

Explaining India As A Nation: Conflicting Views On The Birth Of National Consciousness

Wiggins Bakka¹, Sharada Allamneni²

^{1,2}*Humanities Division, Department of Sciences & Humanities,
Vignan's Foundation for Science, Technology & Research, (Deemed to be University),
Andhra Pradesh, INDIA*

ABSTRACT: *In the light of the recent furore over the rewriting of History textbooks, the paper proposes to examine how India as a Nation has been imagined and projected in popular historical narratives. It will look at the divergent historical accounts surrounding the birth of India as a nation, which seek to explain the early stirrings of national consciousness in India vis-a-vis how nationalism took root in Europe leading to the formation of modern nation states like Spain, Italy, Germany or France. According to popular understanding, national consciousness in the modern sense of the word was largely absent in India till mid-nineteenth century, a view endorsed by many historians like Romila Thapar and RC Mazumdar. They argue that prior to European colonization, despite large parts of the subcontinent having been under the political dominion of powerful emperors like Ashoka and Akbar, the subcontinent was never really one nation because the loyalty of the people was mostly associated with their different rulers. Moreover, Indian society was highly stratified and diverse, with people tending to form narrow affinities and group identities along caste lines and religious faith rather than on geographical boundaries. Unlike the nations which came into existence in Europe, the growth of nationalism followed a different trajectory in India. Nationalism in India, as claimed by historians like Sekhar Bandyopadhyay and Bipin Chandra began to take shape in mid-19th century under the influence of Western enlightenment and widespread resentment to colonial rule. The ultra-rightwing school of thinkers, like Veer Savarkar professed that though political consciousness among its people may have dawned late, the notion of India as Bharatvarsha was very much in currency right from ancient times and they refute the theory that national consciousness in India was made possible only due to external factors like western enlightenment or antagonism to the colonisers. The paper will discuss some of the divergent views that surround the making of India as a modern nation.*

Key Words: *Nation, early nationalism, rising consciousness, cultural awakening, envisioning India*

1. INTRODUCTION

In the light of the prevailing controversy surrounding the project undertaken by the incumbent government, that of revamping history textbooks in India and the widespread criticism being levelled against it, of harbouring a covert agenda of reshaping the national discourse, (Leidig 2016), i.e., of presenting to the world a glorious Vedic past, and Hinduism's 'Golden Age', it has become imperative to understand the divergent views

regarding the awakening of national consciousness among the people and its historical antecedents which has now become such a polemical issue.

Starting with the question of what constitutes a 'nation', historians since the mid- twentieth century have contributed a huge corpus of scholarly work, attempting to explain what goes into the making of a nation, how and when India came into its own consciousness as a nation, and endeavoured to trace how these early stirrings of a national consciousness subsequently found expression as a common aspiration for nationhood. This paper will discuss the spectrum of interesting though divergent views that historians have brought to the understanding of the subject, i.e., the early stirring of national consciousness among the people of this subcontinent and how it subsequently found an expression in the nationalist movement against colonial suppression to pave the way for the birth of India as a modern nation.

The Nation as an Imagined Entity

Explaining the 'idea of a nation', Benedict Anderson argues that a 'nation' is an artificial social construct, imagined by people based on their linguistic, historical and cultural affinities (Anderson, 1983: 7). Tracing the history of the evolution of European nations, Anderson avers that these imagined communities are modern inventions, largely facilitated through the emergence of print capitalism. The integration of members belonging to a certain geographical expanse and congealing of group identities into the formation of a nation was made possible through the rise of the vernacular press that brought about a recognition of likeness among the members. The vernacular media as opposed to the prevailing state official languages like Latin, made possible the publishing of local dailies which provided avenues of exchange and common discourse among compatriots who were hitherto speaking in diverse dialects.

Like his contemporaries, Hobsbawm and Gellner, Anderson proposes a constructivist theory asserting that a nation is an imagined community; though its members have not met most of their countrymen, they still feel a part of the community, i.e., "it is built on a recognition of commonality, rather than actual commonality" (25, 26). Earlier, Herder, the German philosopher had dwelt on the idea of the nation as the *Volksgeist*, (Bergh 2018) which he considers to be a distinct spiritual heritage of each people. His contemporary, Fichte extends the idea further to say, it is a 'genetic inheritance' which informs the cultural ethos of a people. Both Herder and Fichte, consider the nation-state as a transcendent stage essential for building a true cosmopolitan world order. The most influential of all German philosophers, Hegel says that the nation is an outcome of the peoples' legal, political and cultural forces, not the cause. Much before Anderson, Hegel had observed that the increased consumption of daily newspapers was soon replacing early morning prayers (Bergh 2018). This habit, as Anderson later points out helped to nurture the abstract imagination, which was essential for creating affinity among people who had never met or were never likely to meet. It helped to bring about large scale integration and mobilisation, for the evolution of a nation. Thus the 'nation' far from being a 'geographical expression' went on to become an object of wonder providing a ballast for its members in circumstances of deprivation or horror.

Mazzini, perhaps the most ardent of 19th century promoters of nationalism states that nations have no pasts, only futures (Srivatsava, 1982): they are the collective formulations of the peoples who come to enshrine their aspirations in constitutions. Irfan Habib, the Indian historian says, the nation has come to be recognized as the central political entity of the modern world. He adds that a nation is constituted not just by people sharing a common culture, but as J.S. Mill had opined, they should also share a "desire to be under the same government" (Habib, 1975) which they should aspire to form by themselves. Inherent to this

notion of a nation, is the desire in the popularconsciousness for a separate entity, that of the “nation as a sovereign state” (1975, 15).

Against this background, the paper aims to shed some light on the polemics surrounding the idea of India’s birth as a nation, which is also shaping the contemporary narrative of the history textbooks in the country. Given the furore over the whole enterprise, an objective appraisal of the current project of rewriting history is essential for the following reasons:

- There is an ongoing demand in India to rewrite history, responding to which The Indian Council of Historical Research has recently constituted a committee to review existing narratives informing the evolution of India as a nation. It includes the entries on national heroes and martyrs in high school textbooks.
- There is a great churning happening within the intellectual circles and academic departments to deconstruct, what has come to be perceived as the colonial narrative and often leftist versions of Indian history.
- These narratives have certain implications in the formulation of domestic and foreign policies, in that they determine how nation-states assert their identities and locate their place in the world.

Whilst getting into these debates on nationalism in India, it would be pertinent to understand what we mean by ‘history’? The eminent historian and diplomat E.H Carr in his 1961 series of lectures (later compiled into volumes under the title, *What is History?*) presents a significant insight into how historical narratives come into existence. Advising students of history to first study the historian prior to studying the facts, Carr explains how every account of the past is mostly written to conform to the “agenda” as well as the “social context of the one”, who is writing it. Carr opines, “The facts... are like fish on the fishmonger’s slab. The historian collects them, takes them home to then cook and serve them” (Carr 1961). In other words, he suggests that facts speak only when historians make use of them. In building the narrative, all facts don’t get included, only those which are amenable to the historian for building his narrative get incorporated while the others are ignored. (1961 4)

In this approach, there are certain problemsevident:

- Facts of the past are accessible only through the present, i.e. present day political and social conditions tend to influence interpretation of the facts collected.
- It also means that, the past is intelligible only in the light of the present; also the present can be made sense only in the light of the past.
- Besides, it highlights the diachronic element of history, i.e., historical events are relative. History looked different for a 17th century historian as opposed to a 21st century historian.

Here, Carr’s approach suggests that no objective appraisal of the past is ever possible. According to him, collection of facts and interpretation is not a onetime process but a continuous reciprocal process. Facts influence interpretation and interpretation influences further collection of facts, and so on, which could lead to radically new interpretations with each passing age. It also means that historians always engage in a continuous process of moulding their facts to suit their interpretation and likewise their interpretations to facts. Therefore, it is futile to assign primacy of one over the other. So, history writing could also be indicative of the ideological moorings of the author and the zeitgeist of the times when he/she is framing the narrative.

From the above, it can be inferred that historical studies are never isolated processes. Besides, the men/women whom historians study are not isolated actors living in a vacuum but are those who acted in a certain context, under certain contingent impulses of the times. Therefore, it becomes essential to take into account the historian along with a consideration of the social

forces and factors that were acting at that point of time which shaped the historical course. History is therefore, as much a dialogue between the past and present as between the individual and the society. This common sense view of history as highlighted by Carr is particularly relevant for the contemporary times, as it compels one to ask, who is writing or rewriting history and for what purpose; answers to which will provide an insight into the controversies surrounding the shaping of the nationalist discourse.

Idea of India as a Nation and Notions of Nationalism

Turning to the Indian context, there are divergent views on the historical factors that led to the emergence of India as a nation. One school, which resonates with the current political dispensation at the Centre, argues that national consciousness in India was engendered not through an influence of the West, but that a notion of Bharatvarsha, existed long before the European colonizer ever set foot on the Indian soil (Chattopadhyaya, 1939). This school traces the roots of Indian nationalism in indigenous institutions, which are unselfconsciously embedded in the Indian Civilization and which though developed gradually, evolved quite organically. This evolution, antedates the establishment of British rule in India. Thinkers like Tagore and Gandhi supported this view and believed that universalism is deeply embedded in the Indian civilization. Prasenjit Daura, however, criticizes these formulations as the “teleological model of Enlightenment History” (1995) which gives the “contested and contingent nation a false sense of unit” (Daura, 4).

Another school of historians argue that India as a single political entity and a modern nation was born only recently. According to them, before the advent of European colonizers, no sense of national consciousness, in the modern sense ever existed among its people. People were largely provincial in their outlook and identified themselves in terms of local and caste based identities. (Chatterjee, 1986).

Historians like Partha Chatterjee, further argue that the anti-colonial sentiment set into motion against the British empire by the Indian National Congress, became instrumental in mobilizing diverse cultural, linguistic and religious groups, who became ready to submerge their differences and strive for the common cause of overthrowing their foreign masters. Earlier philosophers and thinkers like Vivekananda, Rammohan Roy, Vidya Sagar, and Dadhabai Naoroji have all acknowledged, how exposure to the ideas of western enlightenment brought about a cultural awakening and national consciousness among the people of the Indian subcontinent (Ray, 1980). Thanks to western education, Naoroji could make a critical evaluation of India’s economic status, to show how 200 years of colonial rule had led to the draining of India’s wealth to fill the British coffers. This school, thus argue that Indian nationalism took root in the hostile and common antagonism to India's misfortunes under foreign rule. Gandhi’s *Hind Swaraj* and his regular essays in *Young India*, like Bal Ganagadhar Tilak’s *Kesaria* few decades earlier (akin to the vernacular dailies of European nations that Anderson mentions of), played a critical part in integrating and uniting diverse sections of the countrymen, who through identification of a common cause of suffering against the oppressive foreign rule to assert their right for a separate nationhood. These historians on Indian nationalism have argued that there was no recognition of commonality among the people of the land, and that no notion of India as a political entity, in its modern sense, ever existed prior to the advent of British rule in the subcontinent.

A third school contests all such popular narratives and considers the birth of Indian nationalism as a byproduct of anti-colonialism (Guha, 1982) however they acknowledge the positive consequences of colonial rule, like the introduction of western rationality and

scientific temper to the masses. Such views highlight the exotic origins of Indian nationalism. Subaltern historians like Ranajit Guha and Partha Chatterjee claim that nationalism in India, has been accorded a privileged position by the westernized political leadership who defend it, pointing out that it gave India progressive thoughts and institutions like:

- Introduction to modern political thought for improved administration
- Aspiration for democratic ideals and institutions, very similar to those in west
- Introduction of British educational institutions to India.
- Economic systems set into motion through British rule which in turn contributed to the creation of the nation's infrastructure and institutions like the Railways, Indian Postal System etc., which helped in further integration of India.
- Socializing agencies introduced by British.

It is quite true, that the introduction of British civilization contributed greatly to the eradication of caste and other social evils and iniquitous systems like Sati and Child marriage. It instilled a new consciousness among the subalterns; ushered in western system of administration and governance; a system of jurisprudence with egalitarian values, uniform code of justice etc., by routing out obsolete and parochial modes of justice.

Coming back to the original question, unlike in Europe, nationalism in India and the rest of Asia, as professed by the dominant school of historians was largely a byproduct of the anti-colonial sentiments and the associated problems brought into Asian societies by the colonizers. Speaking with reference to Africa, the eminent historian Rotberg says that nationalism in the colonized parts of the world was fostered within the framework of Western colonialism. He further adds that, it was Great Britain that provided India her "first common, 'national', government...first common measure of internal security...common communications, laws, - although debatable - a common language etc.," (Rotberg, 1967). It brought about the physical unification of India, and, most importantly instilled among Indians, a common aspiration and "a sense of common destiny" (1967 133).

These debates on nationalism also indicate that many consider the association of nationalism with colonialism as most unfortunate. The subject has agitated many and continues to be shrouded under ambiguity. It is rife with polemical debates. Associating nationalism to anti-colonialism is objected by many nationalists today, because it highlights the negative aspect of Indian nationalism. The historian, Smith feels that this depiction tends to overlook the positive aspect of nationalism, notably that of creating "a new type of political and social entity, with arrangements well adapted to the local mores and environment." (Smith 1998)

On the other hand, the Marxist school adopts a class approach and tries to explain nationalism in terms of class conflict. It is explained through concepts like economic determinism and, materialistic interpretation of history. The left thinkers dwell on the nexus between Indian capital and British capital. This school claims that, it is the bourgeoisie leadership which steered the movement ...to subserve their own interests (Mukherjee, 1996). It however overlooks the contribution of leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhash Chandra Bose, who were instrumental in infusing socialistic principles into the Indian National Congress, thereby enabling the formation of a grand coalition of different classes and castes.

Another historian of the Marxist school, Sumit Sarkar adopts a more balanced approach in contending that there were two levels of anti-imperial struggles- one influenced by elites and the other influenced by the masses. He concludes that instead of ignoring either of the two levels, one ought to look at the complex interaction between the two levels. As such complex interactions also reveal the pulls, pressures and compromises of nationalism in India (Sarkar, 1983). The later day historian, Bipin Chandra in his book, *India's Struggle for Independence*

offers such an explanation. He demonstrates two types of contradictions that existed in India; the primary, of the interests of Indian people conflicting with those of the British rulers, and the secondary contradiction, within the Indian society owing to its sheer diversity. The secondary contradictions were however often downplayed in the interest of resolving the primary and thus nationalist ideas gradually gained hegemony (Chandra et.al 1989). National leaders like Gandhi and Nehru were keenly aware that India was not a well-defined or a structured nation like Spain, Italy, France or Germany in Europe. It is interesting how, during the nationalist struggle diverse groups submerged their conflicting interests to unite under one umbrella of leadership.

The Cambridge school of thought dismisses such grand narratives of Indian nationalism. The narrative depicts Indian nationalism as nothing but a series of localized movements (Bayly, 1975). According to the school, the British couldn't have pursued imperialistic policies in such a vast and diverse territory without the support of the local satraps. They imply that since imperialism is weak, nationalism which grew out of such weak contestations could not be grand. This view was contested by the Indian historian, Tapan Raychaudhuri who pointed out that the school takes a reductive view of Indian nationalism by disregarding a whole host of other factors that shaped nationalist consciousness in India, it reduces nationalism to a state of "Animal Politics" (Raychaudhuri & Habib eds. 1982). Another mainstream narrative of Indian nationalism, postulated by historians like Romila Thapar and R.C. Mazumdar are also leftist in orientation. They opine that there was not much evidence of nationalism in the Indian subcontinent before the advent of the European colonizers, particularly the British (Mazumdar, 1962)

Finally, we would like to juxtapose these different schools of thought with a controversial view posted by the radical thinker, V.D. Savarkar. In his book *Hindu Rastra Darshan*, Savarkar equates the concept of Bharatavarsha as " 'Pitrubhoo' and 'Punyaboo' - the fatherland and the Holyland of Hindudom," where he chooses to link these concepts with national consciousness, as a refutation to the colonial view that nationalism in India was fostered through colonial intervention of British rule (Savarkar, 1949). He writes, "Everyone who regards and claims this Bharatbhoomi from, the Indus to the Seas as his Fatherland and Holyland is a Hindu. Here I must point out that it is rather loose to say that any person professing any religion of Indian origin is a Hindu. Because that is only one aspect of Hindutva. The second and equally essential constituent of the concept of Hindutva cannot be ignored if we want to save the definition from getting overlapping and unreal. It is not enough that a person should profess any religion of Indian origin, i.e., Hindustan as his Holyland, but he must also recognise it as his too, his Fatherland as well" (Savarkar, 1949) One may note here, that Savarkar's view of India is at variance with the other dominant idea of the nation that was earlier introduced by Bankim Chandra who had imagined the nation as a motherland.

Hence, as Anderson asserts the nation has been differently imagined by different thinkers. The rise of national consciousness in India has thus been differently explained by different schools. Conflicting narratives persist adding further layers of complexity to the understanding of the national narrative.

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