



ON NATIONALISM: REFLECTIONS OF INDIAN SOCIO-POLITICAL SCENARIO

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Abstract:

Certain terms like nation, nationalism, pseudo-nationalism, patriotism, traitors, and terrorists are taken passionately, emotionally, stormily, angrily and with bias attitude by an number of people in India just for the sake of 'divide and rule' in On Nationalism which consists of three scholarly essays by Romila Thapar, an Emeritus Professor of History, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi; A. G. Noorani, an Indian lawyer, historian and author; and Sadanand Menon, a multi-dimensional personality including Adjunct faculty, Asian College of Journalism, Chennai and IIT, Madras. The text brings to our mind a question, 'are we really living in troubled and troubling times?' There is confusion in the minds of people to which thing or concept we should call patriotism, nationalism, pseudo-nationalism or to consider some of the persons as traitor, anti-nationalists, etc. Observing the activities going on in this country may also arouse certain questions in the minds of citizens of India like, 'in which country are we living: India or Hindustan? Whether we are Indians or Hindustani?' This may force us to peep into our minds to answer the questions like: 'What sort of India do we want? What sort of Indians do we want to be? What sort of country are we going to leave behind for future generations?' (xiii) These questions are certainly to be answered through the Indian Constitution and also the answers are to be found in an intelligent statement made by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, the Chief Architect of the Indian Constitution in the Bombay legislature about eighty years ago. As citizens of India, the text certainly makes the readers to observe the socio-political scenario and their effects on nation and nationalism.

Key Words: Nation, Nationalism, Pseudo-Nationalism, Patriotism, Traitors, Terrorists & Hindustan

Considering the present scenario, we, the Indians really feel that India has been passing through 'troubled' and 'troubling' times. This ultimately makes the real 'nationalists' feel that our country has been facing several problems like poverty, violence, corruptions, overpopulations, inequality, sectarianism, terrorism, environmental disasters, etc. Such problems will have to be eliminated to keep the unity of the nation intact. As per our constitution we have freedom of speech, liberalism, some expressiveness and practice of any religion of our own choice. At the same time, we have the fundamental rights as provided to us by our founding fathers. When various controversial issues come before us, the real point related to India in the twenty first century before the nationalists is of 'nationalism'. Hence the focus of the present paper is to study deeply the reflections of socio-political scenario in connection with 'On Nationalism' – a text shared with scholarly essays by Romila Thapar, A. G. Noorani and Sadanand Menon. A simple question 'What is nationalism?' is taken to elaborate various issues having different meanings in different context in the opinions of Indians. Noorani describes: When the Constitution of India came into force on 26th January 1950, sedition did not figure in Article 19(2) among the grounds on which the fundamental right to freedom of speech and expression (Art. 19(1) (a)) could be subjected to 'reasonable restrictions' by law. Its history and case law suggested clearly that it could be stretched to fall within 'public order' or 'incitement to an offence' (77-78).

Every citizen of India should feel that 'I am born an Indian and would die an Indian'. In the history of India only one citizen of India stated 'I am Indian first and Indian last' is none other than the maker of the modern India and the chief architect of the Indian constitution Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. But I feel very sorry to state that most of the Indians could not understand Dr. Ambedkar. Moreover many citizens (citizens of Hindustan and not of India) try to accuse him for creating India through the constitution, where there is not a single word written about Hindustan. Then why our Prime Minister Mr. Narendra Modi also mentions in his speech 'Hindustan' and not India/Bharat from Red Fort. Isn't it antinationalism? Or isn't it pseudo nationalism? "On 17 March 2016, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) joint general secretary Dattatreya Hosabale declared that 'anyone who refused to say "Bharat Mata ki Jai" is anti-national for us. The BJP President Amit Shah said that 'the BJP will not tolerate criticism of the country'" (95). The views of staunch Hindus like Hosabale, Shah or any one are really thought-provoking about nationalism. Their intention is quite clear to create chaos in the name of religions and nationalism. "All religions in India, irrespective of their theoretical support of social equality, maintained caste distinctions – especially in the codes of marriage and inheritance" (41). To clarify the title of our nation, India, Dr B. R. Ambedkar asserted in the Bombay legislature:

...I do not believe there is any place for any particularly culture, whether it is a Hindu culture, or a Muhammadan culture or a Kanarese culture or a Gujarati culture. There are things we cannot deny, but they are not to be cultivated as advantages, they are to be treated as disadvantages, as something which divides our loyalty and takes away from us our common goal. That common goal is the building up of the feeling that we are all Indians. I do not like what some people say, that we are Indians first and Hindus afterwards or Muslims

afterwards. I am not satisfied with that ... I do not want that our loyalty as Indians should be in the slightest way affected by any competitive loyalty whether that loyalty arises out of our religion, out of our culture or out of our language. I want all people to be Indians first, Indians last and nothing else but Indians... (XIII-XIV).

If we try to understand the real feelings of Dr. Ambedkar the relevance of all his words will enable us to be united as just Indians in spite of our freedom to follow whatever religion or culture we want to go for and practice in our private life. But we should not misuse it in our social and public life. If we do so this will ultimately prove our real nationalism. The relevance of his words and feelings is really applicable even today and if we, as Indians, do not apply them in our life then certainly the nation called 'India' is at peril.

The formation of territory, democracy, culture, human rights and social justice are the part and parcel of our nation. To express our views is really the matter of freedom of speech laid down in the constitution. "Freedom of speech is now seen as the touchstone of democracy, and the ability of individuals to criticize the State is crucial to maintaining freedom" (90). In this regard we need to understand 'nationalism' as 'Indian nationalism' and not Hindu, Muslim or any other religious nationalism. "As a matter of fact the essence of democracy is Criticism of Government" (74). But at present situation the picture of ruling government seems to be much restricted as the ruling party doesn't allow any opposition to say anything in the house. "Criticizing the government is not an act of sedition nor can it be regarded as anti-national..." (47). But the ruling government considers it anti-national when the oppositions raise their issues in the house. The ruling government does not permit the oppositions to raise any issue in the house. Thus they try to smother the voice of the oppositions. Not only that but they feel that oppositions are anti-nationals.

We, the citizens of India, need to understand real nationalism and our other loyalties with the nation. Romila Thapar clarifies, "Nationalism could only be Indian. And Indian meant that which was above all the smaller loyalties to religion, caste, ethnicity and religion" (3). This clearly indicates that 'nationalism' differentiates between the nation and the state. No government has right to take upon the rights of a nation. "Sovereignty resides with the nation and not with the government" (3). In spite of that we find that the voice of democracy is being suffocated. We being democratic, any political party can run the government but no one should concentrate on any religious nationalism. But today it seems that the ruling government is concentrating only on religious issues just to rule by dividing people on the basis of religious matters and caste discriminations. Sadanand Menon quotes:

In Vadodara, the Gujarati poet Anil Joshi, a 1990 Sahitya Akademi awardee, said, 'The atmosphere has become hateful. There is no breathing space and no freedom of expression for literary writers. It is like losing oxygen because we are writers who wish for free breathing space. I do not need an oxygen cylinder in the form of awards to live. The attack on the writers is unfortunate and has taken away the freedom of expression' (135-136).

The views expressed by the poet Anil Joshi really touches the heart and mind of real Indians those who believe in democracy. A. G. Noorani affirms:

In *Hector vs. Attorney-General of Antigua*, the Privy Council held: 'In a free democratic society it is almost too obvious to need stating that those who hold office in government and who are responsible for public administration must always be open to criticism' (87).

It is absolutely right. As per the Article 15 (1) of the Indian Constitution (web. P. 7), "The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them". In spite of the constitutional provision, we find such discriminations that certainly is anti-national. According to Noorani, Amit Shah said, 'anti-national activity cannot be justified on the plea of freedom of expression'. (96). Such statements can create anti-national atmosphere. This is also against secular democracy. "Democracy is fundamental to our country as a modern nation and it has to be a secular democracy" (46-47). Further Romila Thapar narrates, "Democracy without its complement of secular thinking falls short of being a democracy" (47-48). If we really want to reside in a nationalistic country, we must not argue on democracy, democracy, secularism or freedom of speech, but we can have positive discussions on all these issues. Moreover we must take nationalism with positive way.

To consider oneself as a nationalist, one has to establish his identity as a part of that nation. Just shouting as a nationalist can never give anyone an identity of a nationalist. According to Sadanand Menon, "The creation, evaluation and maintenance of a national culture is at base a political act, and is intended to serve political ends" (127). So Romila Thapar clarifies,

Nationalism had, and has much to do with understanding one's society and finding one's identity as a member of that society. It cannot be reduced merely to waving flags and shouting slogans and penalizing people for not shouting slogans like 'Bharat Mata ki Jai'. This smacks of a lack of confidence among those making the demands of slogans (5).

The slogans like 'Bharat Mata ki Jai' has nothing to do with nationalism. "It must be said here that 'Bharat Mata ki Jai' is not an attitude of patriotism, but of deep patriarchy" (120). No country all over the world can consider their nation as 'Mata', then why Indians go on sloganeering in that manner. Doesn't it indicate that we are proceeding towards 'anti-nationalism', or 'pseudo-nationalism?' "Religion as dharma was defined as two

streams – Brahmanism and Shramanism. The first derived from Vedic Brahmanism and the second from Buddhism, Jainism, Ajivika teaching and various others” (51). The BJP and RSS and other organizations related to Hindutva clearly express that those who do not say “Bharat Mata” are anti-national. “Nationalism requires a far greater commitment to attending to the needs of the nation rather than sloganeering...” (5). But their saying indicates that everybody’s loyalty should be with Hindu nationalism or Hindutva and not with Indian nationalism. Purohit says “The two nationalisms – the Hindu and the Indian – were fundamentally in opposition to each other with respect to their deeds” (102). The real nationalism is being side-tracked by the BJP and RSS just to rule by dividing people on the religious basis under the pretext of nationalism, to which they name Hindutva. “Cultural nationalism, by any definition, is a rogue version of nationalism which is already present in concepts of the nation state” (112). So far the slogan ‘Bharat Mata’ is concerned, “a more militant version of nationalism is provided in 1882 by the publication of the novel *Anandmath* by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee” (118-119). Even appeal of ‘ghar wapsi’ is not a good idea at all as it restricts the fundamental rights of Indian citizens.

The issues of nationalism and cultures have to be taken with understanding. As we find, “Culture and nationalism have ever been close allies. Culture has always set up the contours for national movements and nations have used culture as a convenient flag to wave in ideas of superiority or exclusivity” (110). Even then we have complete liberty to “Ideas of cultural nationalism emerged hand in hand with late nineteenth century ideas of nationhood itself” (116). History tells us that physical boundaries, languages and even religions continuously have been changing. Likewise cultural identity has also been constantly changing. Ultimately when we think of religious, linguistic, ethnic and similar single identities they are nothing but pseudo-nationalisms which can never be called as nationalism. “Kashmiri writer Ghulam Nabi Khayal said, ‘What is happening in India pains me. To return an award is the only way to express my resentment...’” (136). But some people took this statement positively and others negatively. As per our constitution, every citizen has got the freedom of speech but the ruling government is taking it in wrong way. Shouting just slogans has nothing to do with nationalism. “The nation is different from the state and from government” (9). We can’t deny our culture but culture related to nation has to be taken in the very positive manner. The great historian Romila Thapar says: Nationalism is a function of the nation. Conceptually, it consolidates aspects of the nation such as democracy, territory and power and endorses the value systems that ensure equal rights and justice. The nation is generally not centrally and directly ruled by a dynasty, it is the representatives of the people who govern it in a democratic system (9).

It is quite clear that nation should be governed in a very democratic way. Nation and value system must be handled in a very democratic way. For that we may consider, “to make the culture the sole base for the formation of the independent nation” (117). Every time the political leaders of BJP and RSS take the issues for the sake of political gains in the guise of Hindutva. “As has been pointed out by many, whereas Hinduism is a religion, Hindutva is an ideology for political mobilization” (35). There are several issues related to real nationalism, pseudo-nationalism and religious nationalism. “BJP government headed by Narendra Modi should use Section 124A to imprison student leaders and prosecute political leaders” (62) those who are from the oppositions and he does not apply it to any leaders or workers from his own party. This clearly indicates the biasness of our Prime Minister. Many times such issues are neglected by the media as it is said that media, the fourth pillar of democracy, is completely under the control of the ruling government. This can also be related to a very nice statement by Romila Thapar who says, “The public historical confrontations today are between secular historians and those who write history from the perspective of communal nationalism” (12). Somehow in the name of nationalism just communal nationalism is being propagated all the time. We need our identity as Indians first and Indians last. “Each identity demands priority for itself and asks to be treated as exclusive, and this becomes as agency for mobilization. The inclusiveness of the earlier anti-colonial nationalism is set aside” (23). The issues related to nationalism are closely related to socio-political issues that always make the citizens of India enter into the depth of nation and culture. Social, political, economic and cultural are really burning issues in the Indian and national context. Romil Thapar mentions,

Examples of this are identities of race, language, caste, tribe and religion. Economic poverty and inequality is the colonial heritage of large segments of the population in the couple of centuries just prior to colonization, India and China were leading economies (23).

In the present situations, we find that in the name of nationalism certain pseudo-nationalism and anti-nationalism issues are always kept live for the gain of political power. Secular democracy and Hindu state are two different aspects. Caste and other issues divide the people. Those who consider themselves secular are on the radar of the Hindutvawadis. Sadanand Menon points out:

The cultural nationalism project of Hindutva will have nothing to do with that kind of an open ‘past’. This is unsurprising because, without exception, communal nationalism take the male point of view and attempt to feminize the nation state into the Motherland or, in our case, Bharat Mata. Along with this come idealized notions of racial and ethnic/caste purity (131).

This clearly indicates that communal nationalism and gender discriminations as well as caste discriminations are the part and parcel of pseudo-nationalism. "The aggressive turn towards cultural nationalism we are witnessing today with assaults on members of minority religions and Dalits..." (125) is another issue related to nation and nationalism. Along with Bharat Mata, the staunch Hindus always take the issues of Hindu vs. Muslim or Dalits vs. Upper castes with their own intentions. Another issue of 'Gaumata' is always preferable when some chaos occurs in the society on the line of Hindu-Muslim struggles and fights. Narendra Dabholkar, Govind Pansare, Malleshappa Kalburgi and Gauri Lankesh were deliberately killed by those who are staunch Hindutvawadi. "Hindu nationalism upon the country over Indian nationalism" (96) has always been overburdened by the staunch Hindus. Whatever the opinions of any citizen of India may be but "we should be very clear that the only nationalism that deserves our support is Indian nationalism" (103). But narrow-minded nationalists always favour the religious or cultural nationalism rather than Indian nationalism. Romila Thapar opines, "Where nationalism based on a specific religious, linguistic or ethnic identity has been successful in creating a nation state, it is used to justify identity politics" (30-31). In the same manner Sadanand Menon expresses:

As a political force, cultural nationalism draws heavily upon the past to shape the identity of the present. It is up to the democratic forces to question the authenticity of such constructs and expose their majoritarian and hegemonic underpinnings (127).

When the matter of cultural nationalism is taken into consideration, the people involved in this matter try to relate the historical events with the present situation. "It is said that the Hindus once had a great and glorious past that was destroyed by Muslim conquerors. Consequently, the creation of a Hindu state is projected as a legitimate return to a rightful inheritance" (33). To keep the majority of population involved in the burning issues related to religions and caste discriminations is the main agenda of all those who want to establish Brahmanical system that was prevalent in India long ago. So Romila Thapar says, "The victimization of human beings by treating them as untouchable is worse than any other" (43). Varna and caste are the products of Brahmanical system. The great Indian economist Amartya Sen has been quoted by Sadanand Menon,

Amartya Sen has claimed in *The Argumentative Indian* about how the BJP has been consistently working towards popularizing the Hindutva theory through misrepresenting historic facts, fabricating evidence, inventing origin stories from popular mythologies and using violence and force on moderate Hindus as well as other minorities. To project India as a Hindu country and reclaim it exclusively for Hindus, it has rewritten Indian history as essentially a history of Hindu civilization, and sees it as an essential prerequisite for establishing a grand Hindu vision of India (115).

Many people try to say that India is a multi-cultural, multi-religious and liberal nation, even then they favour that 'the national culture' is essentially Hindu culture.

To conclude, the text *On Nationalism* is really thought-provoking. All the readers and the citizens of India must take the thoughts expressed in this text in a very balanced and positive way. All the three scholars who shared their thoughts in this text about socio-political scenario take us into the realm of present Indian status. Just to go on shouting slogans like 'Bharat Mata', 'Vande Mataram', 'Gau Mata' or 'ghar wapsi' are not any way related to nationalism at all. On the contrary such slogans create disturbance in the healthy atmosphere of nationalism. Even to have any kind of discrimination may cause a threat to nationalism in the true sense. It is also a threat to constitutional rights. In short, if we the Indians want to have real nationalism we need to follow our constitution in totality.

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