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Expression of Nationalism in *Riot* and *My Country My Life*

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Abstract:

The concept of nation is quite complex and problematic to the core. Its allied terms, nationality and nationalism are equally difficult to define as well as to analyze. Despite their ambiguity and inherent vagueness, these terms are undoubtedly powerful and influential. Truly, nationalism as a trend and tendency is consistently on the rise. Indian nationalism is a unique phenomenon in itself. The nationalist spirit was kindled in the Indian mind mainly during the British regime. However, the attainment of independence immediately followed by the division of the nation brought about a sober recognition of the dangers that lay ahead. The evils of Partition revealed the brutality of communal hatred that threatened to tear into pieces the starry-eyed optimistic vision of an integral nation. Indian English literature, novel in particular, too echoed this paradigm shift in attitude. While pre-independence fiction remained too deeply implicated in the process of nation-building, the contemporary literature is more introspective and focused on the complexities of human relationship. Yet there are occasional glimpses of nationalist writing in varied forms. The destruction of the controversial Babri Masjid on 6th December, 1992 was perhaps the most crucial event that triggered a fresh debate on the ideology of nationalism. The post-Babri destruction literature- both fiction and non-fiction- touches upon different aspects of nationalism. The present article attempts to examine two representative works of recent times- *Riot* (2001), a novel by Shashi Tharoor, and *My Country My Life* (2008), Lalkrishna Advani's seminal autobiography. These works have been chosen deliberately as they offer a substantial commentary on the nationalist agenda.

Keywords: *My Country My Life*, *Riot*, Shashi Tharoor, Lalkrishna Advani, Nationalism

The concept of nation is quite complex and problematic to the core. Its allied terms, nationality and nationalism are equally difficult to define as well as to analyze. Despite their ambiguity and inherent vagueness, these terms are undoubtedly powerful and influential. "Nations... have no clearly identifiable births, and their deaths, if they ever happen, are never natural... the nation's biography cannot be written evangelically", opines Benedict Anderson (Anderson 1983:205). Hugh Seton-Watson, a well-known historian, rightly remarks: "I am driven to the conclusion that no "scientific definition" of the nation can be devised; yet the phenomenon has existed and exists" (Seton-Watson 1977:5). Truly, nationalism as a trend and tendency is consistently on the rise. No wonder, the United Nations admits new members almost

every year; and many 'old' nations, once regarded consolidated and unified, are challenged by 'sub' nationalisms within their borders. Thus Anderson's following observation, made nearly thirty years ago, still sounds convincing: "... the 'end of the era of nationalism'... is not remotely in sight. Indeed nationness is the most universally legitimate value in the life of our time" (Anderson 1983:3). Regionalism, an offshoot of nationalism, is gaining tremendous momentum in recent times. Its seriousness should not be overlooked because the ultimate aim and disguised dream of a separate region is to be a separate nation.

Nation is basically a political entity. It is supposed to be an organic unit, with a social hierarchy, cooperation between the different classes and common political goals. Anderson proposes the most widely acceptable definition of nation as "an imagined political community... imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (Anderson 1983:6). The attribute *imagined*, to him, connotes that members of even the smallest nation have no knowledge of or acquaintance with most of their fellow members. Without communication of any sort, they carry in their minds the image of their communion. Nationalism thus emphasizes collective identity; it presupposes that all individuals in a nation be autonomous, united and culturally or ethnically homogenous. All these assumptions are practically baseless and utopian. There is no single nation in the world that exactly fits into this ideal concept. Moreover, nationalism has many adverse implications. That is the reason why this notion has been criticized on many grounds.

What *constitutes* a nation is itself a perennial point of debate. It is argued that "nation" is an artificial construct and a *cultural artifact*. Human history records that nationalism has been employed as a fatal tool to cause conflict and war between nations. As the two World Wars exemplify, nationalism has often been exploited to encourage innocent citizens to partake in the nations' fights. It tends to submerge individual identity within a national whole. Thus nationalism is divisive and potentially oppressive. Under the lure of "patriotism", it misleads millions to the wrong path of violence and bloodshed. Foremost, unlike most other isms, nationalism does not have any rational underpinning. There is no theoretical foundation to it, neither has it produced any renowned proponent. As a result, liberalists associate it with a kind of mania or disorder. For Tom Nairn, nationalism is:

the pathology of modern developmental history, as inescapable as "neurosis" in the individual, with much the same essential ambiguity attaching to it, a similar in-built capacity for descent into dementia, rooted in the dilemmas of helplessness thrust upon most of the world, and largely incurable (Nairn 1977:359).

Indian nationalism is a unique phenomenon in itself. Basically, India is unlike any other country in the world. It is a land made and unmade by a host of invaders, a place populated by almost every racial type in the globe, where people speak 17 major languages and around 22,000 dialects. The nationalist spirit was kindled in the Indian mind mainly during the British regime. Fight for independence nurtured the seed of patriotism to its full potency. In fact, the nationalist upsurge, as M K Naik remarks, "stirred the entire Indian society to the roots to a degree and on a scale unprecedented earlier" (Naik 1982:118). However, the attainment of independence immediately followed by the division of the nation brought about a sober recognition of the

dangers that lay ahead. The evils of Partition revealed the brutality of communal hatred that threatened to tear into pieces the starry-eyed optimistic vision of an integral nation. Indian English literature, novel in particular, too echoed this paradigm shift in attitude. While pre-independence fiction remained too deeply implicated in the process of nation-building, the contemporary literature is more introspective and focused on the complexities of human relationship. Meenakshi Mukherjee points out the same fact in the following words: "... in spite of the fact that some Indo-Anglican novelists are still attempting to recapture the recent historical past, majority of the writers since 1950 have turned inwards to more private and personal concerns" (Mukherjee 2005:189). Yet there are occasional glimpses of nationalist writing in varied forms. The destruction of the controversial Babri Masjid on 6th December, 1992 was perhaps the most crucial event that triggered a fresh debate on the ideology of nationalism. The post-Babri destruction literature- both fiction and non-fiction- touches upon different aspects of nationalism. The present paper attempts to examine two representative works of recent times- *Riot* (2001), a novel by Shashi Tharoor, and *My Country My Life* (2008), Lalkrishna Advani's seminal autobiography. These works have been chosen deliberately as they offer a substantial commentary on the nationalist agenda.

Tharoor and Advani make an interesting combination. Despite the fact that both of them share the same platform today, that of active politics, they are two poles apart in many ways. Tharoor is (ill) known for his outspoken nature and uncompromising bent of mind; Advani as a seasoned strategist, knows when to bend and bow. As Atal Bihari Vajpayee, his life-long friend and comrade aptly observes in the Foreword to *My Country My Life*: "He has never compromised on his core belief in nationalism, and yet displayed flexibility in political responses whenever it was demanded by the situation" (XIX). Tharoor heads the second-generation of elite diplomats, while Advani belongs to the first generation of *swayamsevak*-turned politicians. Born in London, brought up in Mumbai and Calcutta, and served in the US, Tharoor boasts of a truly global perspective. Advani, on the other hand, carries a painful history of migration and dislocation from Karachi to Delhi. Tharoor's concept of nationalism is a broader one, based on his scholarly understanding. "Indian nationalism", he states, "is a rare animal indeed. It is not based on language... geography... ethnicity... religion. Indian nationalism is the nationalism of an idea, the idea of an ever-ever land that is greater than the sum of its contradictions" (Tharoor 1997:31). To him, "India is a thali, a selection of sumptuous dishes in different bowls. Each tastes different, and does not necessarily mix with the next, but they belong together on the same plate, and they complement each other in making the meal a satisfying repast" (qtd. in Srinivasan 1997: 11). Advani, however, displays a staunch belief in religion-based nationalism, though he often speaks of the 'theme of cultural nationalism' (Advani 2008: XXVIII). Thus, while he laments that "the Ayodhya movement followed a course that I had not envisaged" and calls 6th December, 1992 "the saddest day of my life", he also boasts that this movement "brought to the fore people's revulsion for pseudo-secularism, as practised by the Congress party, communists and some other parties, and projected my party, the BJP, as a spirited champion of genuine secularism" (Advani 2008: XXXI- XXXII). This unusual combination of pain and pride complicates his stance on this sensitive issue.

Riot has a background of the communal riots and mass unrest unleashed by the Ramjanmabhoomi >< Babri Masjid controversy. It reports the murder of a 24 year old American

girl named Priscilla Hart in India. A volunteer with an NGO, Priscilla is staying in an Indian town, Zaligarh, where she is stabbed to death all of a sudden. The investigation of the case leads to nowhere and the mystery remains unsolved. As is clear in the course of the narrative, the story is actually about a larger topic than the undoing of an innocent foreigner -- the latent fragmentation of the secular Indian republic. The novel foregrounds the concept of a plural society on the backdrop of the fanatic notion of nationhood. The focus of the novel is two-fold; it reveals an inner world of emotional complexities while presenting the violent ideological battle in the outer world. From Priscilla's letters and diary-entries, we come to know about her complex love affair with a married District Magistrate named V. Lakshman. This relationship promises to cross all barriers of region, religion and race. However, ironically enough, their affair proves frustratingly inconclusive only because of the difference between their cultural backgrounds. Both of them have entirely dissimilar notions of love, sex and marriage, fostered by their upbringing within diverse value systems. Lakshman precisely puts it thus:

She loves me, she says, and she means it. That is not love as my parents spoke of it, an emotion anchored in family ... in bonds of blood... It is instead love as I have read of it in Western books or seen in Western movies, an individual attraction between a man and a woman, a feeling that is independent of social context or familial connections. (p103)

Conditioned by an orthodox surrounding, Lakshman is incapable of surmounting the cultural barrier between the two. He too shares the prevalent assertion with his friend Gurinder, that "They are not like us" and that America is "a different country, a different culture, a different planet" (p185). Thus a sense of modernity is ultimately defeated by cultural hegemony.

Tharoor, through Priscilla's untimely end, shows how globalization has given rise to new, unexpected issues of conflict between individuals and social groups. This mindless hostility towards foreigners is equated by the long-lasting feeling of animosity between the Hindus and Muslims who are living with each other for centuries together. The reader is indirectly warned of the evil consequences of the insider-outsider debate. Communal violence, Tharoor asserts, is likely to obliterate all the differential marks of otherness only to hasten the emergence of a *perceived* homogeneous cultural identity. As Tirthankar Das Purkayastha, in his scholarly analysis of *Riot*, remarks:

The postmodern view of history as a human construct underlies Tharoor's reference to the myth of the birthplace of Rama as the subject of an ongoing debate, to which no solution seems to be in sight... The argument that the myth cannot be synonymous to history is undercut by a perception, shared by the historians and the novelists alike in the postmodern era, of the fictive nature of all histories... What is unfortunate, however, is that blood is spilled and precious human lives destroyed over symbols of religious faith, sometimes created out of a sense of political expediency. Cultural identities are

constructed around these symbols and depend on them for their own survival (Purkayastha 2010: 56-57).

My Country My Life is an engaging account of India's political evolution in the post-independence era. A rather bulky book, it comprises of nearly one thousand pages. The narrative is divided into five different phases as follows:

Phase One (About Independence and Partition)

Phase Two (About Migration to India)

Phase Three (About Entry into Active Politics)

Phase Four (About Ayodhya Movement & the Ratha Yatra)

Phase Five (About the NDA Rule, Home Ministership & Historic Visit to Pakistan)

The book promises to be a candid, if not ruthless, self-portrait of Advani as a person and a politician. With few exceptions, it is truly a testimony to what Advani is known for in his long-lasting political career: the gift of clarity of thought, strong conviction and forceful articulation. It provides a riveting and insightful version of Advani's early career as a political activist, his fight for democracy during the Emergency, his Ram Ratha Yatra for the reconstruction of the Ram Temple at Ayodhya that resulted in the biggest mass movement in India since Independence and catalysed a nationwide debate on the true meaning of secularism, and his peak time as India's Deputy Prime Minister as well as Home Minister in the Vajpayee-led alliance of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) between 1998 and 2004.

Advani, as a nationalist, has a staunch faith in Hinduism. His views on nationalism and nationhood are, therefore, shadowed by his religious awareness of being a Hindu. Thus "cultural nationalism", a term probably coined by he himself, too smells of fanaticism. He observes that there is an "age-old sense of cultural identity that binds the Indians of diverse castes, communities and religions into a natural national identity" (p XXVIII). However, as he further states:

... the Ayodhya movement opened my eyes to the deep-rooted influence of religion in the lives of Hindus of all castes and sects across the country... I realized that if this religiosity were to be channeled in a positive direction, it could unleash tremendous energy for national reconstruction (p XXXI).

As a matter of fact, however, this movement paved the way for tremendous destruction rather than construction and sowed the seeds of long-lasting religious hatred. According to Advani, the Ayodhya incident was an "explosion", brought about by the "utter disregard for the patience and tolerance of the majority community" (p352). For him, it is worthy to be called a truly historic 'movement' because it combined "the articulation of a collective aspiration of the masses" with "the assertion of the soul of the nation" (p353). He, however, does not define this 'soul' or disclose the secret how he perceived its existence in the 'body' of the nation. It is thus clear that his analysis of this serious and utterly tragic episode in the Indian history is firmly based on his religious ideology. He claims that Ram is "a unique symbol of India's national identity, unity and integration" (p 355). Unfortunately, he fails to realize the bitter reality that Ram is a beloved

idol of the upper caste Hindus, not of the destitute masses. Moreover, the feeling of *unity* and *integration* he finds among the Indian people is sham and superficial. Dr B R Ambedkar underlines the fatal flaw in the Hindu character as follows:

There is an utter lack among the Hindus of what sociologists call *consciousness of kind*. There is no Hindu consciousness of kind. In every Hindu, the consciousness that exists is the consciousness of his caste. That is the reason why the Hindus cannot be said to form a society or a nation...Similarity in habits and customs, beliefs and thoughts there is. But one cannot accept the conclusion that, therefore, the Hindus constitute a society. To do so is to misunderstand the essentials which go to make up a society (Ambedkar 1932: 126).

Curiously enough, Advani refers to Mahatma Gandhi, who had deep reverence for Ram, to justify his role in the Ayodhya movement. He also alludes to Gandhiji's long-cherished dream of the *Ram Rajya*. How, one wonders, does he entail that Gandhiji would have approved of the heinous act of forceful erection of the temple on the disputed land? Because, as he himself mentions, Gandhi viewed of Ram not as a Hindu deity, but as a divine force of universal brotherhood. To Advani, on the other hand, Ram is a symbol of orthodox Hindu pride. Thus it is scarcely surprising that, as a strong advocate of the Hindu cause, he makes a passionate appeal: "If Muslims are entitled to an Islamic atmosphere in Mecca, and if Christians are entitled to a Christian atmosphere in the Vatican, why is it wrong for Hindus to expect a Hindu atmosphere in Ayodhya?" (p366). Is it, after all, an apt exemplification of the Hindi saying, *Muh me Ram...?* Doesn't it seem to be a part of the RSS strategy of using and sacrificing Gandhi *naam* for convenience?

To sum up, a careful analysis of the two books associated with nationalism provides a premonition of its powerful presence in the human psyche. Tharoor tries to point out its vanity though he seems to admit that it is highly impossible to banish this notion from the Indian mind. Theory apart, a practical lesson to be learnt is that nationalism as a binding force and connecting link between otherwise alien individuals is quite handy. But adamant adherence to the projection of nationality in any form is destined to have disastrous effects.

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