

Examining Nationality as a taken-for-granted Frame of Reference

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Imagine two cases. Real and not-so-contemporary.

- An editorial in The Hindu dated January 19 2010 was titled “A debate that threatens France’s social fabric”. In crux, it discussed how by launching ‘a grand nation-wide debate’ on what constitutes French national identity, President Nicolas Sarkozy has opened up a veritable Pandora’s Box of ill feelings and hatred bordering on xenophobia. At the behest of Mr. Sarkozy, the debate was initiated by Ministry of Immigration, Integration and National Identity, and was hated by many. Knowing that France is home to Europe’s largest community of Muslims (an estimated five million), most of whom come from former French colonies and protectorates in Africa such as Algeria, Morocco, Mali, Ivory Coast et cetera, this question instead of asking “What is it to be French?” rather seemed to be asking “Can one be black, Arab, Asian, and be French?”
- The Chinese government accused the Internet giant ‘Google’ of violating Chinese laws, as a result of which Google pulled out of China. It is interesting to see that access to many websites and blogs, particularly those discussing politically sensitive subjects, is restricted in China. The Chinese internet users are upset with this move and announced nation-wide boycott of internet facility provided by the government. Though it is alleged that Google as a search engine provided links to many sites banned in China, it is also speculated that this accusing was done because Google was preferred, by the Chinese Internet users, over the regional search engine “Baidu” (which the Chinese authorities thought is not good for the health of regional nationalistic sentiments).

Now these two cases are entirely different in matters of content of issue, implications, et cetera but they address two different questions that I take up in the paper- those questions that must be asked, even if never conclusively answered. The first case is still clearer of the two. It raises the question “What comprises of a national identity?” and “Who is to decide what these compositions ought to

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be?” Historian and political scientist Patrick Weil, author of the award winning study *French And Her Foreigners* observes that “...by nature the question of identity is a complex issue anywhere...The main reason is clearly linked to immigration with an implicit prejudice that French citizens whose roots are in Africa or in North Africa...might represent *a problem because they don't adapt very well*”. Now the catch here is that, as philosopher Constance Beth put it, national identity should never be the business of governments because a nation's identity is a social and historical construct that cannot be defined by law or decree. The majority of French *are*, in fact, French, why pose the question of French identity? This question presupposes that there is something called ‘frenchness’ that lies in certain predetermined behavior pattern (for instance, their way of talking with a little poetic tilt), their way of art appreciation, being always polite, mores (dress, food, religion, culture) and customs and that a person can claim to be French only if he has submitted to these cultural dictates.

What is this ‘adapting’ thing that was being talked about? Can I really be called to belong to a nation if I only adapt their way of life, their identity? Even before I could attempt to answer this question, there is a more fundamental question to be answered. The fact that there is something that ought to be adapted implies that ‘that adaptable thing’ remains for all times (otherwise how could it be open to be adapted at any given point of time?). But looking around today, does it really sound believable that such things really do exist?

The first part of my thesis, then, is to show that the national identity that we talk about is nothing static or like an object that's just lying there for anyone to adopt and be eligible to be called as ‘belonging’ to that nation. A nation is what it is because of the history it has had. I'll try and show how, except for the history (which in the real sense is what binds us), what we call nation, undergoes significant changes every now and then; and also that these changes are so subtle that their process is beyond comprehension. It is so much similar to Tagore's ideas of nationalism. Generally nationalism is supposed to act as the force that breathes life into the combined aspirations of the citizens of a country. The feeling of nationalism is usually manifested in a pride for ‘local culture’ and a certain amount of self interest governing the actions of nations. Tagore's understanding of nationality, on the other hand, dwells on the interdependence of cultures as opposed to the above mentioned narrower definitions of nations and nationalities. Tagore's three essays on nationalism clearly reflect his anti- nationalistic sentiments. The reason why Tagore abhorred the spirit of national-

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ism was that nationalism has always been a source of war, carnage, death and destruction. And the reason why nationalism has been so is that it has been conceived in ill-spirit, with all the wrong intentions and motives. He vehemently opposed the sentiment of hyper nationalism which reveals the truthfulness of Thucydides' ancient maxim "large nations do what they wish, while small nations accept what they must."

In the essay titled *Nationalism in India* he explains that the reason why Europe's nationalism is aggressive and commercial is because right from the beginning, there was, among them, rational unity. He lacked natural resources, but with the help of this rational unity, they cultivated aggressiveness- political and commercial. They had enemies, but because they had internal unity they could sustain themselves. But the problem with India was that there is no such 'internal unity' as Europe witnessed. And the chief reason for this lack of unity was the presence of the problem of race. But with all due credit to India's efforts, she acknowledged the differences within and made adjustments. They ultimately could find their way to the 'internal unity' via the teachings of great saints that India produced; saints preaching one god to all the races of India. Now the problem is that, the problem which eroded India for centuries, has crept into the world. And thus the only way the world could be saved was to find a basis of unity which is not political.

His aim is to exhort his audience to elevate their thinking to include nobler thoughts of *compassion and mutual help*. Tagore is quite sure that self interest should not play a dominant role in the actions of world leaders, which is what seems to be happening to be in France. This launch of the above mentioned 'nation-wide debate' on what constitutes French identity was prompted by purely electoral calculations. By initiating this debate Mr. Sarkozy wanted to woo the extreme Right, anti-immigrant National front because he owns all except the two of France's region (and which he hoped to win by pleasing the anti-immigrants by questioning the authenticity of the immigrants).

Through the China-Google example, I wish to introduce the second part of the thesis of this paper. If one notices the fiasco that preceded the banning of Google in China by the Chinese nationals, one would imagine 'What made them react in the manner they did?' After all it is just a search engine! But if you notice clearly, you'll find (I hope) that Google was not merely a regular search engine for them, it was, as a matter of fact, a way of life, a type of life-made-easy device. How do we know that their sentiment was not strong enough to proclaim the existence of, say, "google nationalism"?

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So, the second part of my thesis tries to see whether the sentiment of nationalism can or cannot be a *function of convenience*. I dare say that 'it is'. I am an Indian and quite proud to be so. But for a moment if I try and strip all my sophisticated bunch of readymade reasons as to why I feel strongly for India, I'll be able to see clearly that one important reason why I take solace to be an Indian is because it provides me the much needed security. My country has a world class economy, a powerful force to defend me against any outside threat, provides me with all the basic amenities, et cetera. It is human nature to always strive for the better, and that is why at times, though I love my country, I consider settling down abroad (for the reasons just mentioned above, with the added benefit that the faraway place provides me with an extra of everything).

Different readings on nationalism tempt me to further allow that we have nationalist feelings in 'degrees'. For instance, if I belong to the region Delhi, then there is much probability that I give it more importance than any other state of India (despite the fact that nationalism requires of us that the entire country be placed on the same plane). And on the world level, I give special place to India. Now, it might be possible that I feel for a particular region within Delhi, say Vijay Nagar, in the same manner as a nationalist is supposed to feel for the nation (in the real sense). But can I extend my nationalist sentiments to Vijay Nagar? Of course not. Because if today my country abandons me and forces me to dwell in the place wherein lies my true nationalist sentiments (Vijay Nagar, in this case), then I'll be left with nothing. Vijay Nagar can't make me feel secured in the same way as India did. It has no world class economy, no forces to save me, et al. And so, I don't reveal my true sentiment for the place I like the most. If I do, then I am robbed of all the *conveniences* I had.

Now coming back to the point about the culture of a place which knits it together, strong enough to form one complete nation. This point can be understood from a very general example. Right from our childhood, we've been taught the history and geography of our country. And even though we did not exist during 1857 or 1947, we can, somehow, completely relate to the struggle and victories. We feel even for the least insignificant person only by virtue of the fact that he was an Indian and participated in the agony of struggle. But we do not feel the same way when we talk about the fighters of some different country. For instance, Bangladesh Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, on the recent visit to India recalled with gratitude how much India supported in the Bangladesh liberation

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war in 1971. Now we heard it like any piece of information given to us. There is a decent possibility that no one felt 'touched' by her remarks. That is because we don't know about their nationalist heroes, their struggle for independence, and all. We are not aware of their past and culture.

These discussions only aim to show that the concept of nation and nationalism is one which has been, and still continues to be the object of perennial interest not only because till date no final and irreducible way to define it has been found but also because it raises some fundamental yet 'big' questions. Discussing nationalism as a cultural phenomenon, it'd only suffice that we mention Johann Gottfried Herder, truly the father of cultural nationalism, who emphasized nation as an organic group characterized by distinct language, culture and 'spirit'. Herder's nationalism amounts to a form of culturalism that emphasizes an awareness and appreciation of national traditions and collective memories, instead of an overtly political quest for statehood. According to him, each nation possesses an, what he calls, *volksgeist*, which reveals itself in songs, myths and legends.

But this is just one aspect of nationalism. Another significant philosopher Benedict Anderson defines nation as "an imagined political community which is also inherently limited and sovereign. It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members meet them or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion". Anderson's significance also lies in his ultimate practical approach which becomes evident when he says that *authentic imagination of nation is not possible*. I call it practical because, it is really impossible to imagine the authentic events that occurred in the past, the sentiments attached with it, et cetera. One can only 'imagine' lamely how things would have been. Nothing more. Another significant philosopher in the line is Ernest Gellner, according to whom, "Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self consciousness; it invents nation where they do not exist." Yet another important figure is Mahatma Gandhi according to whom nationalism is not so important a thing to worry about as long as one cultivated the purity of his/her soul for the things that really, truly, belonged to India. Tagore, for his part out rightly denies the existence of any such sentiment called 'nationalism' on the grounds that nation is an abstracted concept which also suffers from the conceptual impurity. According to Tagore, nation is based on "double abstraction". First, that nation is an abstracted concept, and second, that nation is built up on the abstracted concept of individuality. He could not be more right in his observation that nation-state as we know it to be,

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has no social, moral factor, rather it is only political and economic. Nationalism, then, is not an inclusive concept, rather exclusive and limited.

Despite its 'mythical' quality, and the difficulties involved in defining it, the phenomena still enjoys profound political and emotional legitimacy in the modern society. As to the beginning of nationalism, Anderson suggests that the nation as a political institution is the product of European enlightenment and industrial revolution. Gellner, on the other hand, attributed the emergence of nationalism to the rise of industrial-capitalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Timothy Brennan examines the role of literature, especially the novels, in the formation of national consciousness. He writes, "It was the novel that historically accompanied the rise of nations by objectifying the 'one, yet many' of national life, and by mimicking the structures of the nation...But it did more than that. Its manner of presentation allowed people to imagine the special community that nation was".

The two parts of my thesis, when combined together, amounts to saying that in order to cultivate nationalism, other things being equal, it is fundamental that one feels attached to the past of the nation, its culture; which is again problematic because I have also tried to show how, at one level, nationalism can be a function of convenience. In such a dilemma, I think the views of Tagore supplies the much needed solace. In one of his very profound articles, Mohammad A. Quayum explains how Tagore did not share even an iota of positive sentiment towards the ideology. *His foremost objection came from its very nature and purpose as an institution.* The very fact that it is a social institution, a mechanical organization, modeled on certain utilitarian objectives in mind, made it unpalatable to Tagore, who was a champion of creation over construction, imagination over reason and the natural over the artificial and the man-made: "construction is for a purpose, it expresses our wants; but creation is for itself, it expresses our very being".

According to Tagore, nationalism is not a "spontaneous self-expression of a man as a social being," where human relationships are naturally regulated, "so that man can develop ideals of life in cooperation with one another" but rather a political and commercial union of a group of people, in which they congregate to maximize their profit, progress and power; it is, as he writes, "the organized self-interest of people, where it is least human and least spiritual". It is obvious that Tagore deemed nationalism a recurrent threat to humanity, because with its propensity for the material and the ration-

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al, it trampled over the human spirit and emotion; it upsets man's moral balance, "obscuring his human side under the shadow of soul-less organization".

Thus we see that Tagore called into question, both the constructed aspect of nationalism (which stifled the innate and instinctive qualities of the human individual) and its overemphasis on the commercial and political aspects. This is very well projected in the character of the main protagonist of Tagore's novel, *Gora*. *Gora* was written by Tagore in the year 1909 and the story is set in the Bengal of 1870s. Though it is more of a psychological/moral base, it nevertheless addresses and points towards the actual political/social condition in India during the 1870s. The novel envelops within itself, a man's journey to self transformation. *Gora* is the story about a young Hindu Brahmin man called Gora who is so religiously sentimental towards his religion that he begins to think that "exclusive Hindu nationalism", "rituals" et cetera is the authentic India. He believed that everything *endogenous is good*. But as the story unfolds and he comes to know of his lineage of having British parents, he realizes how empty his pursuit has been. How he has been thinking that it is actually pre ordained as to who would be the emancipator of India; and wrongly he thought that only 'an exclusive Hindu nationalistic sentiment' could do this. He realized that he is not a Hindu, but still can feel strongly for India. This revelation showed him that '*good can also be exogenous*'.

So my thesis that nationalism, if it be there at all, is not something you can manipulate because it is not 'out there', and that most of the times, the nationalism we talk about is more of a matter of convenience. What really consists of the 'frenchness' that Mr. Sarkozy tries to find out is not really that easy to find, and still more, even if he finds, this does not prove anything. Suppose I am a French national (not immigrant) having my so called 'real roots' in France. I know French language, aware of French culture, their way of behavior, and all. But I don't connect to France. What use, then, is my having all the "frenchness"? I don't carry national sentiments towards France. What then? There can be such cases, and even if one such case exists, this shows that bearing a "_ness" is not the criterion of having a national identity.

In fact, as Tagore always insisted, there 'is' no nationalism. Though his vision is idealistic it's not wholly unattainable. As Mr. Quayum calls, it only calls for a humanitarian intervention into present self seeking and belligerent nationalism. But there is other truth that reminds us that, currently, a nation is an organization of "politics and commerce" focused on power and wealth, and as an insti-

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tution its chief interest lies in the material well being of the people. And this is where the defining of nationalism as a matter of ‘convenience’ comes into play. Ideally there should be nothing but the nation, its people and both bound in a pure and selfless tie. But practically, as a social animal, human being wants, very conveniently, security for itself which the nation provides. So, in such a situation it is only better that one keeps one’s eyes and ears open. And instead of trying to decipher the code of nation, nationalism and national identity, it just do what little it can do to add and strengthen that for which he feels in the true sense.

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