
Nation and Nationalism

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Abstract

A nation is not God-given; it is constructed by a group of people. One's identification with a nation and devotion to it give birth to nationalism. Extreme nationalism can lead to fascism, which has been a major problem in modern times. History has been witness to many wars being waged over land, fuelled by differences in race, caste, community, religion etc. This paper is an attempt to understand and explain this complex phenomenon.

Keywords: Nation, Nationalism, Fascism

"Nation" is usually understood to refer to a "group of people with the same language, culture and history, who live in a particular area under one government: an independent nation" (*Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary*). The concepts of nation, nationality, and nationalism are based on a relationship, largely imaginary, with a particular piece of land, culture, society, race, religion. Benedict Anderson remarks that a nation is

an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign . . . it is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. (6)

Thus, the nation has a very intimate relationship with ideology. Homi K. Bhabha writes that "[n]ations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and fully realize [them] in the mind's eye" (1). Writing about the biography/identity of nations, Benedict Anderson writes that ". . . it cannot be 'remembered', must be narrated" (204). So the concept of nation is something close to the mythic concept of an ideal country. It can also be seen with 'false consciousness' when it fails to fulfil the aspirations of its members. Nations emerge over a period of time as a result of historical conditions, processes and demands. Steven Grosby notes the role of memory in this process:

Every nation has its own understanding of its distinctive past that is conveyed through stories, myths, and history. Whether historically accurate or not, these memories contribute to the understanding of the present that distinguishes one nation from another. This component of time – when an understanding of the past forms part of the present – is characteristic of the nation and is called 'temporal depth'. (8)

On construction of collective identities and the function of space, he states:

[I]ndividuals not only participate in the same tradition but also understand themselves as being different from those who do not, then there exists a self-designating shared belief, which

is called a 'collective self-consciousness' that is, a distinctive culture the boundaries of the social relations [sic] allow us to distinguish 'us' from 'them' [t]he nation is a social relation of collective self-consciousness [h]owever, the nation is formed around shared traditions that are not merely about a distinctive past, but a spatially situated past. Where there is a spatial focus to the relation between individuals [t]he location, thus, is no longer merely an area of space; it has become a space with meaning: a territory one thereby recognizes oneself to be related to those who have also born in that territory, even if they were born before you. (10-11)

Nations have no clear birth dates; they just emerge during historical shifts. Ernest Renan states that individuals have many things in common and at the same time they have forgotten many things under a nation, as we forget our origins and start to identify with the present nation (11). "A nation is [. . .] a large-scale solidarity, constituted by the feeling of sacrifices that one has made in the past and of those that one is prepared to make in the future. It presupposes a past; it summarized, however, in the present by a tangible fact, namely, consent, the clearly expressed desire to continue a common life" (19). John Dunn adds that sovereignty is an essential component of nationhood:

Nations consist of those who belong together by birth (genetically, lineally, through familiarly inherited language and

culture). States consist of those who are fully subject to their own sovereign legal authority. A true nation state, therefore, would consist only of those who were fully subject to its sovereign legal authority. (3)

In *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Benedict Anderson studies nations as 'imagined communities'. He notes that nations are not the result of the consciousness of the people or nations; rather the thoughts of nationalism invent and perpetuate the idea of nations (61). "[A]ll communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined" (6). He adds that a nation

is imagined as sovereign because the concept was born in an age in which enlightenment and revolution were distorting the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm . . . [and] . . . it is imagined as community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as deep, horizontal comradeship. (7)

Nation is no doubt a modern concept but elements of it can be traced to pre-modern societies. Grosby writes that a self-designating name, a written history, a degree of cultural uniformity often as a result of being mediated by religion, legal codes, an authoritative centre and a conception of bounded territory are the major elements of the pre-modern society which were helpful in the birth of nations (72). The

democratic conception of citizenship, extension of production and market, printed books, newspapers, television, films also contributed to and perpetuated national culture (57-58).

Benedict Anderson refers to various factors which act as major forces behind the formation of nations: various dynasties are converted into nations because they failed to survive in the new conditions and “[b]eneath the decline of sacred communities, languages and lineages, a fundamental change [takes] place in modes of apprehending the world, which, more than anything else, [makes] it possible to ‘think’ the nation” (22). Thus, according to him, the nation survives in the minds. In the eighteenth century, the fiction, particularly the birth of novel, also helped to imagine the nation. The circulation of newspapers also attaches people to an idea of the nation. He adds that “. . . fiction seeps quietly and continuously into reality, creating that remarkable confidence of community in anonymity which is the hallmark of modern nations” (36). Thus, gradually national consciousness develops with a change in the character of language, the impact of reformation, print capitalism, and the spread of vernacular languages for administrative centralization (39-41). He finds that print capitalism plays a most significant role in circulating national consciousness among the masses:

What, in a positive sense, made the new communities imaginable was a half-fortuitous, but explosive, interaction between a system of production and productive relations (capitalism), a technology of communications (print), and the fatality of human linguistic diversity. (43)

Print languages perpetuate national consciousness in three distinct ways: they create

unified fields of exchange and communication; give a new fixity to language (and to a subjective idea of the nation); and they create languages of power (44-45).

Benedict Anderson identifies three other major institutions of national consciousness: the census, the map, and the museum. “They profoundly shaped the way in which the colonial state imagined its domination – the nature of the human beings it ruled, the geography of its domain, and the legitimacy of its ancestry” (163-64). The census classified or made identity categories; they became more visibly and exclusively racial. Religion, caste, and race-based census perpetuate national consciousness. The map, brought by the Europeans, spreads through press as a symbol of a particular nation, and the museum retains the ancient monuments to help individuals identify themselves with a civilization, a culture, and a nation (16-85).

Rumina Sethi examines the concept of the nation by relating it to myth which, according to her, helped India to emerge as a nation. She examines the various myths about India. She writes that the story of Muslim invasions of the eleventh and twelfth centuries and the consequent plundering of India’s wealth and prestige are a myth. She also objects to the notions of “glorious” India of the ancient times, noting that “there had also not been a geographically and politically united India during the Gupta period” (12). According to her, Bal Gangadhar Tilak mobilized nationalist feelings through the revival of the Shivaji festival; the *Gita* was also interpreted as a call for action against the British rule; Bipin Chandra Pal invoked people with the help of religion and urged them into political activism; he also used the idea of *swaraj* to explain the demands of the religion (18-19). Sethi identifies nationalistic representation as a “worldview in its less abstract meaning” or merely a false consciousness. She

adds that the construction of Hindu nationalist identity has also played a major role in the formation of the Indian nation. She notes that subaltern groups (including women, peasants, and labourers) are not granted any role in the formation of the Indian nation in terms of agency (20-21).

In *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Partha Chatterjee examines the nation as composed of various fragments. He notes that language plays a major role in the formation of a nation: “. . . [L]anguage . . . [becomes] a zone over which the nation first had to declare its sovereignty and then [has] to transform in order to make it adequate for the modern world” (7). He identifies these fragments of the nation: print capitalism, new network of secondary schools¹, the family, the middle class, the nationalist politics, middle class religion, the new forms of public discourses, the past etc.

Nation has among its subjects those who work as nationalists, and their devotion to the ideologically formed nation is known as nationalism. Martha L. Cottam writes that “[a] person who identifies with the nation first and foremost, who gives the nation primary loyalty and identifies with it with greater intensity than any other group, is a nationalist” (2). So, nationality is one’s identification with an imaginary nation and nationality itself is an imaginary relationship. Benedict Anderson writes:

. . . [N]ationality, or, as one might prefer to put it in view of that word’s multiple significations, nation-ness, as well as

¹ “. . . the University of Calcutta was turned from an institution of colonial education to a distinctly national institution, in its curriculum, its faculty and its sources of funding” (Chatterjee, Partha *The Nation* 9).

nationalism are cultural artefacts of a particular kind. To understand them properly we need to consider carefully how they have come into historical being, in what ways their meanings have changed over time, and why, today, they command such profound emotional legitimacy. (4)

Writing about its political significance, he states that "nation-ness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time" (3). Hans Kohn writes that “[n]ationalities are created out of ethnographic and political elements when nationalism breaks life into the form built by preceding centuries. Thus, nationalism and nationality are closely interrelated” (16). When an individual identifies with a nation, the feelings of nationality or nationalism start to develop. Some people behave in a fascist manner to proclaim the superiority of their nation against others. They often have hatred and contempt for other nations and believe that their nation is the best. They would sacrifice their lives in the name of nationalism. Benedict Anderson remarks that it makes them ready “. . . not so much to kill, as willing to die for such limited imaginings” (7).

‘Patriot’ refers to an individual who is loyal to a territorial community. Patriotism “. . . implies a commitment to the well-being of one’s country, it provides the basis for working out the differences, involving reasonable compromise, between the individual members of the nation . . .” while “[n]ationalism knows no compromise; it seeks to sweep aside the many complications that always are part of life as it actually is” (Grosby 17-18). Regarding the hazards of nationalism, Grosby writes:

Distinctive nationalism is the belief that the nation is the only

goal worthy of pursuit – an assertion that often leads to the belief that the nation demands unquestioned and uncompromising loyalty, when such a belief about the nation becomes predominant, it can threaten individual liberty. Moreover, nationalism often asserts that other nations are implacable enemies to one's own nation; it injects hatred of what is perceived to be foreign, whether another nation, an immigrant, or a person who may practise another religion or speak a different language. (5)

It is thus dangerous to be a fanatical nationalist because it fills the heart with feelings of hatred for other communities/nations. Benedict Anderson warns that “[n]o more arresting emblems of the modern culture of nationalism exist than cenotaphs and tombs of unknown soldiers” and suggests that “. . . nationalism has to be understood by aligning it, not with self-consciously held political ideologies, but with the large cultural systems that preceded it, out of which – as well as against which – it came into being” (9-12).

In *The Idea of Nationalism*, Hans Kohn identifies nationalism as an idea, as the title of the book indicates. He writes about the growth of nationalism as “the process of integration of the masses of the people into a common political form. Nationalism therefore presupposes the existence, in fact or as an ideal, of a centralized form of government over a large and distinct territory” (4). He observes that there is a ‘natural tendency’ among human beings to love the place, the environment and people where they themselves were born and grew up. However, nationalism is not a natural phenomenon, but “a

product of the growth of social and intellectual factors at a certain stage of history” (6). For Kohn, nationalism is mainly a state of mind and an act of consciousness. Identifying nationalism as a distinctly modern phenomenon, he remarks:

. . . [I]n this period, and in this period alone, the nation demands the supreme loyalty of man, that all men, not only certain individuals or classes, are drawn into this common loyalty, and that all civilizations (which up to this modern period followed their own, and frequently widely different, ways) are now dominated more by this one supreme group-consciousness, nationalism. (12)

Nationalism is generally known as love for one's nation, but it is actually a very complex phenomenon which is deeply political and is often the result of several self-interests.

Partha Chatterjee notes that there is a nationalist elite class which defines and carries out the nationalist project. It includes the middle class, which identifies itself with the soil and culture of the land; new forms of public discourse and; the middle class religion. He adds in the context of India that “[t]he nationalist project was in principle a hegemonic project. Our task is to probe into the history of this project, to assess its historical possibility or impossibility, to identify its origins, extent, and limits” (*The Nation* 36). The national identity of India is constructed predominantly by the ruling class: “History [is] no longer the play of divine will or the fight of right against wrong; it [has] become merely the struggle for power” (91).

Frantz Fanon notes that national culture is a contaminated culture. Homi K. Bhabha writes in an essay “Dissemination: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern

Nation” that Fanon’s views are eye openers with regard to the construction of national narratives. Nation is a continuous process of change, something which is not always visible in people’s lives. He also notes that there are margins and minorities which also contribute to the nation, but unfortunately they are often absent from the discourse of formation of the nation (302-08).

The anti-colonial consciousness has played its own role in the birth of nations and nationalisms. The British ruled over many countries. The anti-colonial consciousness in these colonies contributed greatly to the formation and development of nationalism. Ania Loomba remarks that colonialism “shape[d], often violently, physical territories, social terrains as well as human identities” (185). In response to colonial violence, the sense of identity, self-rule, freedom and existence inspired the colonized people. Their struggle against the colonial powers resulted in many new nations:

Anti-colonial struggles . . . had to create new and powerful identities for colonized peoples and to challenge colonialism not only at political or intellectual level, but also on an emotional plane. In widely divergent contexts, the idea of the nation was a powerful vehicle for harnessing anti-colonial energies at all these levels. (185-86)

Religion, racism, communalism and fascism also play a significant role in the formation of nations. There are many nations all over the world which are directly or indirectly under the influence of the above mentioned factors. Pakistan and India are two major examples of religious nationalisms. Pakistan is

named after the beliefs of a religious community. India was also formed largely out of a Hindu discourse although it did not follow Pakistan’s way but chose to remain officially secular.

Racial differences often become a major factor in determining the nature of a nation. Kevin Passmore identifies two types of racism, most inflexible form of biological and cultural:

The racism holds that race is determined biologically. Biological destiny cannot be changed, and assimilation into another nationality is impossible In the early 20th century educated Europeans usually understand race in terms of history and culture. An individual belongs to a nation if she or he inhabited the nation’s historic territory, spoke the national language, or practiced its religion. This racism is less extreme in that it allows for ‘assimilation’ by learning the national language or changing one’s religion. (108-09)

Thus, racism also contributes to certain forms of nationalism. Commenting on what nation and nationalism have come to mean today, Sumit Sarkar, in his book *Beyond Nationalist Frames*, writes:

The nationalism that strides so arrogantly across the political state today is curiously bereft of inner content or meaning. The ‘nation’ nowadays often seems to mean not living human beings but a map and flag, a geographical space with ‘sacred’ boundaries that might be maintained at all costs-even, it seems, with nuclear weapons that might in the process

wipe out the people living within that space completely as those outside. (212-13)

However, as it has been noted, nation, nationality and nationalism are not natural and self-evident concepts. They are products of the socio-cultural and materialistic conditions. Nation, in actual practice, comes to serve the ruling class, not all people - who are rather used to serve and oil the system. There is a complex politics; the individuals who submit to the dominant discourse of nationalism are often known as 'ideal' citizens. The formation of a nation unites the people but at the same time it also divides them; and extreme nationalism easily leads to fascism and to the destruction of peace, freedom, and sometimes, even life.

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