

On Nationalism: An Essential Reading in the Past, Present and Future of India through the Historic Prisms of Politics, Law and Culture

Hasanuzzaman Biswas

Assistant Professor of English

Hiralal Mazumdar Memorial College for Women

Dakshineswar, Kolkata – 35

While reading *On Nationalism* (2016) for the first time, it felt more like an argument than a book delving deep into the origin, history and politics of the concept and practice of nationalism in India. Historian Romila Thapar, lawyer A.G. Noorani and cultural scholar Sadanand Menon appear deeply troubled in their arguments by the turn India is taking since 2014, when a new assertive nationalism has begun to grow, one which sees the expression of different opinions as a sign of treason and encourages its adherents to oppose the dissidents vehemently, mocking them to leave the country, questioning the patriotism of those who no longer feel safe in the country. Thus, a set of questions pertaining to nationalism remains central to the arguments offered by the three eminent scholars in their essays in the book: “What is nationalism? What is pseudo-nationalism? Who is an anti-national? Is the shouting of nationalist slogans important to prove one’s patriotism? What sort of India do we want? What sort of [a] country do we want to leave behind for [our] future generations?” A multi-everything nation like India simply cannot have one unified view of its nationalism. The freedom fighters who moulded Indian nationalism appreciated the granularity and nuances of Indian identity, a composite whole created by centuries of intermingling and cultural exchanges. Jawaharlal Nehru saw it as an “ancient palimpsest on which layer upon layer of thought and reverie had been inscribed, and yet no succeeding layer had completely...erased what had been written previously.” In the very “Foreword” to these essays, Aleph’s publisher alludes to George Orwell’s “Notes on Nationalism” (1945) to tell us what actually goes in the minds of many regarding the difference between nationalism and patriotism:

By “patriotism” I mean devotion to a particular place and a particular way of life, which one believes to be the best in the world but has no wish to force on other people...Nationalism, on the other hand, is inseparable from the desire for power. The abiding purpose of every nationalist is to secure more power and prestige, not for himself but for the nation or the other unit in which he has chosen to sink his individuality (pp. x-xi).¹

The three essays in the book celebrate that pre-2014 view of India, which was at least premised on civility towards all, respect for the dignity of the other, and a syncretic understanding of a common adventure of being Indians. It was not elite-driven; it was consistent with Indian tradition. As the historian Romila Thapar demonstrates, in her opening essay “Reflections on Nationalism and History”, the nationalism that the BJP and its Hindutva project personifies is drawn from the Westernized notion of what constitutes India, which essentializes India as a nation of different and irreconcilable religions (or languages).

She systematically destroys Hindutva by showing its nativism to be the result of a colonial project. The real Macaulayites, then, are not the so called “pseudo-secular” liberals whom the pseudo-patriots decry, but Hindutva adherents themselves—who derive their world view, in reality, from the one constructed by the triumvirate of Mill-Macaulay-Müller (James Mill, who Thapar credits with originating the two-nation theory, Thomas Macaulay, who authored the infamous Minute of 1835, and Friedrich Max Müller, the German Orientalist who saw Aryan—and hence Hindu—civilization as supreme). Thapar reminds readers, quoting the late Benedict Anderson from *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, how nationalism was constructed by people who thought of themselves as a community with common perceptions that united them. Creating exclusionary zones and separating groups wasn’t part of the nationalist project. She lays stress on the way history is caricatured by its focus on dynasties and conflicts, missing the plurality that the experiences of women, Dalits, Adivasis and other marginalized groups has brought, enriching the narrative, adding new layers to that palimpsest Nehru wrote about. “Why do we not ask Dalits and Adivasis what nationalism means to them?” she asks (the answer is blowing in the winds that rose out of Una).

In his lucid and yet fierce essay “Nationalism and Its Contemporary Discontents in India”, the notable lawyer and author A G Noorani hints at the dangers of applying the law of Sedition indiscriminately against writers, artists, activists, students and political opponents while showing how the law of Sedition has actually no place in Post-Independence India. It’s originally based on the racist principles of Colonialism, under which “ignorant and excitable” masses couldn’t be trusted with freedoms. He notes that the incremental steps of the drafters of the Constitution and court judgements (as in the Case of Romesh Thapar v. the State of Madras, 1950) defended freedom of expression until the 1962 Kedar Nath Singh Case, which upheld restrictions on freedom of expression. It remains on the statute books, undermining the Constitution’s liberal, democratic aspirations, and the state uses it (as it did in the case of the Jawaharlal Nehru University Students Union leader Kanhaiya Kumar). Thus, in his coda, Noorani excoriates the BJP and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh over the “Bharat Mata ki Jai” controversy, showing the spurious basis of the slogan’s emergence as a litmus test of what he considers pseudo-patriotism, creating a new national myth built around a militarized mother-goddess.

In the final essay titled “From National Culture to Cultural Nationalism”, senior journalist and cultural activist Sadanand Menon talks about the perils of destroying the nation’s vibrant culture by forcing it to conform to theological and other imperatives. Menon actually shows that the early illustration of the so-called “Bharat Mata” came from a gentle Banga Mata that Abanindranath Tagore drew at the height of the movement against the division of Bengal. But that soft, radiant image got militarized later into an armed Durga or Kali, by way of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay’s *Anandamath*. He highlights five aspects that reveal the pernicious effect of the new nationalism: its “engagement with the past, with politics, with issues of gender, with constructions of culture, and with its fascination with violence”. He astutely contrasts the hypocritical veneration of “Bharat Mata” in a society that has overlooked “the barbarity of the jawans of the Assam Rifles on (Thangjam) Manorama Devi, to incessant mass rapes by soldiers in Kashmir, to the graphic and horrific

brutalities...in Gujarat in 2002...." Martha Nussbaum's prescient *The Clash Within: Democracy, Religious Violence and India's Future* comes to mind here. Menon also points out the online misogyny of Hindutva adherents when they face strong, assertive women with whom they disagree, such as Teesta Setalvad, Kavita Krishnan, Arundhati Roy and Shehla Rashid. He also draws examples from art—the hounding of M.F. Husain being the most famous—and cinema, and recalls the murders of writers Narendra Dabholkar, Govind Pansare and M.M. Kalburgi, praising the writers and artists returning state awards in reaction to such brutalities.

Thus, to speak truly and honestly, the three essays in the book somehow present a bleak view of India (the book's cover is also appropriately dark grey for that matter) and remind those who strive for pluralism how difficult the task remains. Early on in the book, Romila Thapar appears quite apt to cite the British historian Eric Hobsbawm's comparison between the role of history to nationalism and that of the poppy to a heroin addict. Little wonder then when the flag-waving, slogan-shouting patriots assert – 'My country, right or wrong.' As G.K. Chesterton observed, that is a bit like saying - "My mother, drunk or sober." Rabindranath Tagore considered nationalism an "evil" and so criticized it in his novels *Gora* and *Ghare Baire* and in his lecture-series *Nationalism*. And even though Mohandas Gandhi could not embrace Tagore's philosophy of humanism and universalism, he would still write in 1921: "I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any." That showed healthy confidence in oneself and openness towards others. Thus, to put it in a nutshell, today's nationalists lack confidence in themselves and so they retreat into a shrill, narrower identity, the book's essayists argue.

ⁱ Davidar, D. "Foreword" to Romila Thapar, A G Noorani and S Menon's (ed.) *On Nationalism*. New Delhi: Aleph Book Company, 2016. Print. All other quotations are from this edition.