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Nationalism and Nationhood in the Pre-Partitioned Indian Subcontinent

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Abstract:

The paper tries to explore and interrogate the concept of nation. Intelligentsia across the globe agrees to that there is no accurate definition of the term “nation” as it is ambiguous. According to Anderson it is an “imagined community” whereas Seton believes that no scientific definition of a nation can be devised. The absence of a clearly delineated concept of nation results in the ambiguity in the terms such as “nationality” and “nationalism”. The Paper efforts to understand the concept of nation, nationality and nationalism keeping in the view the pre partition Indian subcontinent. The paper, with the help of some interviews of partition survivors, also tries to look into the problematized concepts of nationality and cultural identity which later led into identity crisis in new acquired lands when people could not identify themselves with the land and people around.

Keywords: nation, nationalism, nationality, Indian partition, communities.

“If there are obstacles the shortest line between two points may well be a crooked line.”

(Brecht 92)

Benedict Anderson in his book *Imagined Communities* argues that a nation is not a creation of sociological determinants such as race, religion or language; they are the “imagined communities”. It is an “imagined community” since there exists a sense of connectivity that creates an image of an entire communion. Even the citizens of a small territory do not know each other. This indicates that any specific definition of a “nation” is problematic. The absence of a clearly delineated concept of nation results in the ambiguity in the terms such as “nationality” and “nationalism”. After a detailed study on the concept of “nation”, Hugh-Seton-Watson, the author of the celebrated book *Nations and States* concluded that “no ‘scientific definition’ of the nation can be devised; yet the phenomena has existed and exists” (5). Tom Nairn, the writer of

the magnum opus *The Break-Up of Britain: Crisis and Neo-Nationalism* states “The Theory of nationalism represents Marxism’s great historical failure” (317). Anderson too admits that this era is the “end of the era of nationalism” (3). However, it is the emotional and socio-cultural connect of the inhabitants to their land that makes a physical territory a nation.

Kedourie in his book *Nationalism* says about the theory of nation that “humanity is naturally divided into nations, that nations are known by certain characteristics which can be ascertained”, but he also believes that “only legitimate type of government is national self-government” (9). Kedourie further holds the view that it is most suitable for the ruling class to sustain this inequality. His last statement seems to support Anderson when he maintains that those who rule and those who are ruled belong to “different species of men”. Kedourie approach however raises the question regarding legitimacy: who has the right to govern and what agency empowers and determines it? Interestingly the realization by the developed nations of differences or uniqueness does become the main source of the emergence of the eastern nationalism. It is important to know that eastern nationalism and western nationalism are two different concepts by the virtue of their emergence. The western nationalism finds its roots of origin right in the era of enlightenment and revolution of the sixteenth century in European history. However, the eastern nationalism was more of an anti-colonial sentiment than the discovery and the pursuance of knowledge as in west. Anthony Smith in his book *Theories of Nationalism* asserts that eastern nationalism is perceived as an amalgamation of three ideals: “collective self-determination of people, the expression of national character and individuality, and finally the vertical division of the world into unique nations each contributing its special genius to the common fund of humanity” (23). Hence, in effect it reflects the essence of enlightenment by connecting liberation to knowledge. Smith further adds that nationalism is not “unreasonable application of enlightenment...it constitutes a necessary condition for the search for realistic conditions of liberty and equality, not to mention democracy, in already divided world” (15).

Partha Chatterjee in his book *The Nation and Its Fragments* objects to the claim that the west has given the “modular” of nationalism to the world. He asserts that the nationalism in the third world was “posited not on identity but rather on difference with the ‘modular’” (5). Though in the era of the seventeenth century the western effect of enlightenment can be seen in the social reforms but it was a political stance by the Regime. The eastern nationalism had still not been

realized by people. Nevertheless, it had started emerging and creating its own domain within colonial society even before the first revolution of 1887 to oust the Raj. According to Partha Chatterjee, eastern nationalism made its emergence by dividing the social and public institution and practices into two spheres- the material and the spiritual. The material sphere was an 'outside' domain consisting of economy, statecraft, science, and technology where "west had proved its superiority and the east had succumbed" (6). The spiritual sphere was an 'inner' domain that was constituted by the "'essential' marks of cultural identity" (6). These two spheres were in constant battle because the more the material domain was flourishing the more the need of preserving one's own culture was strongly felt.

The important feature of eastern or anti-colonial nationalism was that there was resistance against allowing the colonial power to interfere in the private domain of the spiritual. Rabindranath Tagore in his essay "Nationalism in the West" repudiates the efforts of intrusion in the national culture by the west. He maintains that though "we know that we walk barefooted upon a ground strewn with gravel, gradually our feet come to adjust themselves to the caprice of the inhospitable earth; while if the tiniest particle of a gravel finds its lodgement inside our shoes we can never forget and forgive its intrusion" (21). K.N.Panikkar in his essay "Culture, Nationalism and Communal Politics" seems to resonate Chatterjee and Tagore when he says, "Culture, in their perspective, was an area that colonialism was keen to conquer-either through appropriation or hegemonisation. The resistance and regeneration were responses to this colonial enterprise" (534). In India though formerly British Regime was allowed to intervene when it initiated social reforms such as the abolition of Sati Pratha but later despite the need for the change, intrusion into the 'national culture' was resisted. Panikkar adds that:

An upsurge of cultural manifestation progressively harden into an attempt, successful or not, to assert the cultural personality of the dominated people by an act of denial of the culture of the oppressor. Whatever the conditions of subjection of a people to foreign domination and the influence of economic, political, and social factors in the exercise of this domination, it is generally within the cultural factor that we find the germ of challenge which leads to the structuring and development of the liberation movement. (534)

The cultural factor that Panikkar talks about is the national unity that finds its basis in the diversified culture of India. Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, the well-known art historian of twentieth-century considers this plurality of culture as the strength of Indian subcontinent. In the book *Essays in National Idealism*, he maintains:

The diverse people of India are like the parts of some magic puzzle, seemingly impossible to fit together, but falling easily into place when once the key is known; and the key is that parts do fit together which we call national self-consciousness It would hardly be possible to think of an India in which no great Mughal had ruled, no Taj been built, or to which Persian art and literature were wholly foreign. (8)

The spiritual domain that Partha Chatterjee speaks of was never dominated by the British regime. The “imagined” nation of pre-partitioned Indian subcontinent that lied in the domain of spiritual or cultural was free flowing even when the “outer” domain was controlled by colonial power.

It is important to mention here that as per western ideology, India was never a nation. Rather it was seen as a geographical territory having various communities inhabiting in princely states. Ali.B.Sheikh in his article 'Political Parties and Their Motives' delineates the Eurocentric opinion about India when he writes:

Churchill, Birckenhead and Strachey are the supporters of the view that India is not a nation. According to them, India is a subcontinent in which people belonging to different races live and where people speak different languages and profess different religions and culture. In this respect, India is like Europe. Just as there are many nations in Europe, so there are many provinces in India. (361)

Churchill, Birckenhead and Strachey’s consideration about India as a subcontinent and not a nation had a logical grounding but it cannot be denied that in pre-colonial Indian subcontinent the two empowered groups comprised of who followed Islam and the others who followed Hinduism. Historians have traced the roots of the culture of Indian subcontinent to Aryan, Greek and Kushan invasions and the invaders becoming a part of it by adapting, adopting, and contributing to the existed faith, culture, and language. When Mughals propagated Islam, and converted many natives. They intermingled with the natives and later became a part

of the larger population. The language, as well as the culture of the subcontinent, has also been restructured and hybridized with the passage of time. Cecil Sandten in her essay “Reading Shakespeare in Postcolonial Literatures” remarks, “Every culture is— in a broader sense and to a certain extent— characterised by hybridity” (75). Salman Rushdie too, in his book *Imaginary Homelands*, also maintains, “Eclecticism, the ability to take from the world what seems fitting and to leave the rest, has always been a hallmark of the Indian tradition” (67). Due to the constant integration and reintegration in the cultural pattern through invasions and migrations, homogeneity is constantly challenged. Therefore, the culture of India is the conglomeration of various cultures giving birth to a commonality of certain patterns that represents the population of India.

Historically the *Bharatvarsh* of the *Puranas* was subjected to successive imperial hegemonies. Even if there always existed inner conflicts among the sovereignties, the subjects with multiple ethnicities adopted and adapted to the continually changing culture, in conjunction with the existing hegemony, generating an intertwined culture. During the colonial regime, not only both communities but also the other communities exhibited the eastern nationalism or the anti-colonial nationalism becoming a unified “imagined community”.

John Stuart Mill to some extent echoes Benedict Anderson when he considers a nation as “a sort of organic growth from the nature and life of that people: a product of their habits, instincts, and unconscious wants and desires, scarcely at all of their deliberate purposes” (206). Mill’s concept of the nation also finds consonance with Joginder Paul’s idea of a nation in *Sleepwalkers* where he maintains that it is the natives that make a land a nation. Moreover, this entwined national culture helped the notion of unity in diversity cultivated in people’s heart. David Aram Kaiser in his book *Romanticism, Aestheticism, And Nationalism* views the nation as a “political embodiment of the national culture of the people. This national culture is seen as constituting the people, rather than being constituted by people” (19). This unique culture constituted the national identity of the natives as Indians, discounting any undue domination of religion or ethnicity leading to syncretism.

India was a nation whose identity was delineated by the composite culture of various communities that exhibited a form of nationalism, which was not controlled by individualized ethnicities and institutions. Termed as cultural nationalism, it was exemplified by the nationalism

of pre-partitioned India a composite culture in which diverse communities merged to form a cultural macrocosm. The heterogeneous Indian society consisted of a substantial percentage of the population of each of multiple ethnic groups developing shared cultural beliefs, traditions, and common language, eliminating the exclusive historical characteristics of ancestry and race. The revolution of 1857 to overthrow the British regime is the foremost example of Hindu Muslim fraternity. However, after the 1857 revolution British regime started to emphasize the cultural and religious differences between Hindus and Muslims. Because of the policy of divide and rule, the two organizations Hindu Sabha and Muslim League became adversaries over the period of time. Muslim League, which was once a strong part of Congress, began to distance itself from it. In this phase, religious and communal identities became the base of cultural nationalism. Jinnah demanded an independent nation in his pursuit of authoritarian power. Religious and communal sentiments were incited to the minds of people against the "other". Jinnah proclaimed that the "Muslims are a nation according to any definition ...and they must have their homelands, their territory and their state" (Panikkar 545). Nehru seemed to be sensitive to the nuanced culture of India that encouraged multicultural Indian nationalism. In his book *The Discovery of India*, Nehru appreciates each culture's contribution towards creating a composite national culture, he maintains, "India was like some ancient palimpsest on which layer upon layer of thought and reverie has been inscribed, and yet no succeeding layer has completely hidden or erased what had been hidden previously" (46). Maulana Abul Kalam also seems to hold the same liberal views when he addressed the Ramgarh session at Presidential Address on 19 March 1940. He said, "Eleven hundred years of common history has enriched India with our common achievements. Our culture, our art, our dress, our manners and customs, the immediate happenings of our daily life, everything bears the stamp of our joint endeavour.... These thousand years of our joint life has moulded into a common nationality" (Panikkar 454-46). The Congress leader Gandhi was against the two-nation theory and mourned the growing hatred between the two communities. He lamented the collapse of Hindu Muslim fraternity and also imposed conversion during partition: "My whole soul rebels against the idea that Hinduism and Islam represent two antagonistic cultures and doctrines. ... I must rebel against the idea that millions of Indians who were Hindus the other day changed their nationality on adopting Islam as their religion" (546).

Notwithstanding general resistance towards the two-nation theory, the colonial regime had succeeded in the propaganda of divide and rule. The weakening of the sentiment of nationalism from the concept of liberty due to strengthening of the narrow concept of cast, creed, and race had led to a communally charged atmosphere. This pseudo nationalism based on race and ethnicity gave rise to “mindless chauvinism and xenophobia” that justified the structured violence and despotism (Chatterjee 2). The colonial powers manipulated the population to ensure the extension of its domination over the colonized. The colonial masters’ foremost priority was to foster the identity of the individual in accordance to his religion and ethnicity. The sentiment of nationalism was circumscribed itself accordingly, creating fissures amid communities. This breach resulted in new borders in world map, dividing the unified territory of India and creating new nation- states of West and East Pakistan, and later Bangladesh. This might be one of the main reasons that compelled Anderson to term nation as “imagined sovereign” where always exists “the allomorphism between each faith’s ontological claims and territorial stretch” (Imagined Communities 7). The people who fought in 1857 against the British regime were now swayed by the parochial communal sentiments with the plan of partition and separate nation-states being promoted by the national leaders. With the rise of sectarian nationalism at times resonated the ideologies of Nazism and Fascism the communities started targeting each other on the basis of religious and communal identities. The identity that is generated through religion, cast or race overwhelmed the identity that a secular nation accords. Unfortunately, with the former overpowering the latter it was further undermined by another narrower nationalism based on language, as seen in the rise of a new nation-state Bangladesh. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, in the province of Bengal, Muslims population outnumbered the Hindus. Their specific majority was concentrated in the eastern part of the province. Though the Muslim belonged to the class of peasants and labourers, their “beliefs and practices continued to have more in common with local cults than with the Islamic orthodoxies and courtly cultures of northern India” (Chatterji 6). The main reason for their demand for a Muslim nation-state was that the elite and feudal class in Bengal was constituted by the Hindus. Moreover, they were the first one to be benefited by the newly introduced western education system in India that later employed them in administration services. The British regime was said to usher the age of “destruction as well as regeneration” (Chatterjee 23). It created a Bengali bourgeois that was able to operate the British machinery according to the British regime. In Macaulay’s words, the

regime had created “a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinion, in morals and in intellect” (Smith 337-38). This change resulted in the emergence of two contradictory categories of loyalty and opposition: the native bourgeois, and the entire common folk consisting of all communities. However, the elite Hindus or the *bhadralok* was flabbergasted when Curzon partitioned the Eastern provision of Bengal and Assam in 1905 because of it being it as Muslim majority area. The Muslim of Bengal also viewed it as an opportunity to get more control over employment and education. This partition made the Bengali Hindus a minority because western Bengal included the provinces of Bengal and Orissa. This partition of Bengal became the root cause of the Swadeshi Movement across India. This movement brought all the communities together who viewed this partition as a culmination of divide and rule policy. Subsequently, in 1911 due to the furore in Bengal, the viceroy withdrew the plan and Bengal was unified.

The “official nationalism” of the Bengali bourgeois decelerated when they realized their still inferior position when Curzon had partitioned Bengal. The Bengali bourgeois realized their position as mere tools of production because the economy was under the direct colonial control. As Partha Chatterjee in his book *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World* asserts, “This was an utterly absurd illusion, because colonial subjugation would never permit full blooded bourgeois modernity but only a ‘weak and distorted caricature’” (24). The same argument is raised by different writers such as Ashok Sen in his article “The Bengal economy and Rammohan Roy”, Barun De in “A Historiographical Critique of Renaissance Analogues for Nineteenth Century India”, and by Sumit Sarkar in “The Complexity of Young Bengal”. Joya Chatterji also affirmed the discrimination by maintaining that, “the Raj had depended on the talents of the Bengali babus or service groups, even while it mocked their “effete” and imitative ways” (9).

The Divide and Rule policy worked out to some extent but generally, this impacted the elite community. The participation of both Muslim and Hindu communities in Swadeshi movement proved to be a set back to the policy. Muslim population in Bengal wanted partition because of their lower status in the society. The Bengal partition was not based on the conflict of specific identities rather it was the issue of the economic empowerment. Nevertheless, after the Lahore Resolution in 1940, Jinnah’s dream of Muslim state in which the distant east comprising

of 55% of the Muslim majority would be included was fulfilled. The irony is that after the partition of 1947, the dream of the Bengali Muslims to rule over their own land shattered because this population was to be ruled by the Urdu speaking minority of West Pakistan. Later Urdu was made the national language despite lack of proficiency in the language on the part of the general population.

Following the political upheaval of partition, the people of East Pakistan came to know of the fraudulence of authority of West Pakistan. Bengal Muslim League leader Abul Hashem proposed the United Bengal Movement demanding the first independent state of Bengal for both Muslims and Hindus. Unfortunately, due to the intervention of the powerful Congress party, the movement failed. After the failure, the idea of independent Bengal took root in the minds of young radicals of the Bengali Muslim League. In 1949 a fully Bengali Muslim organization Awami Muslim League was formed. As the language movement gained momentum, Hindu and Muslims of East Bengal again came together to protest against the atrocities inflicted by the West Pakistan army. In 1952 when the army fired on agitated students of University of Dhaka, killing four, language emerged as the central national agenda. In 1954, elections Bengali Muslims voted for the Awami Muslim League to oust the pro- Pakistan Parties. Though the Hindu parties were not a part of the election, they supported the Plan of Independence of the East. At last in 1971, the mutual efforts on Muslims and Hindus for a separate state resulted in the birth of Bangladesh under the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rehman.

In Bengal, whether partitioned or united, the population consisting of both communities came together to eliminate the oppressive regime. It is also apparent that it was the general population, whether in Punjab or Bengal who suffered most the calamity of Partition. The elite class was largely unaffected by the religious and national schism that victimized the weak. Some village people attached to farms, pastures, and locality were so naive that they had no awareness of the meaning of the newly formed border. The border restrained the movement of the pastoralists and the nomads who were too uninformed to understand the concept of nation and borders leading to the creation of Hindustan and Pakistan.

In Punjab partition too, the people were blinded by the communal frenzy that later they regretted. In interviews, the survivors maintained that their minds were manipulated and the atrocities by the two communities were the biggest mistake on their part. They further

maintained that the manipulation was driven by the political agenda of the national leaders to gratify personal objectives of power. The interviewees were nostalgic about the days in the unified nation. According to them, the pre-1947 era witnessed Hindus and Muslims living in harmony as neighbours despite minor differences. They related to each other forming bonds of friendship, loyalty, and faith in each other. In an interview with Menon, 'Lucknow Sisters' remembered the cultural equality in pre-partition India:

Relation between Hindus and Muslims here were so good...Women were all kept indoors, in parda, whether Hindu or Muslim, it was the same. The men had the same bad habits, good habits, whether they were the Rai Sahib or Khan Bahadur... This was a society where the bonds were so strong, feeling ran deep, outsiders can never be a part of it. (238)

Harbhajan Singh, who is a retired government servant and a witness of partition, asserts in an interview, "There were no real communal tension in our village and our family was reasonably tolerant in any case. I had good Muslim friends, and remember the name of one of them-Basheer. I remember I was welcome in his household and my parents had no objection to his visiting our household" (Maini et al. 94). The example of Hindu-Muslim cordiality during that era was seen in a village where despite Muslims majority, still a Sikh was appointed the Sarpanch. After partition, the Sarpanch unfurled the flag of Pakistan. When the great migration started, "both sides sympathized with their common fate. They supplied each other with drinking water and other crucial necessities, but more significantly with profound emotional understanding" (Salim 99). Shaukat Ali Awan, a Pakistani, whose father was a policeman in pre-partitioned India, in an interview refers to the strong cultural bonding even after partition. He says, "Being in India is like being in one's second home, those 60 years of separation cannot overshadow the common culture and social heritage- particularly of the Punjabis" (Maini et al. 122). These examples depict that though human suffering had put humanity to an ultimate test and it brought out savage instinct in some but it also reaffirmed the compassion and humanity despite adverse conditions.

These interviews are the only documents that tell us 'the underside of partition' otherwise, the historians were always compelled to write the politically charged nationalist history showcasing the communal and secular sentiments (Butalia 265). Historians, while writing

the nation's history of independence, were "mixing cognitive interest with ephemeral nationalist passion or more enduring national sentiment" resulting in "manipulated, over-politicised, and abnormal histories" asserts Rajeev Bhargava in his essay "History, Nation and Community: Reflections on the Nationalist Historiography of India and Pakistan" (196-97). Further, Bhargava directly accuses historiography as "the play of lies and distortions in the birth and growth of nations" (196-97). Bhalla also maintains a sceptic view on national historiography when he says, "there are hardly any chronicles of those days, written with any degree of objectivity and trustworthiness... Most of the available histories of the Partition ... are written by either the apologists of Pakistan or by its bitter opponents ..." (I: xi-xii). Historians are alleged to have marginalized the events of partition making them only a minor setting that actualize the dream of independence. When national leaders were busy proving their official or politicized nationalism and nationhood by creating new nations, one secular and the other the *paksarzameen* for a specific community, the people were devastated by their fragmented homeland and identities. The process of dividing the subcontinent psychologically problematized the idea of nationality and cultural identity to the extent that the identification with land became complicated. Despite the cultural commonalities, people were uprooted and their loyalty was at stake because now it had no connection with their place of birth and domicile. Moreover, the land they were told is their own nation evoked no sense connection and attachment to it. The neighbours, whether they were Hindu or Muslim, found themselves unable to relate with each other. They were caught betwixt and between loyalties for two countries: one, where they physically belong, and the other where their soul and mind were anchored. Kamila in an interview expresses the dilemma experienced, "Somebody had forsaken someone, somewhere. Who, how, and why? Politicians seemed to have all the answers. Had I any? Was I an Indian or....." (Menon 231).

People were eventually affronted with the dilemma of identity construction that was necessitated by breaking up of Indian subcontinent. They mourned the loss of homeland, the land of ancestors and blame the national leaders for the adverse changes in their lives as asserted by Kamila in the interview. They were exiled from their homeland, which results in the erosion of their deep-rooted identification with the specific land, home, village, city, or nation. The demographic division of land has not ruptured the shared culture, history, memory, and consciousness that go into the construction of nationhood and nationalism. The tragic loss of

loved ones and beloved homeland by both communities became the medium of sympathy and empathy despite the fact that the country was divided.

In this radical process of partition, Ritu Menon says, "there were those who gained a nation and those who lost a country – and, as one woman said to us, there were those who became "permanent refugees" (229). Sindhis and the refugees from East Bengal, had to face and are still coping with the problem of becoming "permanent refugee". Converts are not given the same place in the society as the "pure". The Muslim community itself has divided into many sub-categories and during partition, some categories are not even considered Muslim. Each person was rife with dilemma about identity and existence. For the victims and the survivors, the foremost priority was to ensure their and their families' security. In such circumstances, expecting the birth of the sentiment of nationalism in itself becomes problematic.

People view partition as a disruptive force that caused the uprooting of their long-entrenched identities in their homeland. Due to the resultant dislocation, they experience alienation among the new people in the new nation. The quest for belongingness engendered by identity crisis in the novel environ where they were looked at with suspicion and resentment. In some instances, settlers are not accepted in the new nations. In the western side, the migrated people were seen as *mohajir* or the refugees and their localities were separated. In the eastern side, i.e. Bangladesh, the linguistic barriers became the reason of the rejection of the refugee. In most of the narratives following the partition, the loss of homeland outweighs the citizenship in the new nation. The demand for loyalty for the new nation was questioned. Even stories that were written after a lapse of certain time mourn the loss of the ancestral land and identity. The writers from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh through their creative works question the relevance of partition based on communal differences. In the partition literature of subcontinent, the longing for the homeland emerges as a connecting link. The writers through their writings mourn the passing of an era of communal harmony disrupted irreparably by communal frenzy. The opening up of old and hidden wounds of partition through this paper is an attempt to build bridges of empathy and sympathy by viewing the other as fellow victim.

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