

The Cultural Idea of Vishal Bharat: Civilization, Heritage and Transregional Connectivity from Iran to South (East) Asia and the Indian Ocean World

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Abstract

The idea of Vishal Bharat has recently gained renewed attention in academic, cultural and strategic discussions as a way to understand Bharat's historical civilizational links beyond its present political boundaries. However, the concept remains debatable, as it is often confused with territorial nationalism, ideological geopolitical visions or overly simplistic diffusionist interpretations of history. This article reinterprets Vishal Bharat not as a political or expansionist agenda, but as a dynamic, plural and transregional cultural formation that evolved through long term processes of movement, exchange, adaptation, translation and coexistence across Asia and the Indian Ocean region.

Drawing on interdisciplinary approaches including civilizational theory, connected histories, cultural geography, heritage studies, Indian Ocean history, Sanskrit cosmopolitanism, Persianate traditions and diaspora studies, the article explores the historical interactions of the Bhartiya subcontinent with regions such as Iran, Afghanistan, Central Asia, South (east) Asia, East Africa and wider global diasporic spaces.

Instead of repeating older "Greater India" models that emphasize one-way cultural spread, the study highlights mutual exchange, regional adaptation, hybridity and the active role of local societies. Historical examples such as Ashoka's ethical networks, Buddhist transregional connections, Kushan era Silk Route exchanges, Gupta period Sanskrit cosmopolitanism, Chola maritime networks, Bhartiya-Persian cultural synthesis, Mughal

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cosmopolitan traditions and modern diasporic continuities demonstrate a complex and interconnected civilizational landscape rather than a single, dominant cultural sphere.

The article also reflects on the present day relevance of Vishal Bharat in areas such as cultural diplomacy, soft power, heritage collaboration, diaspora engagement and strategic cultural thinking. It ultimately argues that Vishal Bharat should be understood as a relational civilizational geography rooted in historical diversity and interconnectedness. This perspective allows the concept to contribute meaningfully to scholarly debates on civilization, transregional interactions, cultural geography and heritage diplomacy, while maintaining analytical depth and historical balance.

Keywords: Vishal Bharat, Culture, Civilization, Heritage, Iran, South (East) Asia, Indian Ocean World

Introduction

In recent years, the growing interest in civilizational perspectives within global intellectual and geopolitical debates has renewed attention toward cultural formations that extend beyond the limits of modern nation states. Scholars increasingly use frameworks such as the Sinic world, the Islamic ecumene, the Mediterranean region, the Persianate sphere and the Indian Ocean world to understand patterns of historical interaction, cultural exchange and political imagination (Braudel, 1980; Hodgson, 1974; Lieberman, 2003; Subrahmanyam, 2005). Within this broader context, the idea of *Vishal Bharat* emerges as both significant and debated.

The term *Vishal Bharat*, meaning “Greater” or “Expanded Bharat”, evokes a vision of civilizational connections that reach beyond present day *Bharat* into wider transregional spaces shaped by history. However, its meaning remains unclear and often contested. In some discussions, it is used as a cultural framework highlighting *Bharat*’s long standing interactions with other regions, while in others it becomes intertwined with nationalist or territorial interpretations. This ambiguity makes it difficult to engage with the concept in a rigorous academic manner.

This article suggests that *Vishal Bharat* becomes analytically meaningful only when separated from territorial or ideological assumptions and instead understood as a diverse cultural and civilizational network formed through continuous, multidirectional interactions over time.

Contemporary scholarship on civilizations emphasizes that they are not fixed or enclosed entities with clear boundaries. Rather, they develop through processes of movement, encounter, exchange, translation and layered transformation (Arnason, 2003; Eisenstadt, 2003). Historically, the *Bhartiya* subcontinent was not an isolated cultural unit but an active participant in wide ranging transregional exchanges that connected it with Central Asia, Iran, Afghanistan, the Himalayan region, South (east) Asia, the Indian Ocean world, East Africa, and eventually global diasporic networks (Bose, 2006; Chaudhuri, 1985; Eaton, 2019; Ray, 2003).

These interactions were shaped by multiple forces, including the spread of Buddhism, Hindu philosophical traditions, Sanskrit literary culture, trade and mercantile networks, maritime linkages, Persianate administrative systems, *Bhartiya*-Islamic urban cultures, Sufi movements and diasporic exchanges. Importantly, these were not simple one-way processes of cultural transmission. Instead, they involved adaptation, negotiation and mutual transformation.

For example, as Buddhism spread beyond the *Bhartiya* subcontinent, it took on distinct forms in regions such as Sri Lanka, Tibet, South (east) Asia and East Asia, reflecting local contexts and practices (Gombrich, 2006; Sen, 2003). Similarly, elements of Sanskrit political and cultural traditions were selectively adopted and reinterpreted in South (east) Asia rather than directly copied (Pollock, 2006; Wolters, 1999). Persianate influences in South Asia also led to the emergence of hybrid *Bhartiya*-Islamic cultural forms, rather than simply imposing an external model (Alam, 2004; Eaton, 2019). These examples show that *Vishal Bharat* is better understood as a space of interaction and exchange rather than dominance.

From a geographical viewpoint, this perspective is particularly important. Cultural geography today recognizes space not just as a fixed territory but as

something shaped by social processes, symbolic meanings, networks, mobility and shared memory (Cosgrove, 1998; Massey, 2005). In this sense, *Vishal Bharat* can be seen as a relational civilizational geography made up of sacred pathways, trade routes, pilgrimage networks, maritime connections, diasporic communities, linguistic landscapes and shared heritage spaces.

The study is particularly relevant in the present historical moment for three reasons:

- 1) First, contemporary *Bharat* increasingly invokes civilizational identity within diplomatic, strategic and cultural discourse. Such invocation requires scholarly grounding to avoid simplification or political misuse.
- 2) Second, regional connectivity initiatives such as Act East, Indian Ocean diplomacy, Buddhist cultural cooperation and diaspora engagement may benefit from historically informed understandings of long term cultural connectivity.
- 3) Third, global heritage discourse increasingly emphasizes transnational and shared cultural histories, making plural civilizational frameworks analytically valuable when approached critically.

This article, therefore, focused on: *How may the cultural idea of Vishal Bharat be historically and theoretically conceptualized as a plural transregional civilizational formation?*

To address this question, the article adopts an interdisciplinary framework combining civilizational theory, connected histories, cultural geography, heritage studies, Indian Ocean scholarship and diaspora studies.

Research Problem and Rationale

The main research challenge lies in the lack of conceptual clarity surrounding *Vishal Bharat*. Although the term is becoming more visible in public and intellectual discussions, it still does not have a well-defined or consistent meaning in academic scholarship. It is interpreted in multiple ways, as a form

of civilizational memory, a reflection of historical cultural linkages, a symbol of nationalism, a geopolitical idea or even a tool of cultural diplomacy.

This lack of clarity leads to three key analytical issues.

First, there is a problem of conceptual inconsistency. Unlike well established frameworks such as the Persianate world or the Indian Ocean world, *Vishal Bharat* does not yet have a clearly developed scholarly foundation. Earlier references were often linked to the idea of “Greater India” (Majumdar, 1944; Coedès, 1968), while more recent uses of the term tend to carry political or ideological connotations.

Second, there is a continuing imbalance in historiography. Much of the earlier work was based on diffusionist thinking, where *Bharat* was seen as the primary source of culture and surrounding regions were viewed as passive recipients. However, recent scholarship has strongly questioned this one sided perspective (Pollock, 2006; Wolters, 1999; Subrahmanyam, 2005), emphasizing more interactive and reciprocal processes.

Third, in contemporary cultural and policy discussions, civilizational identity is often invoked without adequate historical depth or nuance. Without careful analysis, such usage can lead to oversimplification, misinterpretation in diplomatic contexts or even distortion of historical realities.

In response to these concerns, this study seeks to develop a more grounded, balanced and plural understanding of *Vishal Bharat*, rooted in historical evidence and informed by interdisciplinary perspectives.

Objectives of the Study

This article seeks to:

- a) Conceptualize *Vishal Bharat* as a cultural-civilizational formation rather than a territorial political project.
- b) Examine the historiography and intellectual genealogy surrounding the concept.

- c) Analyze historical mechanisms of transregional connectivity involving religion, trade, migration, diplomacy, knowledge circulation, artistic exchange and maritime mobility.
- d) Map regional cultural interactions across South Asia, Iran, Afghanistan, Central Asia, South (east) Asia, Indian Ocean Africa and diaspora worlds.
- e) Assess the contemporary relevance of the concept for cultural diplomacy, heritage discourse, soft power and strategic cultural thinking.

Methodology

This study follows an interdisciplinary qualitative approach that brings together insights from historical interpretation, civilizational studies, cultural geography, transregional analysis, heritage studies and comparative historical research. Rather than relying on a strictly positivist framework, it adopts an interpretive perspective, drawing on a wide range of secondary sources including historical scholarship, civilizational theory, regional studies, heritage research and analyses of culture in geopolitical contexts.

In terms of methodology, the study uses the framework of connected histories (Subrahmanyam, 2005). This approach moves beyond isolated, nation centered narratives and instead emphasizes processes such as interaction, circulation, interlinkages and mutual transformation. It is particularly relevant here because many of the historical dynamics associated with *Vishal Bharat* developed long before the emergence of modern political borders.

The study also incorporates perspectives from cultural geography, especially the idea of space as relational rather than fixed (Cosgrove, 1998; Massey, 2005). This allows civilizational interactions to be understood in spatial terms through networks, symbolic landscapes, sacred geographies and diasporic connections. At the same time, the methodology consciously avoids any essentialist view of civilizations. Instead, civilizations are understood as

dynamic, internally diverse and constantly evolving through interaction and exchange.

Conceptual Framework

Civilization as a Historical Process

Civilizations are often thought of as fixed and uniform cultural entities, but this view is increasingly being questioned. Scholars now argue that civilizations are better understood as ongoing historical processes that evolve over time. Braudel (1980) saw them as long term historical formations, while Arnason (2003) and Eisenstadt (2003) highlighted their diversity and constant interaction. From this perspective, *Vishal Bharat* is not something static or bounded, but a civilizational process that has developed through continuous exchange and transformation.

Connected Histories

Subrahmanyam's (2005) idea of connected histories is especially useful here because it shifts attention away from isolated, nation based narratives and focuses instead on interactions and linkages across regions. This approach helps in understanding processes like the spread of Buddhism, Indian Ocean trade, Silk Route movements and Persianate cultural exchanges as interconnected and mutually influential, rather than as one-way flows from a single source.

Cultural Geography

Cultural geography also plays an important role by rethinking space as something shaped through social relationships and interactions (Cosgrove, 1998; Massey, 2005). In this sense, *Vishal Bharat* can be seen as a networked cultural space formed through routes, rituals, landscapes, diasporic memories and shared symbolic meanings, rather than a clearly defined political territory.

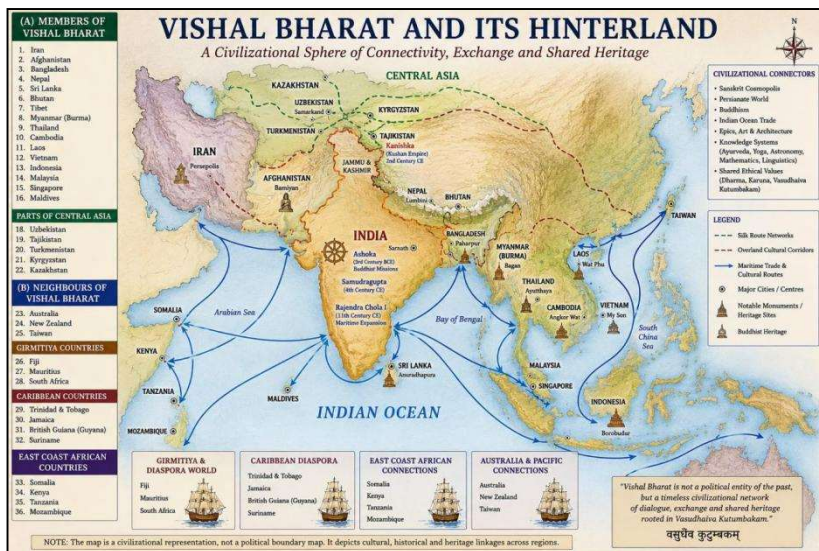


Fig.1 Depiction of Vishal Bharat and its Hinterland

(Source: Created by Author, 2026)

Historiography and Intellectual Genealogy of Vishal Bharat

Any serious attempt to understand *Vishal Bharat* has to begin with some historiographical caution. The idea doesn't come from a single clear tradition and it doesn't have a fixed academic meaning even today. Instead, it sits in a somewhat contested space shaped by different influences like, colonial writings, nationalist thought, postcolonial critiques, connected histories, heritage debates and even current geopolitical discussions. Because of this, it's important to look at how the idea has evolved over time rather than treating it as a settled concept.

The "Greater India" School and Early Civilizational Imagination

The roots of *Vishal Bharat* can be traced back to what is often called the "Greater India" discourse of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This emerged partly as a response to colonial historians, who often portrayed

Bharat as passive and stagnant. In reaction, Indian scholars tried to highlight *Bharat*'s active role in shaping cultural developments beyond its borders.

R.C. Majumdar was one of the key figures in this line of thinking. He argued that *Bhartiya* civilization had spread beyond the subcontinent through religion, language, art, political ideas, and cultural institutions (Majumdar, 1944). The establishment of the Greater India Society in Calcutta in 1926 also gave this perspective a more organized academic platform, especially by encouraging research on connections between South and South (east) Asia.

This body of work was important in several ways. It pushed back against colonial narratives and reasserted *Bharat*'s historical agency. It also encouraged detailed research into inscriptions, temple architecture, political symbols and cultural exchanges across regions. At the same time, it helped open up a broader way of thinking about *Bharat*, not just as a bounded territory, but as part of a wider civilizational network.

Nationalist Civilizational Thought

The conceptual genealogy of *Vishal Bharat* also intersects with broader nationalist civilizational thought. Thinkers such as Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo and K. M. Munshi articulated various forms of civilizational consciousness in response to colonial domination. Although their ideological orientations differed significantly, they shared a concern with historical continuity, cultural depth and civilizational selfhood.

Swami Vivekananda envisioned *Bharat* as a civilization with universal spiritual significance (Vivekananda, 1998). Sri Aurobindo framed *Bhartiya* civilization in philosophical and spiritual terms. These intellectual traditions contributed to broader cultural understandings of *Bharat* as a civilizational rather than merely territorial entity. Yet historiographical caution remains necessary.

As Chatterjee (1993) argues, anti-colonial nationalism often constructed idealized cultural "inner domains" as spaces of resistance against colonial domination. Such narratives were politically meaningful but historically

selective. Thus, nationalist civilizational thought must be understood contextually rather than uncritically adopted as historical fact.

Postcolonial Critique and the Problem of Essentialism

Postcolonial scholarship has significantly reshaped how we understand earlier civilizational narratives, especially by highlighting the issue of essentialism. Civilizations were often portrayed as timeless, unified and culturally pure, but such views ignore internal diversity, hierarchy, conflict and historical change.

Romila Thapar has consistently argued against these simplified interpretations. She shows that historical *Bharat* was never a single, uniform entity but was marked by regional variation, social stratification, shifting political structures and ongoing cultural change (Thapar, 2002, 2014). Dirks (2001) further explains how colonial systems influenced the way *Bhartiya* society came to be understood, while Inden (1990) critiques the tendency of Western scholarship to reduce *Bharat* to fixed categories. Together, these perspectives caution against projecting present day identities onto the past, an important point when engaging with *Vishal Bharat*.

Connected Histories and Relational Interpretation

A major shift in historiography came with Sanjay Subrahmanyam's concept of connected histories. Instead of treating regions as separate and self contained, this approach focuses on linkages, interactions and shared historical processes (Subrahmanyam, 1997, 2005).

Rather than asking whether *Bharat* influenced other regions in a one-sided way, this framework looks at how exchanges actually took place through networks, routes and evolving relationships. It allows us to see the spread of Buddhism, Indian Ocean trade, Silk Route exchanges and Persianate interactions as interconnected processes involving mutual influence. This makes it especially useful for interpreting *Vishal Bharat* as a product of interaction rather than simple diffusion.

Sanskrit Cosmopolis

Sheldon Pollock's idea of the Sanskrit Cosmopolis provides another important perspective. He demonstrates how Sanskrit functioned as a language of power, culture and intellectual life across large parts of South and South (east) Asia (Pollock, 1996, 2006). Its presence in inscriptions, literature and political expression across regions like Cambodia, Java and Thailand points to strong historical connections.

However, these influences were not simply imposed or copied. They were adapted and reshaped within local contexts. For example, Khmer political traditions and Javanese literary forms reworked Sanskritic elements in their own ways. This shows that cultural exchange was always selective and adaptive, supporting a relational understanding of *Vishal Bharat*.

Indian Ocean Historiography

Indian Ocean scholarship brings an important shift by focusing on maritime networks rather than only land based empires. Historians like Chaudhuri (1985) and Bose (2006) describe the Indian Ocean as a connected space shaped by trade and cultural exchange. Others highlight the role of merchants, monks, sailors and migrants in sustaining these networks.

This perspective is important because it shows that historical connectivity was not driven only by states or empires but also by everyday actors. As a result, *Vishal Bharat* can be understood not just as a continental formation but also as a maritime one.

Persianate World and Indo-Islamic Historiography

The idea of the Persianate world further complicates any narrow understanding of *Bhartiya* civilization. Hodgson (1974) described a vast cultural sphere linked through the Persian language, literary traditions and shared intellectual practices. Scholars like Alam (2004) and Eaton (2019) show how deeply South Asia was connected to this world.

These interactions influenced governance, architecture, literature and urban culture. This makes it clear that South Asia was not only shaping other regions

but was also being shaped by them. Such a perspective reinforces a more interactive and dialogic understanding of *Vishal Bharat*.

South (east) Asian Regional Agency

Finally, South (east) Asian scholarship strongly challenges the idea that cultural influences from *Bharat* were simply imposed or passively received. Historians such as Wolters (1999), Hall (2011) and Lieberman (2003) show that local societies actively selected and reinterpreted these influences.

Whether in the case of the Ramayana, temple architecture or models of kingship, these elements were adapted to suit local contexts. This does not weaken the idea of *Vishal Bharat*, but instead it reinforces it when understood as a dynamic network of interactions, exchanges, and adaptations, rather than as a simple, one-directional process of expansion.

Working Definition

Based on the historiographical review, this study defines *Vishal Bharat* as:

“A historically constituted, plural, transregional cultural-civilizational ecology shaped through multidirectional interaction, mobility, exchange, adaptation, maritime connectivity, sacred geographies, knowledge circulation and diasporic continuity across Asia and the Indian Ocean world.”

Table 1. Core Members of Vishal Bharat - Civilizational Footprints

S. No.	Region/ Country	Monuments & Sites	Cultural Practices & Art	Knowledge, Ideas & Heritage
1.	Iran	Persepolis (Bhartiya-Iranian parallels), Persian manuscripts	Miniature painting, Sufi music	Bhartiya-Iranian cosmology, Persianate statecraft, ethics
2.	Afghanistan	Bamiyan (Buddhist heritage), Gandhara	Gandhara sculpture	Buddhism, Silk Route transmission
3.	Bangladesh	Mahasthangarh, Paharpur	Terracotta art, Baul culture	Buddhism, Vaishnavism
4.	Nepal	Pashupatinath, Lumbini	Hindu-Buddhist rituals	Sanskrit texts, Vajrayana

5.	Sri Lanka	Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa	Stupa architecture	Theravada Buddhism (Ashokan legacy)
6.	Bhutan	Dzongs, monasteries	Vajrayana rituals	Himalayan Buddhist philosophy
7.	Tibet	Jokhang, monasteries	Mandala art	Tantric Buddhism
8.	Myanmar	Bagan temples	Buddhist murals	Theravada tradition
9.	Thailand	Ayutthaya	Ramakien (Ramayana)	Kingship & dharma
10.	Cambodia	Angkor Wat	Temple architecture	Sanskrit inscriptions
11.	Laos	Wat Phu	Ritual art	Buddhism
12.	Vietnam	My Son	Champa art	Shaivism
13.	Indonesia	Borobudur, Prambanan	Wayang	Hindu-Buddhist synthesis
14.	Malaysia	Kedah remains	Tamil diaspora	Shaiva traditions
15.	Singapore	Sri Mariamman Temple	Diaspora festivals	Living Hindu culture
16.	Maldives	Coral mosques	Indian Ocean trade	Maritime Vishal Bharat

(Source: Compiled and prepared by the author from various secondary sources, 2026)

Ancient Foundations of Vishal Bharat: Sacred Geographies, Early Connectivity and Civilizational Interaction

A proper historical understanding of *Vishal Bharat* needs to begin not with modern political ideas, but with much older processes like movement, cultural exchange and evolving spatial awareness. The early foundations of these wider connections developed through sacred geographies, interactions with the Iranian world, imperial networks, Buddhist movements, frontier exchanges and the circulation of ideas.

At the same time, it is important not to read these developments through a modern nationalist lens. Ancient societies did not operate within fixed territorial boundaries like modern nation states. Instead, they were shaped by cultural landscapes, symbolic meanings, political linkages and routes of

mobility (Thapar, 2002; Singh, 2008). For this reason, the early roots of *Vishal Bharat* are better understood as relational rather than territorial.

Vedic Spatial Imagination and Bharatavarsha

The earliest sense of spatial identity in South Asia can be found in Vedic and later textual traditions. The Rigveda does not describe a unified political territory, but rather a culturally meaningful world structured around rivers, ecological regions and ritual practices.

The idea of *Sapta Sindhu* or the land of seven rivers, reflects a sacred cultural space rather than a political unit (Witzel, 2001). Over time, texts like the Mahabharata and the Puranas expanded this imagination into the idea of *Bharatavarsha*, which referred to a wider civilizational space (Thapar, 2002).

However, this should not be confused with modern nationalism. *Bharatavarsha* was more about shared sacred geography and cultural belonging than about political unity. As Diana Eck (2012) points out, pilgrimage routes connecting places like Kashi, Prayag, Kurukshetra, Rameswaram and Puri helped create a sense of connection across distant regions. These networks show that early ideas of *Bharat* were rooted in cultural and symbolic geography, not fixed boundaries.

Indo-Iranian Cultural Intersections

Any discussion of early transregional connections must also take into account the long-standing links between South Asia and the Iranian world. These connections are often overlooked because of modern political boundaries.

Linguistic similarities between Sanskrit and Avestan suggest shared *Bhartiya*-Iranian roots (Witzel, 2001). There are also parallels in myths, rituals and cosmological ideas. Although these traditions later developed separately, early interaction between them was significant.

The Achaemenid Empire created one of the first structured political connections between northwestern South Asia and the Persian world (Kuhrt, 2007). This facilitated administrative practices, trade links, artistic exchange

and broader cultural interaction. So, the idea of *Vishal Bharat* cannot be understood without considering these connections with Iran.

Northwestern Frontier as a Contact Zone

The northwestern region of the sub-continent has historically functioned more as a zone of interaction than as a strict boundary. It saw continuous contact involving Achaemenids, Greeks, *Bhartiya*-Greeks, Central Asian groups and later the Kushans.

Alexander's invasion did increase these contacts, though its long term importance is debated (Singh, 2008). More lasting were the *Bhartiya*-Greek exchanges, visible in coinage, art, urban forms and political practices. Such frontier regions often produce cultural mixing and the northwest is a clear example of this kind of hybridity.

Mauryan Integration and Ashoka's Moral Vision

The Mauryan Empire marks an important phase in the development of large scale connectivity across the subcontinent. Administrative systems and infrastructure under the Mauryas created new forms of integration.

What stands out even more, however, is Ashoka's use of moral ideas as a means of communication. His inscriptions are among the earliest examples of a ruler addressing diverse populations through a shared ethical framework (Thapar, 2014).

Ashoka's idea of *dharma* focused on values like compassion, welfare, restraint and respect for different beliefs. It was not limited to a single religious tradition but worked as a broader moral language. While there are references to Buddhist missions reaching places like Sri Lanka, though the details are debated (Thapar, 2014; Sen, 2003). Ashoka helped create a moral and cultural sphere that went beyond political boundaries.

In this sense, we see one of the earliest examples of a civilizational formation that was not based on territory but on shared ideas and connections, something that is central to understanding *Vishal Bharat*.

Buddhism and Transregional Civilizational Connectivity

If any single development significantly reshaped the relationship between the *Bhartiya* subcontinent and the wider Asian world, it was the spread of Buddhism. Over time, Buddhism grew into one of the most important transregional cultural networks in history. Unlike political empires that expanded through territorial control, Buddhism spread mainly through movement of monks, pilgrims, texts and ideas along with systems of patronage and intellectual exchange. As Sen (2003, 2016) has shown, Buddhism functioned not only as a religion but also as a wider cultural and intellectual framework that connected different regions. Through these networks, the *Bhartiya* subcontinent became closely linked with Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Central Asia, Tibet, China and South (east) Asia.

Monastic institutions played a crucial role in this process, acting as centers of learning, manuscript production, artistic activity and cross-cultural contact. In this way, Buddhism helped create a broad and interconnected cultural world that went beyond political boundaries. At the same time, it is important to note that Buddhism did not remain unchanged as it spread. It adapted to local conditions and evolved into different forms in different regions, such as Theravada in Sri Lanka, Mahayana in East Asia and Vajrayana in Tibet (Gombrich, 2006). This clearly shows that cultural exchange involved adaptation and reinterpretation rather than simple copying, which is important for understanding *Vishal Bharat* as a diverse and interactive process.

Gandhara as Civilizational Contact Space

The region of Gandhara provides one of the clearest historical examples of such interaction. Located in present day Pakistan and Afghanistan, it functioned as a meeting point of multiple cultural traditions, including *Bhartiya* sub-continent, Iranian, Hellenistic, Central Asian and Buddhist influences. This blending is especially visible in Gandharan art, where the image of the Buddha reflects Hellenistic artistic styles while still conveying Buddhist religious meaning (Singh, 2008).

Gandhara's position along major trade routes further strengthened its role as a center of exchange, linking South Asia with Central Asia and beyond. Rather than representing a single cultural tradition, it shows how different influences came together to create new, hybrid forms. In this sense, Gandhara is a strong example of how *Vishal Bharat* can be understood as a space of interaction and synthesis rather than cultural uniformity.

Kushan Connectivity and Kanishka

A similar pattern can be seen during the Kushan period, especially under the rule of Kanishka. The Kushan Empire connected regions such as Bactria, Afghanistan, Gandhara, Northwestern *Bharat* and important parts of the Silk Route, creating a deeply interconnected political and cultural space (Beckwith, 2009; Liu, 2010). Kanishka's reign is particularly notable for its support of Buddhism as well as for promoting trade and cultural exchange across regions. Archaeological evidence from areas such as Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Northern *Bharat* including coins, inscriptions, sculptures and monastic remains, points to a high level of interaction and connectivity. These findings show that the Kushan period was not just about political expansion, but also about the movement of ideas, artistic forms and religious practices across regions. Altogether, these developments reinforce the idea that *Vishal Bharat* was shaped through networks of exchange and interaction, rather than through fixed boundaries or one-way cultural influence.

Silk Route Connectivity

The Silk Route was not merely a commercial network but also was a civilizational infrastructure. Through these corridors moved merchants, monks, diplomats, manuscripts, technologies, artistic forms and philosophical ideas. South Asia was deeply embedded in these exchanges (Hansen, 2012; Liu, 2010).

Buddhist mobility was especially important. Pilgrims and scholars carried texts, ideas and institutional practices across Eurasia. Thus, *Vishal Bharat* cannot be understood as isolated civilizational projection. It was embedded within wider Eurasian relational systems.

Table 2. Extended Members of Vishal Bharat - Central Asia and the Kushan-Gupta World

S. No.	Region/Country	Historical Link	Civilizational Evidence
1.	Uzbekistan	Silk Route	Buddhist monasteries
2.	Tajikistan	Kushan rule under Kanishka	Coins, Buddhist art
3.	Turkmenistan	Trade routes	Bhartiya-Iranian synthesis
4.	Kyrgyzstan	Silk Road	Buddhist transmission
5.	Kazakhstan	Cultural exchange	Steppe-Bhartiya interaction

(Source: Compiled and prepared by the author from various secondary sources, 2026)

Knowledge Networks and Ancient Universities

Ancient South Asian intellectual centers played major transregional roles. Institutions such as Nalanda, Takshashila, Vikramashila attracted scholars from multiple regions. These institutions functioned not merely as domestic educational spaces but as international knowledge hubs. Scholars traveled from China, Tibet, Korea, South (east) Asia and Central Asia.

Knowledge circulated in philosophy, astronomy, mathematics, medicine, logic, grammar and Buddhist studies. Xuanzang's accounts provide especially important evidence of such intellectual mobility (Xuanzang, 1996). These knowledge ecologies strongly reinforce the cultural interpretation of *Vishal Bharat*.

Gupta Era and Classical Consolidation

The Gupta period witnessed major developments in Sanskrit literary culture, scientific thought, temple architecture, political symbolism and educational expansion. Nevertheless, the period was undeniably important for cultural consolidation. Sanskrit gained expanded prestige as a transregional elite language. Political symbolism, inscriptional culture and intellectual

production intensified. This laid foundations for later cosmopolitan cultural expansion.

Sanskrit Cosmopolis and the Expansion of Cultural Connectivity

One of the most significant historical frameworks for understanding the transregional cultural dimensions of *Vishal Bharat* is the concept of the *Sanskrit Cosmopolis*. Pollock's (1996, 2006) formulation of the *Sanskrit Cosmopolis* demonstrates that Sanskrit functioned as a transregional language of elite political communication, literary prestige, intellectual expression and ritual legitimacy across much of South and South (east) Asia between approximately 300 and 1300 CE.

Its cultural presence extended beyond the subcontinent into Cambodia, Thailand, Java, Bali, Champa, Sri Lanka and regional maritime polities. This historical phenomenon provides compelling evidence of civilizational-cultural connectivity. However, the analytical significance lies not in simplistic claims of cultural expansion, but in understanding how cultural forms circulated through adoption and adaptation.

Sanskrit was not imposed as an imperial language through centralized conquest. Rather, it was appropriated by regional elites as a prestige medium for political and cultural legitimacy (Pollock, 2006). It transforms the interpretation of *Vishal Bharat* from expansionist narrative to relational cultural process.

Language, Power and Prestige

Language is a key marker of civilizational interaction. Sanskrit served as an inscriptional language, literary medium, ritual language, intellectual currency and political symbol. Its use across multiple regions suggests shared symbolic-cultural frameworks. Yet symbolic circulation does not imply civilizational uniformity.

Regional political cultures selectively appropriated Sanskrit for local purposes. For instance, Sanskrit inscriptions in Cambodia expressed Khmer statecraft rather than reproducing subcontinental political systems (Coedes,

1968; Hall, 2011). Similarly, South (east) Asian literary cultures transformed *Bhartiya* motifs within indigenous cultural frameworks. Thus, linguistic circulation produced hybridity rather than homogenization.

Knowledge Systems and Intellectual Transmission

The classical and early medieval periods witnessed the intensified circulation of knowledge traditions. Intellectual exchange involved astronomy, mathematics, medicine, architecture, logic, grammar and religious philosophy.

Aryabhata's mathematical and astronomical contributions later entered broader transregional intellectual circulation through intermediary exchanges involving the Islamic world (Singh, 2008). Medical knowledge, especially Ayurvedic traditions, traveled through translation and interaction. These knowledge systems further strengthen the civilizational interpretation of *Vishal Bharat* as an intellectual ecology.

Maritime Vishal Bharat: The Indian Ocean as Civilizational Infrastructure

A purely continental perspective is insufficient to explain the historical extent of transregional connectivity associated with *Vishal Bharat*. The Indian Ocean played an equally significant role in shaping these connections. Earlier historiography often treated oceans as barriers, but contemporary scholarship increasingly recognizes them as spaces of interaction and connectivity (Bose, 2006; Chaudhuri, 1985). The Indian Ocean historically linked the western and eastern coasts of *Bharat* with Sri Lanka, the Arabian Peninsula, East Africa, the Persian Gulf, South (east) Asia and various island regions.

These maritime networks facilitated the movement not only of goods but also of people and ideas. Merchants, monks, migrants, sailors, artisans and religious specialists moved across these routes, carrying with them cultural practices, texts and knowledge systems. In this context, *Vishal Bharat* must be understood not only as a continental formation but also as a maritime one, shaped by sustained patterns of mobility and exchange.

Merchant Networks and Cultural Transmission

Historical narratives have often emphasized the role of empires and political authority, but merchants were equally important in sustaining transregional connections. Mercantile communities enabled the circulation of goods while also contributing to settlement formation, religious patronage, linguistic exchange and everyday cultural interaction.

Port cities emerged as important contact zones where diverse communities interacted and coexisted. Merchant diasporas, in particular, created long term cultural linkages across regions.

Scholars such as Das Gupta (2001) and Ray (2003) have demonstrated that these commercial networks were central to the functioning of the Indian Ocean world. This suggests that *Vishal Bharat* was shaped as much by economic and social processes as by political structures.

Bay of Bengal as an Interactional Region

The Bay of Bengal represents one of the most dynamic zones of cultural interaction in Asia. It connected eastern *Bharat*, the Tamil region, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, the Malay Peninsula and the Indonesian archipelago. Increasingly, scholars interpret this region as an integrated historical space rather than a collection of isolated areas (Bose, 2006).

Interactions across the Bay of Bengal included maritime trade, the spread of religious traditions, migration of merchant communities, ritual exchanges and diplomatic contacts. These ongoing processes contributed to the formation of a shared cultural environment across the region. As such, the history of the Bay of Bengal is central to any comprehensive understanding of *Vishal Bharat*.

Chola Connectivity and Maritime Cultural Expansion

The Chola period provides one of the most striking examples of maritime connectivity in the pre-modern world. Rajendra Chola I is frequently mentioned in discussions of transregional interaction due to the Chola dynasty's naval activity and commercial engagement across the Bay of

Bengal. The Chola sphere of interaction extended from Tamil South *Bharat* to Sri Lanka, the Maldives, the Malay Peninsula, Sumatra and other parts of maritime South (east) Asia.

However, Chola expansion should not be interpreted in terms of modern geopolitical nationalism. It needs to be understood within the context of medieval commercial competition, regional power dynamics and political rivalry. Even so, its broader cultural significance remains considerable, particularly in terms of facilitating long distance connections.

Merchant Guilds and Overseas Networks

Tamil merchant guilds such as the Ayyavole, Manigramam and Nanadesi played a key role in maintaining extensive overseas networks (Sastri, 1955; Hall, 2011). These groups were not only involved in trade but also contributed to the establishment of settlements, patronage of temples and wider cultural exchange. Commercial centers often developed into important cultural hubs where different traditions interacted. This shows that maritime connections were not purely economic in nature but also had strong cultural and social dimensions.

Temple Culture and Social Institutions

Temples during this period functioned as more than just religious spaces. In many cases, they acted as centers of economic activity, social organization, ritual life and cultural preservation. They were closely linked with trade networks and often expanded alongside mercantile activity. At the same time, religious practices and institutional forms were not simply transferred unchanged. They were adapted to local contexts, reflecting regional needs and cultural influences. This again highlights the importance of interaction and adaptation in shaping these connections.

South (east) Asia and Regional Cultural Localization

South (east) Asia occupies a central place in discussions of *Vishal Bharat*. It also presents the strongest challenge to simplistic diffusionism. Earlier scholarship often portrayed South (east) Asia as ‘Indianized’. Contemporary

scholarship strongly critiques this terminology (Lieberman, 2003; Wolters, 1999).

Rather than passive reception, South (east) Asia demonstrates the selective adaptation, creative reinterpretation, cultural hybridization and political localization (table 1). Thus, South (east) Asia strengthens relational interpretations of *Vishal Bharat*.

Cambodia

Cambodia is a good example of how cultural interaction actually worked in history. The temples at Angkor show clear links with *Bhartiya* ideas, especially in terms of cosmology and kingship. The use of Sanskrit in inscriptions also suggests connections with wider intellectual traditions. But at the same time, Angkor was not just copying anything from outside. These ideas were adjusted to fit local Khmer conditions, including environment, politics and society.

Thailand

In Thailand, we see a similar process. *Bhartiya* influence is visible in the Ramakien, in language, and in royal traditions and rituals. However, these were not simply borrowed. The Ramakien, for example, is clearly shaped by Thai culture and imagination. It may have roots in the Ramayana, but it developed into something different in the local context.

Indonesia

Indonesia shows even more clearly how outside influences were adapted. Structures like Borobudur and Prambanan reflect *Bhartiya* ideas and there are also influences in language, literature and performance traditions. Balinese Hinduism is another example. Still, these were not direct copies. Local traditions, especially in Java, reworked these ideas in their own way, creating new forms that were rooted in local culture.

Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam

In Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam, connections with the *Bhartiya* subcontinent developed mainly through Buddhism, rituals, trade and other forms of contact.

But each region followed its own path. Local cultures remained strong and shaped how these influences were understood. Because of this, it is not correct to see these regions as part of a single uniform cultural system. Instead, their histories show a mix of interaction, adaptation and local development.

Emerging Historical Pattern

The classical maritime phase reveals several recurring processes: (i) linguistic cosmopolitanism (ii) intellectual circulation (iii) merchant led connectivity (iv) maritime exchange (v) temple linked institutions (vi) regional adaptation (vii) cultural hybridity, and (viii) South (east) Asian agency. These patterns strongly support a plural interpretation of *Vishal Bharat*.

Reframing Vishal Bharat Through the Persianate World and Bhartiya-Islamic Cosmopolitanism

Any meaningful historical interpretation of *Vishal Bharat* has to move beyond a Sanskritic or Hindu centric view. While Sanskrit traditions, *Bhartiya* philosophies, Buddhist networks and maritime links were certainly important, they represent only one part of a much wider civilizational landscape. South Asia's history was shaped just as strongly by its long relationship with Iran, Central Asia, Afghanistan, Turkic political cultures, Persianate literary life, Islamic intellectual traditions, Sufi movements and the cosmopolitanism of *Bhartiya*-Islamic cities. Ignoring these dimensions leads to an incomplete and historically inaccurate picture. If *Vishal Bharat* is to be treated as a serious academic concept, it must be understood as plural, layered and shaped by dialogue between different cultural worlds.

The idea of the Persianate world is especially useful for understanding this phase. Hodgson (1974) used the term to describe a large cultural zone stretching across Iran, Central Asia, Afghanistan and South Asia, linked through Persian language, literary styles, courtly practices, political ethics and shared urban culture. South Asia was deeply involved in this cultural world. As Alam (2004) shows, Persian became a major language of administration and elite communication in the region. Eaton (2019) further demonstrates that between roughly 1000 and 1765, South Asia was profoundly shaped by

Persianate influences in politics, culture and intellectual life. This shows that South Asia was not only sending cultural influences outward; it was also receiving, adapting and co-creating them.

The historical relationship between South Asia and Iran stretches back much earlier than medieval Islamic rule. Linguistic links between Sanskrit and Avestan, similar ritual themes, and shared cosmological ideas point to older *Bhartiya*-Iranian connections, even though the two regions developed distinct identities over time (Witzel, 2001). Later, political, commercial and intellectual interactions strengthened these ties further. Iranian influence shaped administration, literature, court etiquette, architecture and political symbols in South Asia. At the same time, Persianate traditions were reshaped within the local environments of the subcontinent. This back and forth process is important because it highlights that civilizational exchange was mutual, not one-directional.

Afghanistan plays a crucial role in this broader cultural geography. Modern borders often hide its historical importance as a zone of connection rather than separation. For centuries, Afghanistan served as a passageway, a frontier region, a commercial route and a cultural meeting point. Various historical powers, the Achaemenids, Indo-Greeks, Kushans, Ghaznavids, Ghurids, Timurids and Mughals linked Afghanistan closely with South Asia. These interactions shaped everything from artistic styles and religious movements to political culture, trade and migration. The Gandharan region, in particular, reflects these overlapping influences (Singh, 2008). Afghanistan, therefore, should not be seen as marginal to the idea of *Vishal Bharat*; it stands at the heart of its historical complexity.

Central Asia and Transregional Civilizational Exchange

Central Asia played a key role in connecting South Asia with the wider Eurasian world. It was not a distant or isolated region, but an important zone of interaction that linked different cultures through trade routes, migration, imperial contacts, scholarly movement and religious exchange.

Several major routes connected South Asia with places such as Bactria, Samarkand, Bukhara, Ferghana, Kashgar and the broader Silk Road network. Along these routes moved not only goods but also people and ideas, merchants, monks, manuscripts, envoys, artistic styles, technologies and even military groups. These exchanges helped create a shared space of interaction across regions.

Central Asia had a deep influence on the historical development of South Asia, just as influences also moved in the opposite direction. Buddhist and other *Bhartiya* traditions spread northward through these same networks (Sen, 2016). This shows that cultural exchange was not one-way, but involved continuous and multi-directional interaction between regions.

Mobility of Scholars and Sufis

Spiritual and scholarly mobility formed an especially important dimension of trans-regional cultural exchange. Sufi networks connected the Iran, Central Asia, Afghanistan and South Asia. Through shrines, discipleship lineages, poetry, pedagogy and devotional practice, Sufi traditions created shared cultural spaces across political boundaries (Green, 2012). South Asian Islam emerged not through simple importation but through layered interaction, vernacular adaptation and regional embedding. Similarly, scholarly networks linked Persianate intellectual centers across regions. The knowledge circulated through manuscripts, madrasas, court patronage, itinerant scholars, etc. This reinforces the interpretation of *Vishal Bharat* as a historically interactive civilizational ecology.

Bhartiya-Islamic Cosmopolitanism

The idea of *Bhartiya*-Islamic cosmopolitanism offers an important way of understanding South Asia's historical development beyond simplistic narratives of conquest or rigid civilizational divisions. Urban centers such as Delhi, Agra, Lahore, Lucknow and Hyderabad emerged as vibrant cosmopolitan spaces where Persian, Arabic, Turkic and *Bhartiya* traditions interacted in complex ways (Eaton, 2019; Sharma, 2017). These cities became hubs of intellectual and cultural activity, bringing together poets, scholars,

theologians, artisans, administrators, merchants and musicians. The cultural forms that developed in these settings were not imposed from outside but were the result of sustained interaction and blending, reinforcing a more plural understanding of *Vishal Bharat*.

Language and Literary Hybridity

Language provides one of the clearest indicators of this interaction. Persian became a key language of administration and high culture in South Asia, influencing governance, historical writing, diplomacy and literary production (Alam, 2004). At the same time, local languages continued to develop through contact with Persian, Arabic and other traditions. The emergence of Urdu is a notable example of this process, reflecting a synthesis of different linguistic influences. Translation activities between Sanskrit, Persian, Arabic and various vernaculars further enriched intellectual exchange. This linguistic diversity highlights the fundamentally hybrid and multilingual nature of South Asia's civilizational history.

Architectural Synthesis

Architecture also reflects these layered interactions. Across South Asia, built forms incorporated elements such as domes, arches, garden layouts and decorative styles associated with Persianate and Central Asian traditions, which were then adapted to local materials and artistic practices (Flood, 2009). Mughal architecture, in particular, represents a high point of such synthesis, combining multiple influences into distinctive forms. These architectural developments clearly demonstrate that cultural traditions were shaped through interaction and adaptation, challenging any idea of civilizational purity.

Diaspora, Indian Ocean Africa and the Extended Cultural Geography of Vishal Bharat

The cultural idea of *Vishal Bharat* extends beyond pre-modern historical interaction into the modern era through diaspora. Unlike ancient civilizational mobility, modern diaspora often emerged through colonial indenture, commercial migration, imperial labor systems, professional migration and global transnational movement. Regions significantly shaped by South Asian

diaspora include Mauritius, Fiji, South Africa, Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, Guyana, Suriname, Trinidad & Tobago, Reunion and global metropolitan centers. Diaspora communities preserved and transformed language, ritual traditions, food cultures, festivals, oral memory and religious institutions (Vertovec, 2000; Cohen, 2008). Thus, diaspora represents living cultural continuity through adaptation.

Table 3. Neighbours of Vishal Bharat - Girmitiya, Caribbean and East African Connections

S. No.	Region/ Country	Cultural Continuities	Living Heritage
1.	Australia	Bhartiya diaspora, yoga and Ayurveda traditions	Hindu temples, multicultural Indic festivals
2.	New Zealand	Bhartiya-Pacific cultural linkages, Bhartiya religious traditions	Hindu and Sikh institutions, yoga, Bhartiya cultural festivals
3.	Taiwan	Buddhist intellectual exchanges, Bhartiya-Taiwan interactions	Buddhist studies, yoga centres, cultural exchange programmes
Girmitiya Countries			
4.	Fiji	Ramayana recitations	Bhojpuri, temples
5.	Mauritius	Ganga Talao	Hindu festivals
6.	South Africa	Gujarati settlements	Food, textiles
Caribbean Countries			
7.	Trinidad & Tobago	Mandirs	Phagwa, Ramleela
8.	Jamaica	Indentured Bhartiya migration, Bhojpuri cultural memories	Bhartiya festivals, cuisine, cultural associations
9.	British Guiana (Guyana)	Oral epics	Bhartiya-Caribbean culture
10.	Suriname	Sarnami Hindi	Ritual continuity
East Coast African Countries			

11.	Somalia	Ancient Indian Ocean trade links	Shared maritime heritage
12.	Kenya	Swahili-Bhartiya trade	Cuisine, trade ethics
13.	Tanzania	Swahili-Bhartiya business and cultural interaction	Bhartiya cuisine, commercial communities
14.	Mozambique	Bhartiya merchants	Maritime heritage

(Source: Compiled and prepared by the author from various secondary sources, 2026)

Girmitiya Worlds

The experience of the indentured labor diaspora, often referred to as the Girmitiya world, is especially important in understanding cultural continuity beyond the subcontinent. Communities that were transported under colonial labor systems to regions such as the Caribbean, Fiji and Mauritius created new cultural landscapes under difficult conditions of displacement. In these settings, practices like Ramayana recitation, the use of Bhojpuri language, celebrations such as Phagwa and the continuation of both Hindu and Muslim rituals became central to maintaining identity (Lal, 2000; Bahadur, 2013).

At the same time, these traditions were not preserved unchanged. They adapted to new environments, often blending with local influences, including in areas like food and everyday cultural practices. This shows that diaspora communities sustained culture through adaptation rather than static preservation.

Indian Ocean Africa

The connections between South Asia and East Africa represent another important dimension of transregional interaction. Long standing maritime links connected western *Bharat* with regions such as Kenya, Tanzania, Zanzibar and Mozambique. Gujarati merchant communities played a significant role in this process through trade networks, settlement patterns and ongoing social and cultural exchange (Das Gupta, 2001; Bose, 2006). These

regions developed as spaces of interaction where cultures met and influenced each other. They should not be seen as extensions of any single civilization, but rather as shared zones shaped by continuous exchange and contact.

Contemporary Relevance

When understood as a historically grounded and transregional cultural framework rather than a territorial or political idea, *Vishal Bharat* holds clear relevance in the contemporary context. Its value lies in areas such as cultural diplomacy, heritage cooperation, engagement with diaspora communities, academic collaboration, soft power projection and regional cultural dialogue. However, the usefulness of this concept depends on how carefully and responsibly it is interpreted.

Cultural Diplomacy

Shared historical connections can play a constructive role in cultural diplomacy. They can support initiatives such as manuscript preservation, museum collaborations, Buddhist cultural exchanges, academic partnerships and joint heritage projects. It is important, however, that such shared heritage is approached in a cooperative spirit rather than being treated as the property of any one nation.

Soft Power

Soft power is based on cultural appeal and the ability to shape perceptions through attraction rather than coercion (Nye, 2004). *Bharat's* cultural strengths include traditions such as yoga and Ayurveda, its diverse cuisine, democratic institutions, cinema, diaspora networks and Buddhist heritage. When presented with historical depth and sensitivity, the idea of civilizational connectivity can strengthen these soft power narratives.

National Security and Strategic Culture

In the contemporary world, the idea of security extends beyond military strength to include narrative influence, identity formation, strategic legitimacy and cultural confidence. A balanced and historically informed understanding of civilizational connections can contribute to cultural confidence without

promoting exclusionary or aggressive forms of nationalism. At the same time, if such ideas are framed in a narrow or political manner, they risk creating misunderstanding and mistrust at the regional level.

Conclusion

This study has argued that *Vishal Bharat* possesses scholarly value only when interpreted as a historically constituted, plural, transregional cultural-civilizational ecology. The evidence demonstrates connectivity through sacred geographies, Buddhism, Silk Road exchange, Sanskrit cosmopolitanism, maritime interaction, Chola networks, Persianate exchange, *Bhartiya*-Islamic cosmopolitanism, South (east) Asian localization, Indian Ocean commerce, diaspora continuity, etc. What emerges is not a territorial project but a relational civilizational geography. Ultimately, *Vishal Bharat* is best understood less as a claim over space than as a historical memory of connectivity.

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