding of landscape – so that there was really the presence in Varanasi of many other places that were of significance. There was also the sense that everything that was important there also seemed to be duplicated elsewhere and it became a paradigm for other places. I thought that maybe I would look at the network of these places.

I started with going to the Himalayan *tirthas* [place of pilgrimage] and realised that the network of sacred geography of places was always linked or interlinked around the country. There was scarcely one place that was all by itself. Even though people said Banaras was the most important, it was also duplicated. There was the Kashi of the south, the Kashi of the east, Godavari as Ganga. We're talking here about the vocabulary of the sacred instead of single places and that vocabulary is geographical. That got me interested in this and thinking through the implications of India having a rather wide sense of itself geographically. There had always been this sense that somehow India had never really stuck together until the Mughal Empire or until the British. This seemed to indicate, rather, that from very early times – from the Mahabharata and the Puranas – there was a sense of the land that was much wider, that this land belonged together. It wasn't just a cluster of regional identities – though there certainly are those – but a notion of circumambulation of the land that you see in the journeys of people like Ashoka and of Shankara. It really seemed that this was a different kind of definition of what constitutes a land and a people. I guess maybe I'm interested in that because that's always been an issue in the United States, you know: "Who are we, exactly?" And I come from a part of the United States that's very beautiful and in the west [Bozeman, Montana], where we

know the names of the mountains and the rivers and the ridges and that sort of thing, and here in India people speak about the landscape in a storied way, with all of the associations of pilgrimage and of legend and of epic heroes.

But one of the things that I could also say about the work I did in Varanasi: I like libraries and texts and that sort of thing, and there are many texts about *tirthas* and *tirtha yatras* – this is one of the major topics of the Puranas and also of the little penny vernacular pamphlets – but I learned a lot more by being on the ground and going places and that's what interested me a lot more than simply reading about them.

What happens to this sense of an overarching sacred geography when it becomes politically divided?

This sense of sacred geography is not inscribed in stone. One of the things that is so marvellous about the rich Hindu imagination is that it is dynamic. So how many of the Shakti *peethas* [seats of goddess Shakti] are there? Well, there might be 51 or 108 or I don't know. Where are they exactly and which one is which? That is something [that] is kind of written in some of the peetha texts, but it's also very fluid and, for people, it doesn't really matter so very much [whether] it's this one here in Ujjain or this one on the Krishna river, or this one on the wayside in Saurashtra. I think that the sense of sacred geography isn't disturbed by change. One can see that in many places because there simply is so much change. Some of that is historical. I think the idea of holding on to a single point is something that is really undermined by Hindu cultural history. It never held on to the same thing.

The whole business of the Ram Mandir, for instance. In Ayodhya, there are many Ram mandirs and many places in general where Ram was born – *janmabhoomis* or *janmasthans* – but until rather recently, there wasn't this sort of fundamentalist sense that it must be *this* place, *this very* place, because *this very place* is movable. There isn't that kind of exclusive fundamentalism built into Hindu lore. I think I said at one point: anything that is really important is important enough to be duplicated, so you know, it's a kind of new fundamentalism. This is ours and nothing else. How did this awareness of the hardening boundaries of Hindutva politics inform your own study of the fluidity of this geography?

There are two things. First, that it was important to describe and put out there what it is that I see as a scholar. The importance of geographical identity in India, the importance of rivers, of networks, of pilgrimage places, the non-exclusivity of them.

How many *jyotirlingas* [devotional objects to Shiva thought to have originally been pillars of light] are there? There are 12. And which are the 12? Well, that depends on whom you ask.

But the fact that there are these linkages from place to place and region to region is a really important thing. It is part of the definition of India that is not political – was never really political – but more a sense of geographical belonging. That's important in a day and age when nationalism has other sort of more dangerous meanings. So I thought, one, it was important just to say that, that there is a very strong identity to Hindu India as a network of sacred belonging and places. If I had lots more time, I would have gone into the way in which the *dargahs* and Muslim shrines of martyrs and saints have also sanctified the regions of India for Muslims. And of course the Jains have the same networks of pilgrimage, and the Buddhists and Sikhs. But then of course, I am perfectly aware of the fact that the sense of Hindu belonging to the land can be interpreted as sons of the soil and everybody should just sort of admit that they are all Hindu. I was just reading in the paper this morning that Subramanian Swamy was giving a speech in Nashik that we have to rebuild the Ram Mandir and after all everyone going back that far was really Hindu, and he was using "Hindu" in this very broad way.

I was concerned that this book might reinforce this sense of India as a Hindu idea. But there is a sense in which the early definitions of Bharat from the Mahabharata are not racially or ethnically circumscribed. They really talk about the *land* from the Himalayas to the southern seas.