

## NATION AND NATIONALISM: AN INQUIRY INTO THE CONTRASTING VISIONS AND PERSPECTIVES

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### ABSTRACT

The research paper is an attempt to explore the range, perspectives and characteristics of the concepts of Nation and Nationalism. It is not as easy as it seems at initial stage to encompass the vast field of nation and nationalism, yet an attempt will be made to comprehend and examine the discourses of these concepts that have permanent impact on the lives of people directly or indirectly.

**KEYWORDS:** Nationalism, India, Nation

### INTRODUCTION

Nation and nationalism have always been complicated and inscrutable terms. At this juncture, old binaries are crumbling and in addition to that the proliferation of the concepts like globalization, transnationalism, capitalism, market driven forces, marginalization, consumerism have created the need to redefine identities and boundaries related to the given subject. These forces and ideologies are interfering and invading the certitudes of nation and nationalism. In the tempestuous uncertainties where on one hand the world is becoming increasingly footloose and on the other hand the ghosts of pristine identities hound the same euphoric and hyped cosmopolitanism. By and large, the question of eschewing nations and nationalism is a focal point in contemporary literature.

Nation and nationalism are entangled in bewildering contradictions. These concepts are at the same time cohesive and divisive: cohesive in the sense that they bring together people of one land/unit to live in a bond of solidarity; divisive since they thrive by sustaining difference from and antagonism against the 'other'. One can easily observe the in built contradictions in these concepts. They are progressive as well as retrogressive. They are primordial as well as modern, primordial because they are expressive of the innate human need for collective existence, and modern as they are also linked with the passing away of the old religious dynastic order and tradition.

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In the given situation, it becomes significant to study the rapidly changing contours of nationalism and comprehend its implications for the rapidly changing behavior of the people. Nation and nationalism are unavoidable phenomena in highly historical developments of mankind which also include colonialism, imperialism and conquest on the one hand and neo-colonialism, diaspora and globalization on the other. They can only be understood in relation to all these developments.

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In the last few decades, the discussion is going on how to define nation and nationalism in the contemporary era. Ranabir Samaddar observes in *The Nation Form: Essays on Indian Nationalism*:

In the last 34 years the discussions on nations and nationalism displaced discussions on class, and save in few cases, writers on the nation form divorced their discussions on class, labour, peasantry, and all other material existence in order to perch their discussions on cultural significations. Its roots were of course in good old Gellner, who while pointing out industrialism as the main factor behind the emergence of the nation form, brought in the question of modernity almost as a self-explanatory term. Then came writers and historians such as Anthony Smith, Hobsbawm and others, who relied, if at all, on East European experiences as instances (outside the Western metropolitan core) of nations representing freedom from external domination. (xx)

In the last century, revolutionary uprisings, Fascism, Nazism and fall of Soviets has compelled to re understand the concept of nation and nationalism. There are a number of statements that reacted against Americanization of the global world. In Europe or in Asian subcontinent, people are fighting against imperialistic domination of political economy. In this connection Philip Spencer rightly comments in his book *Nations and Nationalism: A Reader* that the studies on nationalism are still relevant today and nation and nationalism has emerged as a centre point in literature in recent years, "Whilst it would be inaccurate to suggest that interest in the topic had ever flagged, or that it had ever become marginal, there has undoubtedly been a real revival over the past twenty or thirty years, with contributions (some from perhaps surprising quarters) which have significantly altered the terms of debate and discussion" (1). It is this revival over the past twenty or thirty years of nation and nationalism, that is the topic of discussion and there is a need to inquire into the contrasting visions and perspectives.

It is very complex but, at the same time very significant to define the term Nation historically. The definition of nation has been rapidly changing its shape. But in the late nineteenth century French Orientalist Ernest Renan defined nation in a lecture 'What is a Nation' in 1882, which was relatively more relevant. The lecture has been published in Bhabha's (1990) book *Nation and Narration*:

Nations ... are something fairly new in history. Antiquity was unfamiliar with them; Egypt, China and ancient Chaldea were in no way nations. They were flocks led by a Son of the Sun or by a Son of Heaven. Neither in Egypt nor in China were there citizens as such. Classic antiquity had republics, municipal kingdoms, confederations of local republics and empires, yet it can hardly be said to have had nations in our understanding of the term. Athens, Sparta, Tyre and Sidon were small centers imbued with the most admirable patriotism, but they were simply cities with a relatively restrictive territory. Gaul, Spain and Italy, prior to their absorption by the Roman Empire, were collections of class, which were often allied among themselves but had no central institutions and no dynasties. (9)

According to the understanding of Renan, nation is the result of disintegration of the classic and medieval empires.

In the book *Nationalism Without a Nation in India*, Aloysius points out that the meaning of the term nation is very complex, "It may refer to an entity forming a part of the compound concept of nation-state, or to a linguistic ethnic community struggling for its own statehood; again it may refer to a relationship that exists or is presumed to exist between individuals and groups with either equality or common cultural bond as the basis of common political consciousness" (10).

The concept of nation cannot be understood in isolation because it has never existed beyond specific contexts. Almost all the critics and thinkers agree to the fact that 'nation' is a construct and not a neutral and natural entity. Through the ideology of nationalism, it is attempted to create exclusive and homogenous conception of national identities. Therefore, it becomes a location of power and hegemony.

The concept of nationalism is also one of the most significant and debate able issues of the contemporary era. A lot of critical and theoretical work has been done on it but still it needs a considerable attention. While there is significant debate over the historical origins of nations, nearly all scholars and critics from different locations accept that nationalism, at least as an ideology and social movement, is a modern phenomenon originating in Europe. Precisely, it is difficult to determine where and when it has emerged, but its development is closely related to that of the modern state and the push for popular sovereignty that has been instigated by the American and French Revolutions in the late eighteenth century.

During that time nationalism was mainly the historically studied area. But now it has attained considerable attention from the philosophers, sociologists, psychologists, geographers, economists and many others. After the middle of nineteenth century, nationalism has become one of the most significant political and social forces in history, perhaps most notably as a cause of both the First and Second World Wars. After that, many theoreticians from varied disciplines observed the prominence of the concept of nationalism and started investigating the narratives from different points of view. John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith rightly observe in the book *Nationalism* that nationalism spills over into many number of cognate subjects such as race and racism, fascism, language development, political religion, communalism, ethnic conflict, international law, protectionism, minorities, gender, immigration, genocide, "The forms that nationalism takes have been kaleidoscopic: religious, conservative, liberal, fascist, communist, cultural, political, protectionist, integrationist, separatist, irredentist, diaspora, pan etc. The fluidity and variety of national sentiments, national aspirations, and national cultural values create another obstacle to systematic research, as do the many differences in national identities" (3).

John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith comment that, “The links between war and nationalism were amply underlined by the central part played by nationalism in the two World Wars.... The Second World War also served to underline the centrality of nationalism” (10). The Nazism in Germany developed because of the construction of absolute national ideals and ethnic ties. They further describe the dark face of nationalism in the western countries. It may be possible that state-based nationalism turns easily into imperialism and colonialism, for example, the aggressive colonization by French, British, Dutch and Portuguese annexations during the nineteenth century to exploit markets and export capital.

Partha Chatterjee writes in his essay “Whose Imagined Community? (1991)” about the emergence of the nationalism as a dangerous sentiment for the whole world. Especially after the 1970s, nationalism seems to be a matter of ethnic politics. The third world people started killing each other in wars or as an act of terrorism:

Nationalism has once more appeared on the agenda of world affairs. Almost every day, state leaders and political analysts in Western countries declare that with ‘the collapse of communism’(that is the term they use; what they mean is presumably the collapse of Soviet socialism), the principal danger to world peace is now posed by the resurgence of nationalism in different parts of the world... This recent genealogy of the idea explains why nationalism is now viewed as a dark, elemental, unpredictable force of primordial nature threatening the orderly calm of civilized life. (23)

However, in 1950s and 1960s, nationalism was still regarded as a feature of victorious anticolonial struggles in Asia and Africa.

The rapid social changes proved that the system of thinking had been drastically changing because it had happened for the first time in the history that working class captured the complete political power. The period between Paris commune to Russian Revolution (1917) and up to Second World War is marked by many ups and downs that never allows the people to think in a linear way. At the end of the 19th century, Marxists and other thinkers produced political analysis that were critical of the nationalist movements then active in central and eastern Europe though a variety of other contemporary socialists and communists, from Lenin to Józef Piłsudski, were more sympathetic to national self-determination. According to the Marxists philosophy, the class conscious people throughout the world would unite the socialists in all countries and therefore, it was expected that the force of internationalism underlying the communist movement, would compete with and weaken the force of nationalism. To some extent these hopes were fulfilled but in unexpected circumstances. Marx and Engels consider and emphasize the concept of nation and nationalism within the scheme of base and superstructure. They appealed that the concept should be understood and analyzed with reference to class struggle. The class interest may not be ignored while comprehending these concepts. Some of the national movements could not succeed due to the class homogeneity.

Another view point is that nationalism is also a philosophy of the state. According to this philosophical understanding of nationalism the nation-state is intended to guarantee the existence of a nation, to preserve its distinct identity, and to provide a territory where the national culture and ethos are dominant. It appears that a nation-state is a necessity for each nation: secessionist national movements often complain about their second-class status as a minority within another nation. This specific understanding about the nation means that the duties of the state decided all the functionability of a nation like the national education systems, often teaching a standard curriculum, national cultural policy, and national language policy. In turn, nation-states appeal to a national cultural-historical mythos to justify their existence, and to confer political legitimacy - acquiescence of the population in the authority of the government.

Most of the time in the history, Nationalism is used as a derogatory force for political parties, or they may use it themselves as a euphemism for xenophobia, even if their policies are no more specifically nationalist, than other political parties in the same country. In Europe, some 'nationalist' anti-immigrant parties have a large electorate, and are represented in parliament. Smaller but highly visible groups also self-identify as 'nationalist', although it may be a euphemism for neo-Nazis or white supremacists. Activists in other countries are often referred to as ultra-nationalists, with a clearly pejorative meaning.

Nationalism is a component of other political ideologies, and in its extreme form, Fascism. However, it is not accurate to simply describe Fascism as a more extreme form of nationalism. Nor is it generally correct to describe non-extreme nationalism as a lesser form of fascism. Fascism in the general sense was marked by a strong sense of state nationalism whereas political parties today like the British National Party tended to have a concept of ethnic nationalism, often combined with a form of economic and ethical socialism. That was certainly evident in Nazism. However, the geopolitical aspirations of Adolf Hitler are probably better described as imperialist and, to a lesser degree, colonialist because Nazi Germany ultimately ruled over vast areas where there was no historic German presence with intentions to eventually populate many of the conquered territories with ethnic Germans. The Nazi state was so different from the typical European nation-state, that it required a category of its own.

Nationalism does not necessarily imply a belief in the superiority of one race over others, but in practice, many nationalists support racial protectionism or racial supremacy. Such racism is typically based upon preference or superiority of the indigenous race of the nation, but not always. For example, in the United States, non-indigenous racial nationalist movements exist for both black and white races. These forms of nationalism often promote or glorify foreign nations that they believe can serve as an example for their own nation. Though such movements were inspired by such form of nationalism but in actual sense they wished to become a part of power and state. The example of Indian Independence and the phenomenon of Dalit movement by Ambedkar can be taken.

In this so called post-national era, dominated by the global forces of multinational companies, corporate power blocs, consumerist culture, explosion of borderless information technology, it seems that the purpose to create a feeling of nationalism is becoming immaterial and irrelevant. But due to the forces of unrecognized and unsatisfied ethnic societies, coarse economic disparity, and globalization of the market and not of labour, the pristine identities are foregrounding rapidly. It seems that it is a neo colonial era, so much so that these forces are disturbing regional and global peace. The explosion of information technology brings the postindustrial era. In this era, an attempt is made to legitimize the exploitation of the corporate houses and multinational companies. In this era, the concept of nation and nationalism becomes cultural rather than patriotic. Therefore, to some extent, the political imperialism is replaced by the economic imperialism.

Nation and nationalism have diverse connotations for different genders. Feminists consider the term nation and nationalism as essentially masculinized entities and the role of women in national movements is considered minor and symbolic. Men are considered the real force behind the nationalist movements, freedom and honour. It is a historical reality that women have been excluded from the process of nation building. Virginia Woolf has extensively reacted in *Three Guineas*, "as a woman, I have no country, I want no country. As a woman, my country is the whole world" (129). Similarly some classes, races and ethnicities have also been excluded from the construction of nation. The exclusion of women from the nationalist canon was a product of the belief that women's lives were confined to the domestic sphere. Feminist

theorists have argued that this absence of women from the work and thinking of these discourses indicate their gender blindness or, at worst, their gender chauvinism. They argue that the result of this gender exclusion has been to render invisible women's hands in the making of nations and states.

In order to understand the peculiarities of nationalism of a particular nation, one needs to emphasize some specific characteristics of nationalism. For example as Tom Nairn, a Marxian thinker provides the materialistic explanation of the romantic nationalism. Nationalism attracts the educated middle class and mobilizes interclass support. He takes the example of India that independence of the country politically is merely the transfer of power and not much change happened. According to him, "the others, the majority, saw themselves excluded from the action, rather than invited politely to join in, trampled over rather than taught the rules of the game; exploited rather than made partners" (74).

Indian intellectuals fashioned ideologies of religious activism to mobilize the masses against British rule. The *Bhagavad-Gita* was redefined and reappropriated as a nationalist text. The cults of Kali and mother goddesses were exploited for political ends. It was propagated that *Kali* needed the sacrifices of white goats at every new moon. The direct message to the youth of India was to go abroad and learn manufacturing of weapons and bombs and come back to their mother country and kick out the Britishers. Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950) in a lecture which was published in 1908 represented the significance of the presence of God in nation and fellow countrymen, "We are trying to realize Him in the three hundred millions of our people. We are trying to live not for our interests, but to work and to die for others. When a young worker in Bengal has to go to jail, when he is asked to suffer, he does not feel any pang in that suffering, he does not fear suffering" (6). It would be deceptive to say that Asian/European Nationalism is evil or constructive. The fact of the matter is that nationalism is neither a blessing nor an evil in itself. But the fact of the matter is that it is an essential spirit to make people stand up for regaining their lost freedom. The different elements involved in the strategy and struggle may be according to the enemy. It is a kind of sentiment which has good or bad outcome according to good or bad forces of circumstances.

## CONCLUSIONS

Nation and nationalism have always been complicated and inscrutable terms. At this juncture, old binaries are crumbling and in addition to that the proliferation of the concepts like globalization, transnationalism, capitalism, market driven forces, marginalization, consumerism have created the need to redefine identities and boundaries related to the given subject. In the tempestuous uncertainties where on one hand the world is becoming increasingly footloose and on the other hand the ghosts of pristine identities hound the same euphoric and hyped cosmopolitanism. By and large, the question of eschewing nations and nationalism is a focal point in contemporary literature.

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After discussing the various theories given by the different scholars from various locations and positions, it would be deceptive to say that Asian/European Nationalism is evil or constructive. The fact of the matter is that nationalism is neither a blessing nor an evil in itself. But the fact of the matter is that it is an essential spirit to make people stand up for regaining their lost freedom. The different elements involved in the strategy and struggle may be according to the enemy.

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