

Perspective

Nationalism and Nation building: the idea of post-modern India

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Significance of nationalism is rapidly changing in this global age. Globalisation threatens sovereignty of nation states and renders them vulnerable to forces that they cannot effectively control. In this global age nationalism is tending to become an outmoded concept. Yet, India needs to redefine its nationalism to suit this global age. Although non state actors have gained salience in global geopolitics, nation states have a vital role to play in global governance. We need the existing system of nation states to coordinate their actions and cooperate with each other to confront the new challenges that might threaten national and global security. India has to become a strong and smart nation state to be able to nudge the world to a vision of coexistence and cooperation. And as the nation state demands a culture that requires citizens to transcend their cultural moorings to work for goals that promote the collective interests of the nation state, the ideology of nationalism retains its salience in this postmodern age. We only need to reinterpret nationalism to suit contemporary global and local concerns.

A new interpretation of nationalism has to take account of the pressures to open up nations to global economic, political and social influences. The classical notion of sovereignty needs revision. National sovereignty cannot be based on state monopolising violence and coercing its citizens into submission. The state has to rely on its communicative and persuasive capabilities to nudge citizens as well as other nation states towards the goals it charts out. A smart state works like a default computer program that ensures maximum scope for private initiatives and enterprise even as they conform to the tacit goals set by the state. The state has to set regulatory norms and set up appropriate institutions that monitor social and economic affairs. The state has to deliver on the expanding array of citizens' rights efficiently in order to retain its legitimacy. Like commercial banks would dramatically collapse when its customers lose faith in their work and queue up to take back their deposits, in this age of digital media that enables almost instantaneous mobilisation of people, a state can lose its legitimacy if it does not deliver on its promises to its citizens. To retain legitimacy the citizens should share the vision and goals; an ideology of nationalism that suits the global age is required.

Indian nationalism has to be inclusive and at the same time accommodate and promote multiculturalism. It should cater to values of universalism even as it nourishes its cultural endowments to meet national aspirations. Indian nationalism should also be sufficiently non-threatening to fit into the system of global interdependence and induce cooperation from other nation states that do not necessarily share its priorities and goals. Indian nationalism has to be

relevant to the emerging global order and at the same time cater to its indigenous cultural aspirations to ensure that India can take advantage of its unique heritage to influence world affairs.

India has a heightened national significance in the emerging global gestalt. Contemporary geopolitics induces insecurities that tempt nation states to shut out external influences and pressures incline nation states to opt for totalitarian governance by taking advantage of advances in information technology and artificial intelligence to create a virtual panopticon on its citizens. However, mega national corporations that can, if they choose, refuse to accept the jurisdiction of nation states within which they operate have the expertise and knowledge to upturn the nation state system of governance. It is comforting that these private corporations after all have invested in economic growth and global prosperity, and prefer to work within the ambit of global governance that nation states have evolved. There is the lurking danger that such knowledge and expertise could fall into the hands of outfits espousing fundamentalist bigotry. Imagine the consequences of Space X programme being taken over by proxies of fundamentalist outfits. These are no longer possibilities on which science fiction writers speculate; they are in the realm of probabilistic realm of contemporary geopolitics. India, as one of the larger economic systems in the world, enjoying its much publicised advantage of demographic dividend can exert its weighty influence on the global political system to ward off such security threats to nudge nation states towards the ideals of democracy and good governance. India has to shed its reticence to assume a leadership role in world affairs by exerting the soft power it has accumulated by its political stability and economic performance. To renege from this leadership role today amounts to reneging on the trust in the world has placed on democracy and pluralism.

In order to assume a leadership role India has to generate a national vision that has global appeal even as it enthuses its citizens to work for shared national goals. Indian nationalism should be non-threatening and synergise with the aspirations of other nation states, especially of the smaller ones.

To assume a role in the world order, India has to keep its own house in order, as it were. Although India as a nation state has attained a degree of stability, in the contemporary world it cannot afford to be complacent. Kashmir and Nagaland separatism are still festering and the maoist insurgency in the tribal forested belt stretching across Bihar, Jharkhand, Chattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and some parts of Andhra Pradesh persist. Of late, cultural trends in Tamilnadu to distinguish tamil culture as distinct from Hinduism which is being increasingly associated with north Indian are becoming prominent in politics. In Karnataka too, a social movement is gaining momentum to claim that Lingayat beliefs and practices propagated by saint Basava as constituting a distinct non-Hindu religion. Karnataka government is also engaged in carving out a distinct Kannada identity by endorsing a separate flag for the State. Gone are the days when some prominent political leaders of the former Mysore State were resisting the merger of Kannada speaking areas of the coastal belt, of Maharashtra and Hyderabad into a larger Karnataka. These movements for distinct collective identities should alert us to need to redefine nationalism in accordance with social change to meet emerging cultural aspirations. These movements of cultural differentiation are operating at the level of States but the Hindutva movement has become a major agenda in the Indian political

discourse.

Hindutva nationalism gained prominence when the Congress party claiming to be wedded to 'secularism' exploited religious sentiments for cynical short term political gains. The BJP succeeded in terming Congress party's secularism as pseudo secularism and another word for the appeasement of the religious minorities. The party's later attempts to rectify its tilt by kindling the Ayodhya dispute and by launching its election campaign from Ayodhya merely ensured that the fruits of its efforts fell right into the laps of the BJP which set out a campaign to build a Ram temple on the site of Rama's birth place by dismantling, if necessary the Babri masjid that is said to have been built there. The BJP's hindutva campaign gained such political traction that political parties, including the CPM, took precautions not to make remarks that could be interpreted as hurting Hindu religious sentiments.

The ascendance of Hindutva is also partly the outcome of the global ascendance of religious fundamentalisms, especially of the Jihadi terror unleashed by the Al Qaeda with its 9/11 attacks on the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York and on Pentagon. Islamic fundamentalist movements took on truly global proportions by converting secular nationalist movements in Palestine, Chechnya and Kashmir into Islamic movements. Terrorist attacks in Jammu and Kashmir, on the Parliament and on the city of Mumbai on November 26th 1998 and the mass mobilisation of Muslims all over the world in the wake of offending cartoon in the newspaper Charlie Hebdo in France only served to promote the Hindutva cause by indirectly demonising Muslims and decrying discrimination in favour of minority religions. The global spread of Islamophobia has had much to do with the ascendance of Hindutva. Although the Hindus constitute an overwhelming majority of the population in India, instances of jihadi terrorism and proclamation from Islamic fundamentalist organisations that India has to be reclaimed for Islam lend credence to Hindu insecurities.

Hindutva ideologues defend their ideology as an attempt to unify Hindus who constitute 80 per cent of the population. They claim that the Congress adopted a divide and rule policy by using the politics of caste based reservations to divide the Hindu votes on caste lines. Actually, the policy of caste based reservations which was part of Ambedkar's strategy of promoting social equality promoted national unity by converting even the oppressed and excluded castes and tribes into stakeholders of Indian democracy. But the strategy also produced some recursive trends. The Hindutva movement benefited from the social equality strategy that aroused caste consciousness. The religious leaders and the cadre of the Hindutva movement mostly belonged to the other backward castes and Dalit categories. The movement also benefited from the reverberations of the global rise of Islamic fundamentalism. The strength of Hindutva lies in its obfuscation. The judgement of the Supreme Court which rejected the notion that Hindutva ideology invokes Hindu religion, supports the claim of the BJP that it is a secular, cultural ideology that is open to all religions so long as the Hindu ways of life and culture are respected.

It is quite possible to offer a cosmopolitan interpretation of Hindutva and there have been many such instances in India's history. Swami Vivekananda, who has become a respected Hindutva icon, once stated that India for its liberation needs a Vedantic brain in an Islamic body. Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan on hearing a prayer from Upanishad that celebrated plural religious and sectarian traditions of India added two lines to the Sanskrit stanza to include

Christ and Muslims who invoked Allah. But the licence that seems to have been tacitly extended by the BJP and its sister organisations to mobilise that lynch members of minorities religions in their campaigns against eating beef or in their cow protection campaigns have instilled Hindu phobia among the religious minorities and are progressively alienating them. By alienating a large segment of the population India cannot hope to generate the 'India first' spirit to which the Prime Minister is dedicated. On the contrary it produces dysfunctionalities that tend to pull down India from occupying its rightful place in the comity of nation states.

True, by playing up singular instances of lynching and mob violence our visual media ensure that a stray or exceptional incident becomes the general trend. Graphic displays of such mob attacks set off a competition in gaining instance publicity and the dubious fame that brings with it and in fact encourage other fringe organisations to indulge in more spectacular displays of their intolerance and barbarity. Instead of condemning such acts of brutality by responsible political leaders the deafening silence that it generates from them is open to interpretation of complicity.

The ascendance of Hindutva is isolating the liberals among the Muslims who do not subscribe to radical or fundamentalist Islam. A prominent BJP leader in a television debate approvingly quoted Mr Chagla, a prominent lawyer and minister of education in Nehru's cabinet, who claimed that he was an Indian by birth, Hindu by culture and Muslim by religion. One can only speculate whether Mr Chagla would have attained such high positions in contemporary India after making such a statement considering the polarising trends that dominate public discourse today.

While Hindutva is unable to evolve into an encompassing ideology of nationalism that is required to unify India of the postmodern times, critics of Hindutva tend to rely on the Constitution and espouse what they refer to as Constitutional nationalism. Reference to the Constitution is particularly evocative because Ambedkar who was the Chairman of the drafting committee of the Constituent Assembly, is now hailed as the father of the Indian Constitution. It immediately resonates with the Dalits who regard him as their own leader.

Recourse to the Constitution does not however solve the problem because it is subject to a wide spectrum of interpretations and meanings. The 42nd Amendment which also inserted the words 'secular' and 'socialist' to characterise the Indian republic in the Preamble, chooses not to define those words. As is now well known, Ambedkar was himself averse to the inclusion of the word socialist because he wanted the Constitution to be free enough for later generations to choose their ideologies. The word 'secularism' has been open to a wide range of interpretations. Some interpretations interpret it as the state that maintains neutrality in matters of religion in the execution of its functions. Others interpret in terms of cultural pluralism that treats all religions equally. According to this version the state has to intervene in matters of religion in a culturally diverse country like India. Of course, the term is also interpreted in terms of the state being against all forms of religion. These are problematic interpretations for a variety of reasons. There is no accepted standard to judge neutrality of the state or the equal treatment it renders to different religions. Some claim that the Indian ethos, which they claim is Hindu is inherently secular because it accepts all religions as different paths to the same truth. But then Hindutva secularists claim secularism as the hegemony of Hinduism

whereas those who discover the practice of secularism under Muslim rule in different phases of Indian history use the term to justify hegemony of Islam under which Hinduism also found a niche. This brings to light the issue of hegemony that is so crucial to politics. The Hindu ethos was tolerant of religious diversity and as Srinivas argues this diversity and pluralism was framed by caste differentiation that gave considerable room for autonomy to diverse cultures. The system was held up by a hierarchy that converted cultural differences into a scale of deference. Moreover, following the distinguished sociologist of religion Robert Bellah, who points out that the definition of the 'secular' is culture or religion specific and that secularism professed in different political systems are undergirded by their dominant religious and cultural ethos, the term becomes unhelpful in articulating secular nationalism, particularly in the Indian context.

Another approach to nationalism that projects secularism is to invoke the Section 44 of the Constitution referred to as Directive Principles. This section directs policy making but it does not make it legally binding on the state to follow the principles that are enunciated therein. There is a clause in this section that directs the state to usher in a uniform civil code. Romila Thapar, the distinguished Indian historian finds much merit in this clause to overcome polarisation based on religion. The Uniform Civil Code has come under severe resistance from Muslims in India who see it as an attempt to interfere with *Shariyat* that they regard as the core of Islam. Whatever the defence, India cannot afford to lock up women's talents inside their *burkha* or *niqab*. It is imperative that their freedom to participate in the public sphere is not curtailed and they are not handicapped by traditions that governments in more enlightened Muslim countries find abhorrent. The Supreme Court has taken a first step in this direction to ban triple *talaq*. To nudge the Muslims into seeing the wisdom of their women deriving the full benefits that the Constitution affords is a sign of good governance. Of course, good governance should also ensure that women in every sphere of life are treated on par with men. It is interesting that in the early stages of the movement for women's rights in India, domestic issues and particularly the issue of dowries and murders caused for being unable to extra dowry used to figure on top of women's agendas. Today, the stress is on harassment at the work place, rape in the public sphere and the freedom for women to walk the streets at nights. This shift in focus is also indicative of the progress that women have made in the country by breaking the shackles of domestic immurement.

I regard the movement towards a uniform civil code as helpful in evolving a new spirit of nationalism that can transcend the boundaries of religion, caste and communalism. But in this age of religious fundamentalisms, it would become essential to work towards creating a conducive social environment. As I see it the state has a critical role to play in creating such an environment.

I take my cue from Mahatma Gandhi who while watching cricket in Bombay as Mumbai was then called advised that the competing teams should not be formed on the basis of religion. As is well known, the Pentangular cricket tournament in Bombay used to be between teams divided on the basis of religion. When in 1940 members of the Hindu Gymkhana consulted Gandhi on whether they should participate in the tournament, Gandhi favoured discontinuance because of the Second World War. At the same time he chose to comment on the practice of forming teams on the basis of religion thus:

I can understand matches between colleges and institutions, but I never understood reasons for having Hindu, Parsi, Muslim and other communal Elevens.

I should have thought that such unsportsmanlike divisions would be considered taboos in sporting language and sporting manners. Can we not have some field of life which cannot be touched by the communal spirit?

Gandhi's observation is a plea for secularisation of sports. Although it is not possible to define secularism to everyone's satisfaction, it is possible to specify secularisation as a process by which spheres of social life that previously come under the umbrella of religion or of community identity are come out of the sacred canopy. Indian nationalism can flourish when more and more spheres of social life are freed from the religious or community tags that are attached to them. In India however, a process that reverses secularisation is at work. Social spheres in which religious or caste or community identity should not matter in assessing performance and distributing rewards, they are deliberately brought in out of considerations of social justice.

As has been said before, the social logic of egalitarianism was to bring into salience collective identities of caste, tribe and community to render social justice in a society riddled with steep and cumulative social inequalities. That this interpretation of egalitarianism contributed much to nation building efforts in the late twentieth century is uncontestable. But now this strategy has started yielding diminishing, if not negative, returns. This is because public spheres in which such considerations should not matter are steeped in the discourse of caste and community identity which makes it difficult to induce the team spirit and cooperation among diverse castes and communities that is required for good and effective governance. Equality of results is a compelling principle of distributive justice, but when the question is about enlargement of the national pie, merit or excellence in performance should be the principle criterion.

The pursuit of equality based on caste and community identity, that is the policy of caste based reservations is also creating widespread alienation and discontent among the general population. Liberal economic reforms has exposed the people to a cornucopia of goods thereby kindling aspirations for higher standards of life. These aspirations have intensified competition all round even as the uncertainties of the market create insecurities that affect even the privileged segments of society. Combined with these processes is the harsh reality of class differentiation among all castes and communities because the reservation policy can only cater to a select few of their representatives.

To compound the problem, the policy of reservations is generating widespread resentment. The beneficiaries of the policy feel cheated that they still are mere numbers and that their talents and potential are not fully tapped or appreciated because of the social stereotypes of them as the new brahimns or the newly previliged class. The episode of the suicide of Rohit Vemula the student of Hyderabad Central University brought this to the forefront of national debate two years ago. Vemula was upset that his self worth was not appreciated, that he thought of himself as stardust but the society reduced him to a mere number. This dramatically brings out the aspirations for achievement and accomplishment that the social environment does not now encourage.

It is generally argued that the pursuit of excellence is not conducive to the promotion of equality. But the pursuit of excellence and the sense of accomplishment that it brings enhances self worth and compel the wider society to recognise the person's social worth. When the deprived sections are lauded for their achievements and accomplishments, the spirit of equality is bound become pervasive and the myths and stereotypes of castes and communities also evaporate which contributes to the process of secularisation and nation building.

There is an old English saying that British nationalism was created in the rugby fields of Eaton and Harrow, the famous English public schools. This holds true for the game of cricket in India. The passions that Indian cricket team which is chosen on the basis of merit and is yet inclusive because selectors go across social strata and caste and communal barriers to select players who can do proud for India. Cricket was a game which was earlier confined to the maharajas and the aristocracy. As Rajdeep Sardesai says in his recent book, Indian cricket today holds a mirror to its cultural diversity. The team composed of players coming from miffusil small towns belonging to under privileged castes and communities can hold their own and often outshine players belonging to more privileged strata. This is in a sense equality at work. If India has to harness its rich reservoir of talents in diverse spheres of social life in nation building and in generating the spriti of genuine nationalism that has become vital to face the challenges of the postmodern world, the pursuit of excellence should become the watch word.

The challenge of postmodernism is also the challenge of fragmented nationalisms that confronts the whole world. The rise of right wing extremism propagating Nazi and Fascist ideologies of white racism and of Christian fundamentalisms in Europe and the US can be partly attributed to such contemporary postmodern trends. At the same time, it is becoming apparent that modernity did not effectively dissolve ethnocentrism in the West. The rise of Scottish nationalism in the United Kingdom and the upsurge of Basque nationalism in Spain suggest that ethnic conflicts in the West are not just superficial cultural outcomes but have deep roots in their cultural history. The arrow of history that modernity promised is now broken, Europe, which is reputed to be the womb of modern civilisation nurturing the ideals of universalism, individualism and liberalism now confronts various types of parochialism that it had chosen to forget. India can offer a unique role for nationalism that encompasses the nationalisms of little traditions.

Hindutva is about nationalism that looks back into history for inspiration. And since india's history is also about invaders and their conquest, the search for an authenttic self ends in ancient India and its glorification. In anthropological terms such glorification of the ancient past lends support to self pride that was smashed subsequently by maurading boorish hoardes that conquered through deceit and cowardice. While such histirography might expose ethnocentrism in the grand narrations of the conquerers it does not offer room for a brutal self examination of past mistakes that inspired the freedom struggle. It also obfuscates survival strategies of a civilisation that also stooped to conquer even as it civilised the conquerers. There was a time during the hey days of British colonialism when the source of inspiration for the national struggle becomes ancient history and mythology, but now to confront contemporary conundrums and conflicts history should be a source of learning harsh lessons about civilisational defects. Indian nationalism should transcend the cynicism of postmodernism that offers a receipe for the fragmentation of cultures; it needs a narrative that

knits cultural fragments with the threads of folklore and local traditions that have preserved the wisdom and knowledge of an ancient civilisation to offer a healing balm to the wounds of history. It is time that the Hindutva narrative is amended so that its grand vision of *Akhand Bharat* is realised as a federated United Nations of India extending from Afghanistan in the north west, to Tibet in the north, to south east Asia and Sri Lanka in the south. Such a vision would be endorsed by Mahatma Gandhi as much as it would be by Mohammad Iqbal, who was Pakistan's inspirational poet. He had once dreamed of a Pakistan that retains its uniquely Indian identity. That is why he sung that song *Saare Jahan se achcha, Hindustan hamara*. Nationalism for India should inspire us to work for and realise such a federated vision. It is a vision that overcomes the persisting separatism of Kashmir and of the north east. Cultural diversities, freedom and democracy have better prospects of survival in such an extended vision of India.