

"A man is
great by
deeds, not by
birth"

-Chanakya

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Project Indian Nationalism: Synthesis of Indic Civilization and European Governance?

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Abstract

Nation is a Western construct but is a popular one in Indian political parlance. The idea of the nation is not as incontrovertible as we may think. The European origin of this word was lost in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century when Indian leaders attempted to create an Indian nation by claiming equivalence to the Western nations. These leaders, from Aurobindo Ghose to Mahatma Gandhi, were aware of their construct but did as a means for securing respect to the people. The end result is the creation of the Indian Nationalism.

Keywords: Nation, Nationalism, Indian Nationalism, Civilization, Westphalia

1 Introduction

The idea of nation is a story the Europeans have told the non-Europeans for the last a few centuries since the Treaty of Westphalia. The medieval Europe was suffering from religious wars, notably between the Catholics and the Protestant forces. After much bloodshed—an estimated eight million people perished in the Thirty Years' War till the Treaty of Westphalia—the Europeans realised that instead of arriving at a common religious principle for all man, it is wise to banish religion from the sphere of governance altogether. Along with this secularisation, the sovereignties for political system were created. Before secularization of the European polity, the kings used to derive their legitimacy from God's mandate. After secularization, the legitimacy of the kings needed creation of nations. The kings, now, were understood to be the first member of their respective nations. The Treaty of Westphalia was the watershed moment for recognition of nation as a sovereign structure in the present age. After this treaty, it was understood that none of the sovereignties should invade another one.

In the secularised European worldview dominated by nationality, glorification of religion was not a goal to be pursued by the governments but was rather replaced by the idea of glorification of own nation. The genesis of nationalism can be detected to twofold phenomenon of recognition of nation as the independent and sovereign unit of governance and gradual strengthening of democracy in European governance post French revolution (1789–99). The population needs to be told a story for receiving their consent toward aggressive imperialistic policies used by the European powers in a government. Of course, this necessity grew with strengthening of democracy. In a government where the populace has some say, the decision maker must take them on-board for effective implementation and

cooperation. Therefore, the narrative of nationalism started dominating European political system.

A nation is an imaginary political community as Benedict Anderson famously stated . The idea of nation comes with a prefixed geographic boundary, a shared history, a particular cultural outlook and a preferred language . All these are deemed as ideal by nationalism. A nation is the sovereign unit of governance. The word independence denotes if a nation is capable of governing itself. What exactly is the goal of governance for a nationalist?

Government must aim for development and glorification of the nation. Nationalism combines civilization, history, geography, language and government in a melting pot, and infuses a nation out of it.

This European idea was made completely an Indian by the Indian national leaders. They were forthcoming in *claiming* the existence of a nationalism of different variety called Indian nationalism. It was a matter of claiming equality with the colonizers. The leaders of “Indian nationalism” did not pay attention to the construct called nation.

This simplification is tempting. Indeed yes. And then, pages after pages, books after books, have been written to discuss the problems of hyper nationalism. How nationalism makes that proverbial simple soul equate his own entity and own ego to that of an imaginary entity called a nation. Acting out of imagination without reality is a potential source of danger. That by an imaginary narrative people can be misled, is the argument presented by the critics of nationalism. Our goal does not necessarily involve to endorse or oppose nationalism but simply to demonstrate that there was no such construct called nationalism in our civilizational domain.

2 Civilization and Nation: A Case of Mistransaltion

Indic civilisation does consider good governance of the motherland as a worthy goal. As a matter of fact anarchy has been much decried in the Indic civilizational texts. However, Indic civilization’s idea of governance has three significant differences with nationalism. The first difference is that the civilizational or cultural unit need not be same as unit of government. A nationalist says proudly that his nation is his state. In the same breath, he says that his nation is his culture. A nation infuses cultural hegemony to governance. But for the Indic civilization, the cultural world could be called Bharat-varṣa or Aryavarta or Jambudvip—the different names of the geography under Indic civilization. The concept of the ten dikpālas are

pertinent here who represent forces of the same Indic civilization but are located in different regions to oversee that region. This decentralized protection of the civilization is unimaginable for a nation but readily appreciated in the Indic civilization.

Some from the nationalist camp may counter my hypothesis of non-existence of the idea of nation in India. In his defence, he could cite examples of Hindu emperors who have conquered India and tried to forge an empire. What did exactly Chanakya imagine when he attempted to create unification of Indian states and make his disciple Chandragupta Maurya the emperor? Was not that like forging a nation when none existed at all? Was that not exactly what Giuseppe Mazzini did for Italy? How was not Chanakya India's Mazzini? Why did Samudragupta conquer India if not to forge a nation? How was not Samudragupta India's Otto von Bismarck? One could go on and on and call each of India's emperors India's _____ (fill up the gap with one's favourite European statesman of eminence)!

At this point is time, it is imperative to remember that external observation wise similarity may not at all mean a similar conceptual idea. Many examples in different disciplines testify to this phenomenon of external observational similarity in spite of no internal connection. Here is a good example from linguistics. Persian 'bad' (as in Persian-Urdu badmāś, badnām) sounds similar to English "bad", and for these cited words, the two also have the same meaning. From this external similarity, one would feel like concluding about their inner similarity of being cognate words; yet on closer examination, these words are not at all cognate. It is concluded that Persian 'bad' is unrelated to English bad, despite phonetic and semantic identity. In biology, a whale, externally speaking, behaves like a giant fish but the internal evolutionary story is very different—a whale is a mammal whereas fishes are oviparous. Unification or conquering of states to forge an empire and unification of states to give rise to a nation may externally look somewhat similar but internally they are not simply comparable.

Nations tend to emphasize on uniformity of law. Each individual from a nation has the exact same relationship to the state which is why uniformity of law for any and every citizen of the nation is considered a characterization of the national identity. However, in the Indic civilization, the uniformization of the code of law was not attempted. The idea of law was always context specific. Manu is one of the first persons to offer the philosophy of law. He offers four sources for making the law of the land : the Vedas (Sruti), tradition (Smrti) of the civil society, the customs of the respected persons and lastly individual pursuit of happiness.

The first two sources were stated to be superior compared to the last two sources in case of some contradiction between them.

The Vedas are essentially the spiritual tradition of the land whereas like the Smrtis represent the social tradition. These traditions evolve. The Smrtis are time-specific. If we go for a written description of the living tradition, the written description would, understandably, depend upon time and place. This is exactly why the Smrtis were rewritten in every age. The idea of rewriting is acknowledged by awarding the tradition as the highest source of legal code. This is quite bottom-up approach of making a law. If “modern” is an adjective to describe a positive thing then use of tradition as law is definitely a modern notion, even though it was an ancient phenomenon. However, this law violates the idea of nation in which all citizens are the same. For a particular land, the custom handed down in regular succession among the varṇas (occupation and education wise division of man) is called the conduct of virtuous men. No nation-specific law but an assortment of laws based on place, age, occupation and education is the essence of Indic civilizational idea.

3 The Idea of Governance in Indic Civilization

The crucial difference between nationalism and governance by the notion of Indic civilization lies in the purpose of governance. What is the purpose of the nation? Welfare of the citizens of the nation, what else! What exactly constitutes this welfare is perhaps not easy to address but definitely nationalism, by its nature, will not have any higher goal to look beyond nation. The purpose of governance in Indic civilization is promotion of True Self (called ātman) as the human life goal, as is with all the institutions of Indic civilization. All Indic schools consider present plain of existence as manifestation of a deeper reality which is permanent and free from other deficiencies of present plain of existence resulting in grief and misery. The goal is to return back to that deeper reality rather than keep hopping from one state of present plane of existence to another one. Development of daivi sampads (divine characteristics) is desired to reach this goal of returning to “original state” of deeper reality rather than being stuck in its manifested state and suffer. A Buddhist calls this deeper reality as Śūnya (pervasive emptiness) while the Upanishads will call it Brahman (ubiquitous consciousness); similar terminology exists for other Indic philosophies.

The governance which serves this above-mentioned human life-goal for all, is called Swaraj. Swaraj consists of two words, Sva + Rāj. “Sva” means the deepest human existence or True Self or ātman. The True Self must not change by definition. Can our body be called our True self? Indeed, No, as our body changes continuously over time – from childhood to youth to old age. Can our mind be called our true self? Again, No. Our mind too changes continuously, coloured by different emotions in different situations. Only pure consciousness can be called Sva. The rule of this pure consciousness brings no problem to anyone as this True Self—the pure consciousness—is the self-same for all. The second syllable, Rāj means governance. Swaraj connotes the governance of the True Self.

No absolute sovereignty

Nations are sovereign. For a nationalist, a different nation’s sovereignty needs to be respected if it causes to harm to his own nation. In Indic civilization, someone negating and extinguishing the universal natural order (“Ṛta”) should be punished in tandem with the idea of the daivī sampads. One of the divine qualities namely “tejas” requires man to oppose oppressors with due strength. And, yet again, the protagonist needs to be careful about maintaining various daivī sampads like modesty, gentleness and ahimsā while continuing his opposition to the oppressor. This notion of duty to humanity marks the third difference between Swaraj and Nationalism.

This particular anti-oppression notion as a policy of governance was demonstrated by Śrī Kṛṣṇa in Mahābhārata. Jarāsandha was the king of Magadha who harboured an ambition to be unconquerable. Śrī Kṛṣṇa reprimanded him severely for imprisoning those eighty six kings and also for his plan to kill them in a ritual to please Śiva. Here are Śrī Kṛṣṇa’s exact words from Mahabharata (Jarasandha Vadha Parva, Sabha Parva, chapter 20):

“...O king! The Kshatriyas who live in this world have been abducted by you. Having committed this cruel act, how can you think of yourself as innocent? O supreme among kings! How can a king do violence to honest kings? Having oppressed the kings, you wish to sacrifice them to Rudra. O Brihadratha’s son! This act of yours may touch us too. We follow dharma and are capable of protecting dharma. Human sacrifices have never been seen. Why do you wish to sacrifice humans to the god Shankara? You are of the same varna. Yet, you are treating those of the same varna as animals. O Jarasandha! Is there any other mind that is as perverted as yours? We help all those who are distressed. For the protection of our kin, we have come here to

counter you, the one who is acting so as to destroy our kin. O king! If you think that there is no man among the kshatriyas of the world who can do this, your mind is greatly deluded....”

4 The Making of “Indian Nationalism”

If India had her understanding of Swaraj, how has the myth of Swaraj being Indian Nationalism developed? No suitable word exists—in Indic dictionary—for nation. In the colonial times, India encountered the political system called nationalism when British education system replaced our system. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee was the first graduate of Calcutta University. A man of distinction by his own right, he was one of the pioneers of the Bengali Renaissance. It may be mentioned here that when “Indian nationalism” grew in the early twentieth century with Indian National Congress, Bengal was at the forefront of Indic cultural revival. Bankim Chandra’s iconic novel *Anandamath*, published in 1882 CE, is considered his masterpiece on “Indian Nationalism”. One of the characters of the novel describes the motivation for their rebel movement :

“If you place your feet on a serpent, even that serpent raises its hood. Do you ever lose your patience? Look at all the lands—Magadha, Mithila, Kashi, Kanchi, Delhi, Kashmir. In which of these countries, do people eat grass? Or weed? Or parts of termite mound? In which of these lands, do people eat jackals and dogs? In which land, do people eat corpses? In which country, do people face problems to have money in chest, to use sacred stones for rituals, or to even keep wives and daughters at home? Dire consequences await for our pregnant wives and daughters at home. Their bellies are made open to take the embryo out. In all countries, the king as his duty must protect the subjects. Where is our Muslim king to save us from these miseries of life? We lost our virtuous conducts, lost the tradition of our jāti (caste), lost dignity, lost family tradition, now even our life is on the verge of being lost. How can we save the Hinduness of the Hindus without driving out these inebriated bearded men (slag targeted to Muslims)?”

This clearly shows that the speaker is not worried about having a Muslim king per se. He is worried about terrible law and order condition and governance. His complaint against the Muslim king is that he and his administration failed the loyal subjects. Many consider Bankim Chandra’s works, most notably *Anandamath*, as the genesis of Hindu nationalism.

The speaker indeed considers himself a Hindu and worried about protecting Hindu Culture. But where is an iota of Indian (or Hindu) nationalism in his statement? It may hereby be noted that he considers all the different regions of India as separate lands and appreciates the good governance in those lands. He does not have any goal for a single government in the entire India. He is only worried about good governance or about Swaraj.

Meanwhile, the Westerners were watching at growing Indian civilizational consciousness. To fit this civilizational aspiration for Swaraj into their own framework, they called it a Nationalism. Once it is a nationalism, it has to be that of “Indian” variety. Allan Octavian Hume, a retired British civil servant, founded the Indian National Congress in 1885 and this is possibly the official recognition for the term of “Indian nation” or “Indian nationalism”. For the Indians, the term was quite confusing from their understanding of the civilizational consciousness and they interpreted it in their own way. At that moment for a colonised country, to challenge the Western framework of governance was a luxury that they could not afford, particularly when all they wanted was to be heard by the British rulers. Being born out of Indic civilizational ideas, they, understandably, interpreted the word “nation” in their own way as they deem it fit. Hindus attempted to fit it as in the sense of their own civilizational entity. Therefore, we see Bal Gangadhar Tilak, the fierce “Indian Nationalist”, did not ask for his nation’s independence but said, “Swaraj is my birthright and I shall have it.”

Gandhi and the Final Seal at the Indian Nationalism

It is not only about Tilak but who’s who of “Indian nationalism” of those times, all were hesitant to use the Western terms like “independence. The famous extremist nationalist leader Aurobindo Ghose—in his Uttarpara speech in 1909—explained why “Hindu Nation” is something different from other nations. It is because of “Sanatana Dharma”. Since nationalism for India was a settled fact, the only way out is that it is a different nationalism.

At the same time, Muslims in India understood the word “Nation” from their own perspective. In 1888, at Meerut, Sir Syed Ahmed delivered an influential speech in which he effectively described the Muslims of the world as a nation—Islamic Ummah, so to say. For example, regarding the population distribution of Bengal, he commented:

“As regards Bengal, there is, as far as I am aware, in Lower Bengal a much larger proportion of Mahomedans than Bengalis. And if you take the population of the whole of Bengal, nearly half are Mahomedans and something over half are Bengalis.”

Clearly the Muslim Bengalis for whom the native language is Bengali, could not be Bengalis for Sir Syed Ahmed but only Muslims. He rather categorically found that India “is inhabited by two different nations — who drink from the same well, breathe the air of the same city, and depend on each other for its life.”

Gandhi put the final seal to this project of Indian Nationalism. In his book *Hind Swaraj*, he laid down the plan. The plan is a continuation of the story told before. Gandhi loudly claimed that India has nationalism and it is very much a nation. This story is made complete with the Government of India Act 1935. Under this act, the idea of an India which may not have Burma in it was recognized. This act also paved the way for standardization of language and law across India.

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