

Indian Nation as an Idea Determined Time to Time

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Paper Received on 02-08-2022

Accepted on 06-09-2022

Published on 15-09-22

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2022.4.9.14

Abstract

The present paper argues that India is not a timeless nation-state rather it has been constructed by various ideological claims in specific historical times. Even the concept of a nation is an idea perpetuated in modern times. The terms nation, nationality, and nationalism are also coined in modern times to perpetuate the idea of a nation by various political discourses. Many nations emerge against the colonialism and many to become independent communities. India also goes through such phases of history in which it has to redefine itself against the British denigration of it. It passes through the various other historical factors also, such as Hindu cultural nationalism, struggle for freedom, Independence etc. All these factors have been examined in the present paper to understand Indian nation.

Keywords: Nation, Nationality, Nationalism, India

India is projected as an eternal nation by the votaries of Hindu cultural nationalism, but history shows that the concept of nation itself is modern. Even the words, such as *nation*, *nationality* and *nationalism*, are not so old. India as a nation is a historical formation shaped by socio-cultural and material conditions. Elements like caste, religion, culture, colonialism, postcolonialism, modernity, technological development, language, politics, etc. all mark the origins and development of India as a nation. In his book, *The Indian Ideology*, Perry Anderson remarks:

The principal carrier of the ideology is the liberal mainstream of Indian intellectual life. There, British influences dating from the Raj have been increasingly replaced by American variants, as the United States becomes the land of consumer reference for the Indian middle class, and of principal academic location for scholars of the diaspora. (3-4)

Partha Chatterjee notes that a standard nationalist history tells us that nationalism began in India in 1885 with the formation of Indian National Congress (*The Nation* 5). Perry Anderson points that the Congress was not originally Indian because it was founded “by a group of lawyers whose leading light was an Englishman, [and it] remained for some time a pressure-group of notables seeking no more than colonial self-government” (15-16). But, no doubt, the formation of Indian National Congress has played a major role in perpetuating a nationalist discourse. Although Mahatma Gandhi had no experience of Indian political life, yet gradually became a leader of the Congress Party. He was well educated, a good and quick orator, a successful organizer and fund-raiser, and a diligent, efficient political worker; so he played a major role in consolidating the Congress. But, Perry Anderson adds, he “injected a massive dose of religion – mythology, symbology, theology – into the national movement” (22). Perry Anderson further notes that his great achievement was “the creation of a nationalist party” (45).

Indian nationalism is partly the result of anti-colonial consciousness which was used strategically by Hindu cultural nationalists as much as by Gandhi and other Congressmen. The struggle for freedom by nationalists contributed to nationalism. Indian nationalism also developed in opposition to the Western denigration of Indian culture and people. Many writings, such as *The Renaissance in India and Other Essays on Indian Culture* (1918-21) by Sri Aurobindo, *Hind Swaraj* (1908-09) by Mahatma Gandhi, *The Discovery of India* (1946) by Jawaharlal Nehru were aimed at establishing the idea of India as a strong nation equal to any other nation in terms of glory. Partha Chatterjee comments:

The more nationalism emerged in its contest with the colonial power in the outer domain of politics, the more it insisted on displaying the marks of “essential” cultural difference so as to keep out the colonizer from that inner domain of national life and to proclaim its sovereignty over it. (*The Nation* 26)

Another decisive figure in the Indian National Congress was Jawaharlal Nehru. He was mentored by Mahatma Gandhi. Nehru had socialist leanings and a modern bent of mind, and he proposed major changes for development in independent India. He said often that he is not a believer and that the rituals of Hinduism had little or no meaning for him. But as Perry Anderson perceptively remarks: “[I]n much the same artless way as Gandhi, he identified the religion with the nation” (54) as he often explains in *The Discovery of India*, Hinduism as the symbol of nationalism and declares it as a national religion.

The establishment of the Indian republic after the partition was a major stage in the evolution of the idea of India as a nation-state. Perry Anderson observes that the formation of the Indian nation-state practically ignored the Indian masses:

The legacy of the Raj was not confined to them. Alongside its machinery of administration and coercion, Congress inherited its traditions of representation. The Constituent Assembly that gave India its constitution was a British-created body dating from 1946, for which only one out of seven of the subjects of the Raj had been allowed to vote. Once independence was granted, Congress could have called for new elections, with universal adult suffrage. No doubt fearing the outcome might be less convenient than the conclave to hand, in which since partition it controlled 95 per cent of seats, it took care not to do so. No election on an expanded franchise was held till 1951-52. The body that created Indian democracy was thus itself not an expression of it, but of the colonial restrictions that preceded it. (106)

The reason, according to Perry Anderson, was that the major ruling political party, Congress, was under the control of the elite; the common people had no voice, though the Congress formally projected an idea of India to conceal the ground reality.

The Congress Working Committee was organized by Nehru and others in 1937 to plan for the nation. Its functions were to determine state policy, the technical evolution of alternative policies and determination of choices of scientific grounds, and to resolve the political debate about the Congress leadership. Thus, “. . . the very institution of a process of planning became a means for the determination of priorities on behalf of the “nation” (Chatterjee, *The Nation* 201-02).

Hindu nationalism played a major role in the development of the idea of India as a nation. Many leading Hindu cultural nationalists were highly educated and had easy access to the means of communication which helped to disseminate the discourse of nationalism. Cultural nationalists like Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Sri Aurobindo and V.D. Savarkar worked long and hard for the cause of nationalism. They wrote about India, Indian people, religion and culture and developed a discourse that glorified Indian civilization. At the same time they actively participated in the freedom struggle for what they called ‘Mother India’. The most important organization of Hindu nationalists Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS) was founded in Maharashtra in the mid 1920s. Chetan Bhatt observes that “there was a strong degree of political continuity between ‘Hinduised’ versions of ‘Indian’ nationalism and the specific ideology of Hindutva that emerged in the 1920s” (4).

Hindu cultural nationalists interpreted major religious texts, such as *Vedas*, *Upanishads* and *Gita*, as the symbols of Indian culture, *dharma* and nation. They exhorted people to follow the divine message of the texts, wrote for the religion, and gave nationalist interpretations of these texts. For them, religious texts

illustrated not simply the religious and (frequently) ‘racial’ unity of its past, but pre-eminently its national unity, as *Aryavarata* (the land of Aryans) or *Bharatvarsha* (the Kingdom of Bharat), the Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas and the epics illustrated that ancient Hindu civilization possessed not simply a cultural and moral greatness, but a highly developed ethical system, polity, civil society and social formation. (12)

Many Hindu cultural nationalists started their own schools of Hinduism which further contributed to the nationalist discourse. They “employed conceptions of Aryanism within their various ideas of patriotism and loyalty to the monarch, religious reinvigoration, or reformist or revolutionary nationalism” (14). Dayanand Saraswati founded The Arya Samaj. Besides Bal Gangadhar Tilak’s conflation of religion with nationalism (he worshiped Ganesha and adored Shivaji), the activities of Brahma Samaj, Rajnarain’s Hindu Maha Samiti, the extremely influential annual ‘Jati Mela’ later renamed as ‘Hindu Mela’, Chandranath Basu’s efforts to relate the term *Hindutva* with Indian History, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya’s writings and the establishment of RSS in 1920s all worked to mix Hinduism and Indian nationalism.

The religion-based census of 1881 and the legislating of Hinduism by forming the ‘Hindu Code’ in 1955-56 made Hinduism nationalized or nationalism Hinduised. Vasudha Dalmia remarks that after the legislation

[t]he term ‘Hindu’ [came] to be applied to every person who could not be proved to adhere to a religion of non-Indic origin, forming thereby one great legal community and setting up a presumption that persons domiciled in India were governed by Hindu law, unless some exception was established. (15)

She further adds: “ The category ‘Hindu’ played a double role: internally, it stood for moral order, and externally, for religious difference and a measure of political autonomy vis-à-vis the succession of imperial cultures with their seat in Delhi” (19).

The Hinduised political party Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was founded out of Jan Sangh in 1980. The favourable conditions of the time gave it a chance to emerge as a major political party. Perry Anderson observes that it was helped by “. . . the death of Indira Gandhi; the ensuing pogrom in Delhi, applauded by her son; the ballooning corruption around Rajiv Gandhi, and its generalization with the neoliberal turn under Narsimha Rao” (148). The BJP called upon the Indians to reclaim their past civilization, culture and identity.

The idea of India underwent major transformation in the 1990s as the country's politics and economy embraced neoliberalism. Open market, growth in information and technology, and privatization rapidly changed India into a global marketplace. Gurcharan Das’s book *India Unbound* is largely an argument in favour of the neoliberal idea of India. On the other hand, Arundhati Roy’s essays offer a strong contestation of this idea.

In other words, the idea of India is not static; it has been changing with time. There is no essential, immutable idea of India. So there is no exhaustive definition possible of India either. The historical and material conditions define a particular idea of India. Though the geographical place remains the same, but the idea of India is a dynamic one, dependent on the changing historically determined ideological needs.

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