Culture, Politics and Identities: Debating the idea of Indian Nationalism

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Abstract: *India, like all other societies, has always experienced changes within social structure and of the structure. In both colonial and post colonial periods, India has experienced rapid changes and transformation in the sphere of identity formation in terms of caste, language, religion and region and so on. Hugely diverse populations that India was had to put up a united fight in freedom movement and even in post-colonial India the debates on identity, cultural autonomy, and on top of all nationalism have not subsided. The question of Indian nationalism has been debated by the stalwarts of India's intellectual tradition like Gandhi, Tagore, Nehru, Ambedkar and Savarkar. In this paper an attempt has been made to revisit the nationalism debate in India.*

Intrroduction

We all feel revered towards India - a great respect, a feeling of patriotism, collective sentiments, a kind of solidarity and what Ashish Nandy conceptualises as 'emotions of homo-pschychologicus feeling of togetherness', a kind of representation. The term "nation" represents itself through traditional value system, religiosity, its chasteness, purity and most importantly it is perceived as the product of indigenization. We all know that 'change is the unchanging law of nature' and everything has been changing according to the changing social structure and the changing political patterns. India is known for its rigid and traditionally rooted practices as in caste system, which is followed by the principles of purity and pollution and belief on *karma* system. These all are regulated by the script of *manusmriti* and well conceptualised by Dumont as religion is the ideology of social stratification based on purity and pollution related to the legitimised belief system of the four Varnas, believed to have originated from the bodily parts of Lord Brahma. There were other evil practices also found in relation to the status of women like *sati,* Bal Vivah (child marriage) and so many brutal practices. These practices of the past reveal the unequal power

structure where a vast population belongs to the "culture of silence". Our social leaders always strive to get rid of all sorts of limited thinking that prompts these anti-social practices.

India has always experienced changes within social structure and of the structure. In both colonial and post-colonial periods India has experienced rapid changes and transformation of identity formation in the socio-cultural and political spheres. The Indians variedly identify themselves with different dimensions of religion, region, language and class while on the other hand Indian social structure in pre-colonial India was governed by the ideology of religion and the Varna system. The colonial government of India started collecting facts and figures regarding population, religion, language and caste for the sake of smooth administration. Colonization of India was not just a matter of governing the country but there was an inherent economic logic of maintaining the industrialisation in England and the accumulation of profit to which the social scientists recognise as colonial mode of production[1] (Desai 1948: 23). First, they came with the purpose of establishing a colony or a market in India which was to facilitate speedy industrialization of England. There are three units of production i.e. land, labour and capital; the British wanted to accumulate capital by making profit through purchasing low cost of materials plus low investment on labour and made full advantage of huge colonial market for their products.

Later, the colonisers made efforts to restructure the whole of the Indian society through new policies, laws, centralization of power, education policies, new languages of governance, bureaucracies, taxation systems, and land tenure laws that deeply influenced all aspects (social, economic and political) of people's life (Desai 1948). The British wanted to spread the language of modernity in the form of English education through new classes and by changing the traditional mode of production in India for their own profit. They came with new ideas in economic (production for industrialisation), societal (Western influences and Western value system) and political fields.

At the cultural level, the introduction of Christianity created a new culture, life style and societal value system. These introduction of new elements in traditional India resulted social change as both traditional and modernity were encountering each other and created a dialectical relationship between the conservative forces and forces of change (Mukerji 1965). With the introduction of new agrarian policies and programme the Varna and Jajmani system were replaced by feudal system (relationship between landlord and tenant). The commercialisation of agriculture in British India was a point

of shift to new agrarian social order with a new rural social system. Concepts such as caste may retain salience in new colonial structures, but they are inevitably transformed at the same time. Notwithstanding the significant changes in the colonial era the traditional institutions like Varna system, Jajmani system and religious value system continued to play a key role in the social life of the people. They continued alongside the emerging the relation between landlord and tenant, emerging classes like the educated middle class and the industrial proletariat. India experienced the introduction of new and modern means of transport, communication and education system. The emergence of class identity signaled the advent of modernity which conflicted with traditional identities.

The Marxist intellectuals like Desai (1948), Mukerji (1965) have studied social change in India in terms of class relations and class consciousness and in the light of a dialectical conflict between Indian cultural value systems and the Western culture. Desai (1948) follows the Marxist constructs like "class in itself" and "class for itself" to interpret the dynamics of social change in India. Desai also explains the usefulness of the Weberian notion of class and class formation on the basis of skill and market opportunities. The introduction of English education in colonial India was done with the purpose to recruit the Indians into the administration of the British government in India. In Desai's conceptualisation Western education in Indian society has created a new Indian middle classes which doesn't have any relationship with wealth but with the production of a new knowledge system. This newly emerged Indian middle classes in urban India defeated the colonial agenda and contributed immensely for concretization of a national consciousness for the nationalist movement against the British. Thus, in Desai's view, the British can be credited for producing a secular identity for the Indians, which is distinct from religion-based identity. Using Habermas's terminology (1962), one can say it was like a public sphere for Indians in their life world. The Western education gave a new perspective to view the world in terms of awareness to develop the nation. Due to this education, the Indians became aware about the colonial reality. It was the formative period of renaissance and enlightenment in Indian society. The 1857 revolt first saw an articulate expression of Indian nationalism and the sense of National identity. The 19th century saw the emergence of Bengal renaissance, which found expression in so many movements, including the anti-colonial movement. The social reformers like Raja Rammohun Roy, Rabindranath Tagore and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar came forward and debated the means to destroy social evils like child-marriage, inequality, gender discrimination and so on. On the other hand, Gandhi, Nehru and

Ambedkar came forward with their theses on issues like freedom, strong government, democracy, political and individual rights and duties, constitutions etc. The developments in Ashis Nandy's phrase can be termed "homo-pshycologicus", meaning a national identity against the British ruler.

The famous Marxologist D. P. Mukerji (1965) has conceptualised the process of change in Indian society in terms of a dialectical conflict between the established traditional value systems and the alien cultural value of western society. He was deeply interested in understanding the nature and meaning of Indian social reality rooted in the Indian tradition while emphasizing on the changing process due to many external factors. He said that due to the external factors Indian tradition or "parampara" are also changing. He conceptualised that the Indian tradition and modernity are the two bipolar concepts and the conflict is the cultural power where domination of one cultural value is backed by the degree of resistance of that culture. He mentioned very significantly, that there has always been a dialectical relationship between India's tradition and modernity, British colonialism and nationalism and individual and collectiveness. Although Mukerji did not emphasize on identity as such his analysis of culture, power and resistance is a combination which can be conceptualised as an identity with an ethics of cultural value system. In this context there can be two identity systems; one is the traditional identity of Indian society based on the notion of Hindu category of mind and another is western identity based on the ideas of economic rationality and the notion of methodological individualism.

Idea of nation and nationalism
The idea of nationalism has been hotly debated by the stalwarts of India's intellectual tradition like Gandhi, Tagore, Nehru, Ambedkar and Savarkar. In the years leading to independence they viewed India from different points of view.

Rabindranath Tagore can be aptly described as a poet and writer of decolonization, who wrote extensively on the "nation" and nationalist issues, although he rejected the idea of nationalism proposed by the leaders like, Tilak, Bipin Chandra Pal, Gandhi and the leaders of Indian National Congress.

The homogeneous and mono-cultural view of the nation was unacceptable to Tagore and he proposed a self-reflexive national identity. His idea of nationalism 'was a distinctive civilizational concept of universalism embedded

in the tolerance encoded in various traditional ways of life in a highly diverse, plural society'. Tagore's imagination of Indian nation was articulated in his novel *Gora*[3] which talks about the Indian nation beyond the caste, creed, religion, races, regions etc. At the same time the novel has as its backdrop the period after the Sepoy Mutiny in 1857, a period of rising discontent against oppressive British rule. Nationalism and the idea of freedom fired the imagination of Indians across social classes. It was these 'stirrings of national consciousness towards the end of the last century' that 'created the historical and social setting for *Gora.*'

Gora, the patriot, abhors the inter–mixing of castes, classes, religions and races. Gora in this novel said: 'today all the castes of Bharat are my caste, whatever everybody eats is my food. It was as if I carried around with me some invisible gap of separation, which I could not cross, Because of this there was a great void in my mind' (*Gora:* 476). At the end of the novel Gora asks to be taught the mantra of 'that deity who belongs to all – Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Brahmo – the doors of whose temple are never closed to any person of any caste or race – the deity not only of the Hindus but of Bharatvarsha' (*ibid:* 470). Through this novel he visions the making of India or nation, which transcends all social inequalities and deep rooted problems in the social stratification. Tagore's *Gora is an articulation of his faith in universal* humanism, an anti-thesis of nation and nationalism, which thrive on narrow and unnecessary divisions. In *Gora* Tagore dwells on the civilizational aspect of nationalism, where he talks about a multi – cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious country like India.

According to Tagore, India is a civilizational or an oceanic flow of cultures and traditions. For him India is like a gigantic machine that homogenizes, and negates differences. In his poem, *Mukti* i.e. deliverance, Tagore says:

Deliverance is not for me in renunciation,
I feel the embrace of freedom in a thousand bonds
of delight.
No, I will never shut the door of my senses,
The delights of sight and hearing and touch
will bear thy delight.
Yes, all my illusions will burn into illuminations of joy,
And all my desires ripen into fruits of love."
In the sonnet, Mayabad, i.e. cult of illusions, he says:
"Alas, my cheerless country,
Donning the worn-out garment of decrepitude,

Loaded with the burden of wisdom,
You imagine you have seen through the fraud
Of creation.

In his poems and the national anthem *Jana Gana Mana* Tagore expresses his views on Indian nation. Tagore did not believe in indiscriminate veneration of traditions, but stood for unshackling of reason by opening up the doors of society. He wrote in *Ancient Treasures* (1892): 'If we are to build up a nation, we must, with all due respect and regret, cast aside the load of the venerable rock-like tradition, which is suffocating our humanity, our strength and our manly independence'.

Mahatma Gandhi's idea of nationalism seems relatively simple to comprehend. He wanted an independent Indian nation state and freedom from British colonial rule. His idea of nationalism was not based on shallow ethnic or religious communalism. He was grounded on his notion of *Swaraj*-enlightened self-control and self-development leading to harmony and tolerance among all communities in India. His concept of nationhood is not merely based on the territorial extent of its sovereignty; it is the national sentiments and expressions which encompasses the Indian ancient history. Gandhi's idea on nation and nationalism was based on the *Satyagrah* and non-violent movement and for that matter he motivated people to boycott foreign materials and to use *charkha*, *khadi* and all indigenous handmade things which are at the same time pure and expression of human labour and creativity. According to him, a nation should be based on 'sarva dharma sambhava', where each and every group of people can serve their religion as they wish, where all religions would get an equal status without any discrimination. Gandhi's view of nation is based on functional perspective, through which he wanted to see the nation in harmony with the whole. Like diverse religions the Varna system would also be the integral parts of a coherent whole, the nation. Both parts (fragments) and the structure (the whole) are important to make harmony and peace. Gandhi wanted to vision a nation which should be based on Hindu- Muslim unity and peace. He wrote:

Hindustan belongs to all those who are born and bred here and who have no other country to look to. Therefore, it belongs to Parsis, Beni Israelis, to Indian Christians, Muslims and other non-Hindus as much as to Hindus. Free India will be no Hindu raj, it will be Indian raj based not on the majority of any religious sect or community, but on the representatives of the whole people without distinction of religion. I can conceive of a mixed majority putting the Hindus in a minority. They would be elected for their record of

service and merits. Religion is a personal matter, which should have no place in politics (Gandhi 1947: 277-278).

I do not expect India of my dreams to develop one religion that is to be wholly Hindu or wholly Christian or wholly Muslim, but I want it to by wholly tolerant, with its religions working side by side with one another (ibid: 257).

I swear by my religion. I will die for it. But it is my personal affair. The State has nothing to do with it. The State would look after your secular welfare, but not your or my religion. That is everybody's personal concern (ibid: 278)

His idea of nationalism is more oriented towards "spiritual politics" or "dialogic religiosity" oriented secularism. The combination of religion, ethics and politics in Gandhi has been largely acclaimed as unique and a sign of Indianness.

Jawaharlal Nehru's vision of nation is based on "atheistic secularism", which is different from Gandhi's version of spiritual politics. For Nehru the modern secular ideal had originated in the West and crystallized as a world-view under the impetus provided by three major forces of the modern age - Religious Reformation, Industrialization and the Democratic Revolution. Even though certain cultural ingredients of secularism lie deep in certain aspects of Indian historical tradition, India's introduction to the ideal of modern secularism was the result of the Western impact. Apart from this, the secularization process also received stimulus from the Indian religious reformation pioneered by Swami Vivekananda, Maulana A. K. Azad and many others. Further, the secular idea gathered momentum from the historical compulsions and necessities of India's struggle against colonialism and from her efforts to evolve as a unified national identity out of its multi-religious, multi-ethnic and multi-lingual diversities. When Nehru was in the jail of Ahmedabad fort, he articulated his view of Indian nation in his writings, which were published as *Discovery of India*. He thought Indian nation beyond the caste system and religious values, which are essentially divisive. His idea of modern nation would evolve through modernization, industrialisation, alongside India's emergence as an economically and technologically advanced country.

According to Nehru nation should be based on secularism because India has so many faiths, which cannot be the foundation of a united nation. He believed that religion can have a function since it can bring peace to our soul but it cannot be the foundation of a modern secular society. His dream

modern nation should be democratic, which should uphold the universal principles of equality, liberty and fraternity. Nehru was an apostle of humanity, peace and amity and his idea of national integration and communal harmony constituted the spirit of post-colonial nation building. Nehru laid the foundation of independent India on the pillars of democracy, socialism, secularism and peaceful co-existence. He thought of India as a whole and always insisted that the people should think of the country's problems in a national perspective. Speaking about nationalism Nehru said: 'Nationalism does not mean Hindu nationalism, Muslim nationalism or Sikh nationalism. As soon as you speak of Hindu, Sikh or Muslim, you do not speak for India' (Nehru 1955: 374-380).

Speaking at Trichur in December 1955, Nehru pointed out that:

We have before us lessons of history. We have seen how repeatedly in spite of our many virtues and our great abilities we have fallen in the race of nations, and because of this lack of unity among us the entire community of India has been separated into castes and creeds which do not pull together. Therefore, I lay stress everywhere on the unity of India and on our need to fight communalism, provincialism, separatism and casteism (*The Hindu,* Nov. 12, 2002).

He cautioned the Indians against divisive forces saying:

We must be on our guard against the disruptive tendencies in the country which raise their heads whenever an occasion offers itself. Among these tendencies are some which come under the name of communalism — politics under some religious garb, one religious group being incited to hate another religious group (Ibid 2002).

B. R. Ambedkar's notion of nationalism and his understanding of the Indian national movement are quite different from that of other leaders whom we have discussed. Ambedkar's vision of nationalism was rooted in the caste system. He had a dream to see India as caste free society with no more exploitation, a society based on true equality. His main agenda, along with freedom from colonial rule was annihilation of untouchability. Nationalism according to Ambedkar, should counter both internal oppression and external domination. He wanted equality and civil rights for those who are for centuries deprived of all opportunities for social and economic mobility. Indian society, in Ambedkar's view, was a system that never allowed equality and fraternity, the principles that are essential for a democratic form of government, to grow. He wanted constitutional safeguards for the oppressed classes. Nationalism, in Ambedkar vision, is of the spirit of dignity

both for the people and for the country. He had profound feeling for the poor and untouchables which induced him to fight against denial of basic human rights.

To Ambedkar, freedom of a country cannot be distinguished from freedom of its people; freedom would bear no meaning unless there is freedom for the oppressed. For him, nationalism means expression of inner unity of a people and it is a process of social assimilation. Therefore, irrespective of caste, colour and creed, nationalism gets perfect harmony if social brotherhood of men prevails everywhere within a nation. He emphasized on fighting casteism, linguistic division, communalism and separatism because he was of the opinion that these social evils fragment the people into small social units which are against the spirit of nationalism. He believed in revolution for the betterment of the society and safeguards for the down trodden. He believed that all problems are rooted in the structure only so good nation is possible only if the existed rigid structure is destroyed (Ray and Ray 2011)

Savarkar, widely knownas the author of Hindu nationalism, refused to accept the theory of Aryan invasion of the subcontinent, and stated that the ancient land of ''Sindhu'' comprised the entire subcontinent. He argued that the sense of nationality was already present four thousand years ago in the "Vedic Nation" as a cultural self-consciousness that took root through the development and refinement of a common language, Sanskrit, and a common body of philosophy and ritual practices (ibid: 87). He claimed that "Hindustan" had been the preferred name for India through millennia (ibid. 82). For Savarkar, idea of nation had to be for Hindus also as he looked it through the geographic and territorial ground. By saying that Hindu land is the holy land he particularly emphasize on the majority religious group of Hindus because they have built on the powerful base of sacred geographies/ territory, which gives the identity of the people. His ideology of Hindutva was narrow and he was talking about the conflation of *janambhoomi* (mother land) and *punyabhoomi* (holy land). Savarkar's main concern was to define the two main coordinates of the Indian nation, its territoriality and its culture.

Another striking feature of Savarkar's thought was the simultaneous influence of Fichte's idea of the "internal border," that is, the internalized individualization of nationhood. Hindutva, for him, is essentially a question of subjective feelings, loyalty, individual patriotism, a "will to nationhood" (Hansen 1999: 78). Savarkar argued that the ultimate criterion for being a Hindu was the definition of a "holy land" (*pitrubhoomi*), which is the

geographical location of the sacred shrines and myths of one's religion. "Hindu" denoted all those whose religion has grown "out of the soil of India"— Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs, and the multiple Hindu sects, the Hindu Dharma.

Then soon after independence the Indian political leaders decided to peruse four self-stipulated goals: (1) to achieve an improved standard of living through higher rates of growth, (2) to establish a functional political democracy, (3) to achieve social equality through social re-engineering and (4) to make a quick transition in making government the servant of the people rather than being its master. The long existing tradition-bounded institutional practices of caste as a systematic social stratification and the ideology of colonialism have left their legacy that often interrupts India's progress to achieving its immediate goals.

The decline of Nehruvian ideals in post-colonial India allows reinterpretation of modern state as something fragmented into the micro-level socio-political identities. The Indian nationalism from the late colonialism till the Nehruvian regime was a state-centric nation building project in which emphasis was on national unity which would transcend political consciousness of diversified identities.

The Indian politics and governance, political socialisation and voting behaviour have fundamentally changed in the post-liberalisation period. The role of media, the intervention of youth with global imagination of nation and the neo-liberal capitalism have reordered the Indian way of governance. In sum, the dynamics of politics, governance and citizens' political behaviour in post-independent India is a clear cut reflection of a journey from a national consciousness to fragmented identity formation. This change is a product of the socio-economic changes and the development of new micro level political discourses which largely impact upon the nature of government formation and the process of political socialisation.

Notes

1. The term *mode of production* derives from the work of Karl Marx (1818–1883), and the concept has played a significant role in subsequent Marxist theory. Mode of production refers to the varied ways that human beings collectively produce the means of subsistence in order to survive and enhance social being. Marx believed that human history could be characterized by the dominant modes of production. In this

sense the term refers to a specific economic system, where he mentioned about relation and forces of production. (Elster, Jon 1986). Regarding the colonial mode of production, Bipan Chandra tried to relate this concept from the feudal mode of production, where there was the relationship between landlord and tenet (in the colonial period, those zamindar who were performing the role of father with the relationship of lower caste group as son, they transformed into landlord and tenant. This previous relationship was called the Asiatic mode of production which is stagnant in the history) and that relationship was purely based on what Marx says exploitation

2. The concept of Bharatvarsha is a key concept in *Gora*. It is more than a geographical area. It is identified with faith, religion, tradition, customs and all manner of indigenous values and ideas. Bharatvarsha is a mystical "entity" that encompasses time itself, appropriating 'the distant past and the even farther future, while weaving a particular thread in a particular pattern in the vast destiny of mankind.' (*Gora* 135)

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