www.thevoiceofcreativeresearch.com (ISSN: 2582-5526)

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 3 & Issue 3 (July 2021)

https://doi.org/10.53032/tvcr/2021.v3n3.01

Nation and Nationalism as Cultural Politics: Issues and Debates

Dr Samipendra Banerjee
Assistant Professor of English
University of Gour Banga,
W.B. India

Abstract

The present research article critically examines the multifaceted dimensions of nationhood and nationalism within the framework of cultural politics. It explores how notions of nation and nationalism intersect with cultural identities, power dynamics, and socio-political discourses. The study delves into key theoretical debates surrounding the construction of national identities, addressing issues such as historical memory, language, ethnicity, and the role of cultural symbols in shaping collective belonging. Furthermore, the article analyzes the contemporary relevance of nationalism as a political force and cultural phenomenon, considering its impact on social cohesion, global dynamics, and identity formation in diverse societies. It explores case studies and theoretical frameworks that highlight the complexities and contradictions inherent in nationalist ideologies across different historical and geographical contexts. By critically engaging with these debates, the article aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how nationhood and nationalism operate as cultural politics, influencing perceptions of belonging and identity within societies. It emphasizes the dynamic and contested nature of these concepts, inviting further scholarly inquiry into their implications for contemporary cultural and political landscapes.

Keywords: Nation, Nationalism, Cultural politics, Identity, Power dynamics, Socio-political discourse, Cultural identity, Historical memory, Ethnicity, Global dynamics

As recent scholarship has shown, nationalism in the contemporary world is far from being redundant as it was initially felt it would be, after globalization. Nationalism has certainly transformed under the wake of global flows of capital but to dismiss it as irrelevant in the contemporary times would be naive. This paper is an attempt to re-examine the various key theoretical positions on nationalism as a social and political category of analysis. The contemporary world is undergoing a phase, which may be described as a resurgence in nationalism. This is evident in the rise of much insurgent nationalisms across the world that has often been accompanied by bloody violence. Even as the aftermath of 9/11 continues to be felt in global relations, violence and nationalism have been operating in alarming synchrony along fresher contours. Israel's bombing of the Gaza strip in 2014 at the pretext of destroying the Hamas, their destruction of civilian hideouts and lives in Gaza, their repeated violation of ceasefire, and the series of continued violence on the Israel-Palestine issue since then is a contemporary addition to the series of violence (often racial and ethnic) in the name of nationalism in Chechnia, the Balkhans, Spain and the Arab world among others. In fact, Israel's attitude to nationalism in the 2014 conflict could lead social theorists and political scientists to rethink the dimensions of contemporary nationalism in a global world. There is little doubt however, that such conflicts continue to open up newer areas of interrogation about nationalism and the 'violent' form that it is often taking. Writing in 1999, Leela Gandhi was apprehensive about the rising violence:

> East or West, we are now aware of the xenophobia, racism and loathing which attends the rhetoric of particularism. Nationalism has become the popular pretext for contemporary disquisitions of intolerance, separating Croatians and Serbians, Greeks and Macedonians, Estonians and Russians, Slovaks and Czechs, Armenians and Azerbaijanis, Israelis and Palestinians, Hindus and Muslims (108).

It emerges nevertheless that even despite globalization, it would be wrong to dismiss nationalism as an obsolete category of study. Again nationalism is a sufficiently complex field of study in itself and has to be understood in terms of its relation to several contingent terms including the state, community, territory, sovereignty etc. because the idea of the nation is connected to at the same time territorially defined states and more abstract imaginations of community, what Anderson addressed as "deep, horizontal comradeship" (Anderson 7). Terms like nation, nation-state, nationalism and national identity are confusing and are often wrongly used as if they are synonymous. In fact, "the term nation is fundamentally ambiguous" (Snyder 3) and so are other related terms. Nationalism can be seen as the ideology that comprises of a certain set of beliefs about the nation that in turn could be conflicting. National identity, again, is produced by nationalism and it "involves a process of identifying oneself and others as a member of a nation, although there may be profound differences in the salience which each attaches to the national as opposed to other identifications" (Spencer and Wollman 3).

While it is difficult to define the nation, the various available definitions help us to understand the complex process of nation and nationalism. For Benedict Anderson, nation is "an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (6). This definition has remained, over the years, one of the most influential expressions of nation and nationalism, partly because Anderson continued to qualify, with remarkable clarity, every parameter of his definition. He emphasizes, for example, the way the nation is imagined in the sense of a community,

> ...because regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately, it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings (7).

For Steven Grosby, the "Nation is a community of kinship, specifically a bounded, territorially extensive, temporally deep community of nativity" (14). He further adds that by 'community' he refers to "a level of self-consciousness of the individual such that one recognizes oneself to be necessarily and continually related to others..." (14). In a manner similar to Anderson's, Grosby qualifies each of these parameters till he arrives at the above definition of the nation.

Anderson's formulation is a crucial moment in the historiography of nationalism because of his emphasis on imagination. According to C. Vijayasree,

> The discovery of the essential link between 'nation' and 'imagination' marked a decisive moment in the emergence of the studies of nation. It erased the disciplinary boundaries between the political and the aesthetic and brought the concept of nation into the discursive domain (ix).

Anderson thus remains a significant starting point because his definition emphasizes the conceptual quality of the nation – the fact that the 'nation' is 'imagined'. But then, he also says that the nation is imagined as 'inherently limited' because they have "finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations" (Anderson 6). In Grosby's definition too, there is an awareness of 'community' in the sense of individual 'self-consciousness' and the sense of 'territoriality' in parallel. In fact, this is one of the key paradoxes of nation and nationalism—that the nation is at the same time both imagined/conceptualized and territorially defined. It is a curious blend of the tangible and the intangible, the absent and the present. The nation thus is never there yet always present.

Theorizations on the nation have often confused the 'nation' with the 'nation-state'. The terms have been used as if they were mutually interchangeable. But there have been essential differences between the idea of the 'nation' and the concept of the 'nation-state'. The construct of the nation has been seen as a product of modernity whereas the 'nation-state', defined in terms of territory is historically older.[2] Spencer and Wollman offer a clear distinction:

> One (the state) has to do with sovereignty, with power and authority over a given area and population; the other (the nation) has to do with relationships between people, with how people see themselves as connected over both time and space, as sharing some kind of collective identity (2).

This essential difference is however missed out in the interchangeable use of the terms. M.N. Karna draws attention to the varied scopes of terms like nation, nation-state and territory:

> …Our understanding of nation and nationalism is still amorphous and blurred because the confusion created by the interchangeable use of the terms nation, state and territory. In fact, these three major dimensions—the nation as a collective identity, the state as an expression of political sovereignty, and territory as a geographical area – have to be properly delineated to grasp the coincidence between nation and state (75).

Again, Amartya Sen elucidates the probable dangers of confusing the 'nation' with the 'nation-state':

> That jump from the 'nation' to the 'nation-state' is a leap across a considerable conceptual divide. The concept of the 'nation', thus, is made to take on whatever abuse of power and of violence

> that may be attributable to the nation-state… The confounding of the concept of the 'nation' with a characterization of the 'nation-state', tempting as it may be, is not a strong enough basis for making impossible to think of the 'nation', without setting out, at once, the troops of an authoritarian 'nation-state' marching against dissidents. We have to take more note of the purpose and rationale of the idea of a 'nation', with and without the operation of a 'nation-state' ("On Interpreting" 25).

There are thus, as Sen suggests, two possible approaches to studying the nation – with and without the operations of the 'nation-state'. In this thesis, my focus would be primarily on the construct/imagining of the nation devoid of the sense of the nation-state, unless otherwise mentioned.

Theoretical discourses on the nation have been locking horns over primarily three conflicting positions. The first kind extends over its conceptualization—whether the nation is a cultural or a political category. The second is linked to its geographical categorizations—the Western and the Eastern kinds of nationalism. A third is on the question of its temporal origins—whether nations and nationalism are modern or pre-modern. All issues are central to the theorizations of the nation and I would attempt to explore the basic premises of the first standpoint, the debate between the Nation as a cultural or a political category.

Leading critical discourses on the nation have, surprisingly, been content over categorizing nationalism either as a cultural or a political phenomenon. If at all there has been a recognition of the inter-relationship between culture and politics in the realm of nationalism, that has remained largely untheorized. At the beginning of *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*, Partha Chatterjee cites John Plamenatz who notes that nationalism is primarily a cultural phenomenon although it often takes a political form (1). Although Plamenatz faintly suggests a blend of the cultural and the political, theorists have largely been divided over the issue.

The connection between ethnicity and nationalism is essential to understand the process of nation formation. Anthony D. Smith while analyzing the critical relationship between ethnicity and nationalism emphasizes the 'cultural' nature of nationalism. According to Smith a nation may be defined in terms of a cultural community, which precedes any possible political organization. This cultural community or as Smith prefers to call it, an 'ethnie' is essentially 'pre-political' and the first step towards the modern organized nation with certain shared myths and cultures and a feeling of solidarity amongst themselves (1983). Smith moves on to suggest that a 'myth-symbol complex', which is a cultural signifier expressing ethnic identity, is the basis of modern nationalism (1991). The nation is thus a plurality of meanings which is expressed through shared memories, common myths, symbols, narratives and other cultural forms.

Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm (1992) closely follows Smith but he distinguishes between the 'principle of nationality' and 'nationalism'. For Hobsbawm the principle of nationality is used as a tool by organized political parties to achieve an end in power which in turn lends a sense to nationalism. But the 'principle of nationality' exists long before the arrival of mass politics and hence seems to have a prior existence in the realms of cultural discourse. Both Smith and Hobsbawm thus indicate that nations existed well before the arrival of political, legal and economic entity of the state echoing Hegel's famous dictum that 'nations may have had a long history before they finally reach their destination, that to forming

themselves into states'. Interestingly this definition of Hegel's has also been cited by Gellner who however arrives at a largely different conclusion than those of Smith and Hobsbawm.

For theorists like Gellner (1983), the nation is primarily a political category. Gellner notes that nations and nationalisms are forms of political organisation, which are sociologically necessary products of modernity. Gellner's oft-quoted definition of nationalism summarizes the significance he attaches to its political form: "Nationalism is primarily a political principle which holds that the political and national unit should be congruent" (1). Gellner attributes the emergence of nationalism to a transformation from what he calls 'context-specific' communication of agrarian pre-industrial societies to the contextless communication of Industrial economies. The process involves a tendency of homogenization and nationalism is an expression of this phenomenon. John Breuilly (1993) takes the debate further when he suggests that nationhood emerges as a solution to an essentially political problem. For Breuilly, nationalism is "associated with the development of specifically modern kinds of political action; and that these kinds of political action are closely connected to the development of a new kind of state" (qtd in Spencer and Wollman 47). Consequently, in sharp contrast to Smith and Hobsbawm, the nation becomes a product of a nationalist ideology and not a pre-existing cultural category.

Gellner strongly maintained that nations are essentially products of nationalism itself (1983). Gellner's student, Anthony Smith takes the distinction between nation and nationalism further. For Smith, nationalism is "an ideological movement for the attainment and maintenance of self government on behalf of a group some of whose members conceive it to constitute an actual or potential nation" (*Theories* 171). While defining thus, however, Smith betrays an awareness of the political quality within nationalism. Such distinction, nevertheless, helps in demystifying conceptual confusions regarding the nation. The Czech Marxist historian Miroslav Hroch (1985) has made significant contributions in this regard while making a comparative study of national movements by considering the smaller nationalities of Europe. Hroch (1996) moves on to distinguish between 'nationalism' and 'national movements' in terms of binary opposites. For Hroch, nationalism is negative and equated with the extreme political right. 'National movement' on the contrary is positive and is associated with the formation of a nation-state by stressing existing national values. Even national and nationalist movements are not the same thing. If the former positively reemphasizes national values, the latter negatively over-emphasizes them. Hroch's distinction reminds one of, specifically in the Indian case, the stand of nationalism taken by Tagore, to which I shall return in due course.

A consideration of the cultural-political debate in the realm of nationalism remains incomplete without taking into account the position taken by probably the most significant modernist theorist of the nation, Benedict Anderson. It was a coincidence that Anderson's intriguing thesis *Imagined Communities* appeared in the same year as Gellner's *Nations and Nationalism*. And Anderson and Gellner arrive at a similar conclusion though through different theorizations. Partha Chatterjee nicely summarizes the comparative merits of the scholars:

> Both point out a fundamental change in ways of perceiving the social world which occurs before nationalism can emerge: Gellner relates this change to the requirements of 'industrial society', Anderson more ingeniously to the dynamics of the new cultural homogeneity which is sought to be imposed on the emerging nation: for Gellner this is the imposition of a common high culture on the variegated complex of local folk cultures, for Anderson the process involves the formation

> of a 'print-language' and the shared experience of the 'journeys undertaken by the colonized intelligentsia (*Nationalist Thought* 21).

Indeed Anderson, while recognizing the 'cultural roots' of nationalism insists on its political quality. Anderson (1983) suggests that it became possible to 'imagine' the nation with the dwindling of the religious modes of thought, the subsequent shift from Latin to Vernaculars, the arrival of print capitalism and through cultural artefacts of the newspaper and the novel. This movement is allied with the shifting perceptions of time, leading to what he calls "homogeneous, empty time" (Anderson 24). A reading of Anderson's thesis reveals primarily a culturalist position. The process he talks of is a socio-cultural one since the 'imagining' of the nation before the actual event takes place on a cultural plane. But then, the political aspect is equally important. As I have already pointed out above, Anderson noted that the nation is not just an 'imagined community' but an 'imagined political community' (6). Even Gellner, who had strongly emphasized the political nature of nationalism concedes that the sense of belonging to a nation is in a way, a sense of belonging to a cultural community: "Modern man is not loyal to a monarch or a land or a faith, whatever he may say, but to a culture" (36). On the other hand, Smith and Hobsbawm, while emphasizing the cultural element of nations have also recognized their gradual transition into organized political units.

It is thus possible to re-read nation and nationalism by blending the apparently conflicting spheres of culture and politics, what Anshuman A. Mondal in his intriguing study suggests as a form of 'cultural politics':

> Nationalism is, therefore, a form of cultural politics. It is political because it is a movement, which describes to seize control of (liberate), or break away from and create its own (secede) state; indeed, break away and join another state, which would satisfy its own principle of national self-determination (irredentism). It is therefore located within a field of power. It is cultural because it bases the legitimacy of its actions upon the uniqueness of its national culture. The existence of such a culture validates its desire for a national state, or so it claims … Culture is thus thoroughly and inseparably entwined with power (22).

Thus given the significance of both cultural identity and political organization within discourses of the nation, the idea of nationalism is best described as a form of cultural politics. This is in fact an illuminating intervention since once we are able to read nationalisms as forms of cultural politics instead of the contesting binaries of culture and politics, new insights would appear as products of the interactions between public culture, nation and politics. Many of the contemporary literary writings are also informed by the politics of selfhood, gender and history and by cultures of the contemporary that in turn would suggest new ways of conceiving contemporary nationalisms.

Works Cited

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London and New York: Verso, 1983. Print.

Breuilly, John. *Nationalism and the State*. Manchester: Manchester U P, 1993. Print.

Chatterjee, Partha. *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* London: Zed Books, 1986. Print.

Gellner, Ernest. *Nations and Nationalism*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1983. Print.

Gandhi, Leela. *Post Colonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*. Delhi: Oxford U P, 1999. Print.

Hobsbawm, Eric. *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*. Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 1992. Print.

Hroch, Miroslav. *Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe: A Comparative Analysis of the Social Composition of Patriotic Groups among the Smaller European Nations*. Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 1985. Print.

---. "From National Movement to the Fully Formed Nation: Nation Building Process in Europe". *Mapping the Nation*. Ed. Gopal Balakrishnan. New York and London: Verso, 1996. 78—97. Print.

Karna. M.N. "Language, Region and National Identity". *Nation and National Identity in South Asia.* Eds. S.L Sharma and T.K. Oommen. New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2000. 75—96. Print.

Mondal, Anshuman. A. *Nationalism and Postcolonial Identity: Culture and Ideology in India and Egypt*. London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003. Print.

Snyder, L. Ed. *Encyclopaedia of Nationalism*. Chicago: St. James Press, 1990. Print.

Sen, Amartya. "On Interpreting India's Past". *Nationalism, Democracy and Development: State and Politics in India*. Eds. Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal. New Delhi: Oxford U P, 1999. 25—27. Print.

Smith, Anthony. D. *Theories of Nationalism*. London: Duckworth, 1983. Print.

---. *National Identity*. London: Penguin, 1991. Print.

Spencer, Philip and Howard Wollman. *Nationalism: A Critical Introduction*. London: Sage Publications, 2002. Print.

Vijayasree, C. "Introduction". *Nation in Imagination: Essays on Nationalism, Sub-Nationalisms and Narration*. Eds. C Vijayasree, Meenakshi Mukherjee, Harish Trivedi & T. Vijay Kumar. Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2007. ix—xvi. Print.