
INTERPRETING NATIONALISM IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

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**ABSTRACT**

This article explores the issue of nationalism in the Indian context with a particular focus on the contemporary discourse. An effort has been made to explicate the ins and outs of the concept of nationalism and its types as identified by various scholars in the area. It is imperative to note that Indian nationalism as ingrained in the Constitution of India is essentially different from the nationalism adopted in the most monolithic countries of Europe and the Middle East. The contemporary nationalistic forces seem to invest efforts to consolidate the nationalistic identity of the country through discursive means. This article disambiguates the concept of nationalism and puts the Indian nationalistic vision in proper perspective.

KEYWORDS: Nationalism, identity, diversity, pluralism, Indianism

RESUMEN *Una interpretación del nacionalismo en el contexto indio*

Este artículo explora el tema del nacionalismo en el contexto indio, poniendo el foco en el discurso contemporáneo. En él se ha hecho un esfuerzo para explicar los vaivenes del concepto y los distintos tipos de nacionalismo tal y como lo han definido distintos académicos de este área. Es importante señalar que el nacionalismo indio tal y como se entiende en la Constitución de la India es esencialmente distinto del que se ha adoptado en los países más monolíticos de Europa y Oriente medio. Las fuerzas nacionalistas contemporáneas parecen concentrar sus esfuerzos en consolidar la identidad nacionalista del país mediante recursos discursivos. Este artículo aclara el concepto de nacionalismo y nos aproxima al significado de la visión nacionalista contemporánea.

Introduction

In the last few years, India has witnessed a fresh debate on nationalism and a lot of discourse has been cocooned around the issue. Seasoned with political motivation, this discordance on the topic of nationalism has ambiguated the nationalistic vision as ordained in the Constitution. The idea of nationalism is required to be disambiguated and explained in the light of the contemporary Indian perspective so that the Indian collective psyche can be saved from shallow political jingoism. The political and the intellectual arenas of the country seem to be divided on the question of nationalism. While proclaimed nationalists in the country invoke national

unity, supremacy, and a monolithic Indian identity, others emphasize diversity, multilingualism, multiculturalism, and at times, separate ethnic identities in India. The root cause of this disagreement is the lack of clarity and inherent ambiguity of the concept of nationalism as envisioned and understood.

Nationalism and its types

Benedict Anderson sees a nation as an “imagined political community” in which the individuals share with one another “deep, horizontal comradeship” (1983: 6-7). Gellner considers nationalism as “primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit be congruent” (Gellner, 1983:1). Some essential symbols, such as the national flag and the national anthem, reinforce the nationalistic sentiment and give it strength (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983:1-7). In all the three aforementioned sources nationalism is viewed as a construct of modern imaginary and its liberal and secular values are essentially incongruent with hierarchical forces such as religion and monarchy. But considering the fact that many states claim themselves to be totally religion-oriented, such as the Islamic nations of the Middle East, a slightly broader vision of the concept of nationalism is required. Therefore, an effort has been made to mention multiple types of nationalism as imagined and practiced in different parts of the world.

Unlike a country, a nation is more of a psychological than a geopolitical entity. An individual’s nationalistic identity is that to which he/she feels associated. Therefore, psychological affiliation is the foundation stone of a nation. Nationalism is a sentiment of oneness that binds large masses on the basis of shared identity. In this sense, people living in different parts of the world may belong to one nation. Geographical location is not an essential requirement but a desirable factor for the existence of a nation. Diaspora nationalism and especially Jewish nationalism before the formation of Israel are based on this very idea.

Nationalism is seen in many different ways leading to its multiple types and subtypes, such as ethnic, religious, linguistic, cultural, diaspora, civic and hybrid, etc. Ethnic nationalism is defined in terms of ethnicity, which may include shared language, traditions, religion and ancestry, and generally, it seeks validity on the grounds of ancestral homeland (Smith 1987: 134-138). Similarly, religious nationalism is based on the sentiment of shared religion or sects of religion, such as Islamic nationalism or Shia/Sunni nationalism (Xypolia, 2011:109-120). Mostly such nationalism is religio-political and is based on the claim of their authenticity,

divine right, and duty to fellow believers. Not very differently, the linguistic nationalists unite on the grounds of shared language and the cultural nationalists bind together on the grounds of a shared culture.

Cultural nationalism is based on a shared culture. Generally, people across ethnicities and religions inhabiting a geographical area share certain cultural values, traditions, and lifestyle. People's self-identification as a part of that particular culture makes them a member of such a nation. Cultural nationalism is neither purely ethnic nor purely civic as membership in a cultural nation is neither purely hereditary nor purely voluntary (Neilsen, 1999). Indian nationalism is mostly cultural nationalism. Post-colonial nationalism developed as agitation and mobilization against the European colonisers of the third-world countries of Asia and Africa. Such decolonised nations insist upon defining their own identities themselves and not as the colonisers view them (Chatterjee, 1993). In this sense, Indianism is partly postcolonial nationalism.

In civic nationalism, the state derives its legitimacy from the will of the people that they express through their active participation in electoral politics. This nationalism has its roots in the social contract theory proposed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his book *The Social Contract* (1762). The ideals of civic nationalism are equality, liberty, tolerance, and fraternity (Tamir, 1993; Miller, 1995) and it generally functions through representative democracy. The nationalisms of democratic countries like France and the USA are examples of this type of nationalism. Civic nationalism is essentially different and opposite to ethnic and religious nationalism and shares only a little space with cultural and postcolonial nationalism. Indian nationalism has the characteristics of civic nationalism also.

The concept of a nation can broadly be classified under two subtypes: *qaumi* (ethnic/sectarian) nationalism and *watni* (territorial) nationalism. The *qaumi* nationalism is based on shared ethnic and religious identity while *watni* nationalism is based on the shared political identity of a country/state. In *watni* nationalism, citizens feel a duty and commitment towards the nation they are born in or adopted by.

The western notion of nationalism is based on a shared ethnic and linguistic identity and the Islamic nationalism of the Middle East is based on a shared religious identity and all these versions of nationalism are *qaumi* in nature. Such nationalist doctrines often encourage xenophobia and an exaggerated pride in race and language (Haim, 1955: 124). This version of

nationalism gained popularity in the Islamic world more than anywhere else because Islam believes in the concept of the *umma* (Islamic brotherhood) and *milla* (tribal brotherhood) (ibid:131). Such a nationalism, though it consolidates quickly, is essentially divisive and can hold as long as the nation maintains a monolithic character. This divisiveness arises due to the fact that it is practically impossible to maintain a complete monolithic character in all *qaumi* factors such as religion, ethnicity, and language. Therefore, in the long run, such nations experience sectarianism and separatism on the grounds of ethnicity, religious sects, and language. Sectarian and ethnic separatist movements of Pakistan, the Amazigh movement of Algeria, and Kurdish separatist movements in several nations of the Middle East bear witness to this phenomenon.

The main force behind the formation of the nation of Pakistan was the Islamic mobilisation, though contradictorily it proclaimed itself to be a secular state at the time of its formation (Akturk, 2015). Very soon under the influence of Islamists, Pakistan redefined itself as an Islamic republic in 1956 and adopted Islamic laws through the Hudood Ordinance in 1977. Its religious nationalism could not keep its integrity intact and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) seceded on ethnic lines in 1971 after a violent civil war that claimed the lives of two hundred thousand (Bass, 2013) to thirty hundred thousand people (Alston, 2015: 40). Pakistan has continuously been experiencing violent ethnic separatist movements of Baloch, Sindhi, Pashtun, and Mohajir ethnic groups since it became an Islamic republic. A similar case is of the Kurdish separatist movements in different countries of the Middle East, and sectarian struggles between Shias and Sunnis across Islamic nations with a few exceptions. The *qaumi* nationalism is problematic as it teaches its adherents exclusionism, which in the long run becomes self-destructive. Exclusionism that starts from religion takes narrower definitions and causes sectarianism and separatism and a feeling of insecurity among people. It is generally observed that nations formed on *qaumi* lines often split and become small. Such nations are generally controlled by extremely strict laws and crushing armed forces. A big democratic nation with a lasting vision cannot be formed on these lines.

The *watni* version of nationalism suits the pluralistic character of big countries like India. This type of nationalism is not based on narrow ethnic or religious groups but is inspired by a bigger and broader identity of a nation that binds the people of multiple ethnic origins, sects, and regions together. National emblems of such nations are secular in character and give the message of fraternity and integration. Nationalism as ingrained in the constitution of India is

of this type. For people who understand the language of faith and familial relations better, the nation is imagined as a goddess or mother as Mother India. “How deeply ingrained has been the depiction of the homeland as a female body whose violation by foreigners requires its citizens and allies to rush to her defence” (Parker, Andrews et al., 1992: 6). For *watni* nationalists, the map and political identity of the nation hold supreme importance. In these nations, all citizens are treated equally and no special favour is given on the basis of ethnicity, caste, faith or language as such favouritism pushes the nation towards the aforesaid *qaumi* version and results in sectarianism in due course. Contribution to national progress only deserves acclamation in such a nation. With multiple types of reservations, personal laws, separate types of government control of religious properties, controversial laws about the promotion of minority religions, monetary and opportunity benefits on communal lines, India follows only a crude version of *watni* nationalism, though its ideal should be pure *watni* nationalism. The nation needs to reconsider whether political sectarianism is practiced under the garb of equanimity, and it needs to reconsider whether it should not free itself of all sectarianism and save the nationalistic ideals as ingrained in the Constitution.

Understanding Indian nationalism

Indian nationalism is territorial in nature and shares fundamental principles of civic nationalism, cultural nationalism, and postcolonial nationalism. The strength of the Indian nation lies in its *watni* character where narrow identities of religion, ethnicity, and language are always surmounted by a collective Indian identity and patriotic fervour. India is among those few nations that not only protect and preserve diversity but also celebrate it. People from almost any territory of India generally identify themselves with Indian culture and proudly claim its cultural legacy.

Indian cultural ethos is broad-based and all-encompassing and generally considers cultural and religious narrowness as foreign to its character. With multiple dharmas, religions and sects, hundreds of languages and dialects, multiple ethnicities, and a population of over 1400 million, India stands as a strong nation and one of the biggest democracies in the world. In the last 75 years since India got its present shape, India has successfully maintained its democratic character.

While the fact remains, India is a multilingual and multicultural nation with 121 major mother tongues (Census of India 2011) and representation of most major religions of the world

practiced with regional and cultural variations . This obvious diversity has not affected India's national integrity. In a country which houses 18 percent of the global population in 2.4 percent of total land of the world, occasional frictions, if they seldom arise, do not indicate sectarianism but results of overpopulation that causes many people to share small spaces and limited resources. The collective Indian psyche seems immune to divisive discourses of sectarianism and maintains its national integrity. This unity in diversity defines Indianism. Indianism comprises a sense of shared national identity, territorial integrity, national pride, together with a sense of ownership and belongingness not with just a community or region but with the entire country (explained in detail in Nehru 1946). Indianism is essentially Indian nationalism that can be contrasted with the idea of any ethnic nationalism. It must also be made clear that this concept of Indianism has nothing to do with American aboriginal movements which also have similar names.

In the past few years, India witnessed some debate on the word nationalism. While one political agency claims nationalism to be its political philosophy, the other political agency claims that India is not a nation but a union of states. By saying so, the latter seems to dismiss the existence of the sentiment of nationalism and its relevance in India. The agencies that deny the existence of India being a nation seem to deny the fundamental duties given in Part IV-A of the constitution of India, which focuses on patriotism and respect for national emblems. Their reduction to insignificance in electoral politics also shows that most Indians do not agree with them.

The existence of the sentiment of nationalism can best be understood in the light of and in reaction to some chronic provocation that threatens the welfare of the in-group (Handman 1921: 105). Indian people have been experiencing chronic threat and provocation earlier from the British colonizers and after independence from China and Pakistan. These circumstances consolidated India's nationalistic sentiments. In the previous few decades, there had been some futile efforts to sow the idea of multiple nations in India but such an idea could not catch people's imagination and died a natural death as common Indians generally believe in a pan Indian nationalism which is Indianism.

When we consider the cultural aspect of Indian nationalism, we realise that Indian nationalism is based on a strong base of shared culture. Despite all diversity, India has a shared cultural ethos. The cultural ethos of India is anchored upon the utmost respect for parents, teachers and

guests as said in *Taittiriya Upanaishad* that parents, teachers, and guests are venerable.¹ Various sects, faiths, and schools of thought exist in India as the Indian spiritual ethos believes that there is one God, and different scholars describe Him in many ways² (Rigveda, Mandal 1, Sukta No. 164, Richa No. 46). The Indian pluralistic co-existence is not strange for a country whose spiritual psyche is taught in the familial relationship among the entire human race, and which considers the entire earth as a family³ and nothing on earth devoid of the divine glow,⁴ though monolithic cultures, such as those of the west and the Middle East, may sometimes find such a notion strange and problematic (as is the case with Hatcher, 1994). To understand the mixed cultural ethos of India, one is required to observe that many Hindus in India celebrate Christmas and many Christians celebrate Diwali; many Hindus visit Muslim Dargahs as pilgrims and many Christians of Kerala celebrate Onam and worship Mahabali like Hindus; and Sikhs, Sanatanis, Jains and Baudhs share many festivals and pilgrimages. Sikhs, to whom service of mankind is supreme, can be seen distributing food during the festivals of other religions also. The essential unity despite obvious diversity in India can be understood when one listens to the popular shabad kirtan of Gurubani as sung mainly by Sikhs that says that God created all from the same light, therefore, all are equal and nobody is superior or inferior.⁵ Interestingly, the verse is casketed in *Guru Granth Sahib* of Sikhs, though it is composed by Kabir, who was a Muslim by birth and a disciple of a Hindu sanyasi. Basically, Indian nationalism celebrates Indian culture with all its plurality and glorifies its national heroes from across the religious and cultural spectra. All religions that grew, flourished and took refuge in India are part and parcel of Indian culture and all proudly hold the national flag of India. Many including the Supreme Court of India are of the view that the word Hinduism denotes the culture of the country and a way of life. A broad definition of Hindu as social and spiritual culture encompasses not only all the spiritual offshoots of Sanatana such as Jainism, Buddhism,

¹ मातृ देवो भवा, पितृ देवो भवा, आचार्य देवो भवा, अतिथि देवो भव. (तैत्तिरीय उपनिषद्, 1.11.2)

May the mother be to thee a God. May the father be to thee a God. May the Guru be to thee a God. May the guest be to thee a God. (Taittiriya Upanishad 1.11.2)

² एकं सद्भिर्ग्रा बहुधा वदन्ति

God is one and the wise call Him by many names (Rigveda, 1. 164. 46)

³ अयं निजः परो वैति गणना लघुचेतसाम् । उदारस्वरितानान्तु वसुधैव कुटुम्बकम् ॥ (पञ्चतन्त्र, पंचम तंत्र, “अपरीक्षितकारकम्)

The world is seen in the dual colours of ‘this is mine and that is other’ by those who are ignorant. The generous and the broad-minded know that the entire world is a family. (Panchtantra, Fifth Tantra)

⁴ ईशा वास्यमिदं सर्वं यत्किञ्च जगत्यां जगत्।

God resides in everything that you see in the world. (Ishawasyopnishada, Verse 1)

⁵ अब्बल अल्लाह नूर उपाया कुदरत के सब बंदे, एक नूर ते सब जग उपजाया कौन भले को मंदे ।

First God created light and then all beings from the same light; hence, all are equal and nobody is superior or inferior. (Kabir Das)

Sikhism, Shaivism, Vaishnavism, Shaktism but also those who took refuge in India and embraced its culture such as Zoroastrianism and homebred converts of the religions of non-Indian origin. Interestingly the entire world sees our culture as Hindu/Hindi as Europe calls us Indian (English), Indio/India (Spanish) Indisch (German), indien/ indienne (French) which are all derived from the phonetic variations of the word Hindu. Arabs call Indians *hindiun*, Persian speakers *Hindi*, and Turkish speakers call Indians *Hintli*. Around 80% of the total population of India is Hindu by culture and by religion and those who follow other religions are still culturally Hindustani. Therefore, Indian nationalism is basically Indianism which seeks spiritual inspiration and moral strength from everything culturally Indian and resists foreign influences. The freedom struggle that sculpted its post-colonial spirit taught the Indian nationalists to resist the cultural onslaught of its invaders and colonial powers that subjugated and demeaned it for long centuries in the past.

Conclusion

The analysis leads to the conclusion that Indian nationalism is basically Indianism which is not monolithic in character unlike the religious nationalism of most countries in the Middle East. Indianism is essentially territorial and shares features with cultural, civic, and postcolonial nationalism. Indianism is partly civic as it derives its political legitimacy from the will of the people expressed through their participation in electoral politics. Indian nationalism is guided by the civic principles of equality, liberty, and fraternity. The postcolonial character of Indian nationalism is expressed in its glorification of the freedom struggle, its national heroes, and resistance to foreign influence. Indianism is mainly cultural nationalism as it celebrates everything Indian and sees its rainbow-coloured culture as a unified national culture. It may be difficult for a person with a monolithic vision of nationalism to understand Indianism which is essentially pluralistic and orchestrates one single vision with hardly any note of discordance.

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