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## Different Dimensions of a Nation

By: Manjari Katju

*The idea of a nation state based on ethnicity could easily change into a predatory state that flourishes by calling for the extinction of the 'other'. Such an exclusivist state could turn upon itself and even consume the ideal of the nation.*

The rise of political Hinduism in India in the late 1980s intensified discussions on questions such as what is a “nation”; what are the “qualifications” for its membership; does it work with clearly demarcated boundaries; is it premised on exclusivist notions; when does a “community” become a nation; and what is the latter’s relation with the state.

*The Nation and Its Citizens: Tales of Bondage and Belonging* addresses some of these issues about democracy and citizenship in India that have concerned contemporary scholarship. Sukumar Muralidharan persuades us to focus again on these and related questions. The book does so not only because existing institutions sometimes find it difficult to resolve dissonance and discord, but also because a populist upsurge has the potential to fundamentally alter the nation state as we see it today. The inter-institutional dynamics also undergo a change when one institution takes on more than its share of power and starts using it.

The past shows that if a nation has staked claim to power against another nation and achieved statehood, it has subsequently faced challenges from sub-national identities aspiring to statehood themselves. Moreover, it comes under pressure to conceptually rethink itself and in turn redefine who belongs to it or does not. Of course, this is hugely contingent on who wields state power and what ideas of nationhood hold dominance at a particular juncture.

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The book draws our attention to the contentions within nations—the urge to impose rules of uniformity, to expunge differences, to bring about individual subservience to the general will, and a belief in self-discipline and control. It reminds us that nations are constructs of history and that memory and forgetting play a vital role in creating them and their heroes, villains, mothers, and fathers. The nation in operation is also a division of labour, as the book states, and an integrated system that allocates functions within it and has mechanisms to share the products of collective labour.

The chapters of *The Nation and Its Citizens* focus on varied themes that elaborate how nationalism is moulded by the lived experience of citizens. They highlight that in India the foundations of the nation were laid by the Constitution, which, rather than basing it on an uneasy past that had been sullied by religious clashes, looked to the future and emphasised the opportunities and choices that had opened with the forming of a new republic.

The coming of Hindutva on the political scene through the Ayodhya agitation reflected the seeking of a fresh national identity as articulated by the advocates of Hindutva. The unleashing of ideas of Hindu nationhood by them was also a way to nullify the effects of the politicisation around caste identity. Hindu nationhood or Hindutva was seen as a unifying platform and creating a common foe—the Muslim “other”. The Ayodhya or the Ram temple movement resonated in the popular mind that had seen material hardships and unequal opportunity, and succeeded in creating a popular base for Hindutva.

Muralidharan argues that nations often start with lofty promises—in their struggling phase they come out with weighty slogans and attractive claims. They pledge their allegiance to the principles of liberty, equality, and effective citizenship. However, these promises are rarely fulfilled in the course of time. This has been the case with all nationalisms—the French, American, or English. They began with big promises but did not fulfil them, as evident in their histories of colonialism and neo-colonialism.

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The book reminds us that India began with the promise that national freedom would be a precursor for a social revolution and a victory over inequalities. It also believed that caste and religious inequalities could be overcome by administrative policy in the new

nation. This was very optimistic.

*The Nation and Its Citizens* cites the example of secularism to illustrate how the promises of nationalism have not been fulfilled. Muralidharan says the slogan that was adopted for secularism—*sarvadharmā samabhav*—meant equal opportunity for all religions rather than a strict separation of religion from public life. This carried a tilt towards those who had the numbers. Eventually, secularism was very easily moulded into an idea of majoritarian assertion.

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The book says that at the time of its birth India adopted a definition of citizenship that was agnostic towards a religious identity, only a residence requirement was sufficient for citizenship. But later the idea of national and equal citizenship gave way to a majoritarian notion of citizenship based on religious identity.

The author brings out that there were various perceptions of national identity among Indians in colonial India. The Arya Samaj went with a Hindu-centric notion of the national self and felt that the vast numbers of menial castes had to be brought within the ambit of Hinduism. They had to be drawn from the middle space of Hinduism and Islam and unambiguously accommodated within the Hindu fold for the faith to survive in the face of “dwindling” numbers.

Leaders such as Bal Gangadhar Tilak felt that religion formed the basis of nationality and that Vedic religion was the religion of the Aryans from very early times. He stated that India had been a united, self-contained country in Vedic times and its greatness had lasted till its hegemony was uncontested. But there was also Jyoti Rao Phule in Maharashtra who challenged these views on Aryan nationality and supremacy and championed lower-caste political assertions.

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Nationality was also seen as something based on civic merit and common political rights—a perspective advocated by the Indian National Congress. It upheld the view that citizens living in the same territory should not be discriminated against in terms of rights and that the policies of the government should be equally applicable to all.

For M.K. Gandhi, nationalism was almost like a relationship between an individual and the creator, and the civic bonds between one citizen and another were a way of realising a higher divine purpose. Tagore, on his part, recoiled from the idea of a nation as a common bond and articulated an unambiguous critique of nationalism. He saw the nation as an aggressive entity built for a mechanical purpose.

While Gandhi felt uneasy with the idea of an overarching state and thought that it was dispensable, Tagore felt the nation itself was dispensable. Both, however, believed in individual liberation through civil society. B.R. Ambedkar, on the contrary, viewed civil society with suspicion and realised there was the need for submission to the neatly laid out laws of the state. These contestations alongside the anti-colonial struggle gave birth to the independent Indian nation.

Discussing the ideas of nation, state, and civil society in the writings of thinkers such as Adam Smith, Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Hegel, Vladimir Lenin, and Anthony D. Smith, Muralidharan contends that nationalism first consolidated itself in Europe and then became manifest in the expansion of colonialism and the strengthening of imperialism. Capitalism, which originated in these imperial territories, expanded far and wide through military might to areas that were culturally very different—subjugating and controlling the communities that resided there.

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While nationalism spread the values that helped it grow, such as individual liberty, civic solidarity, and private ownership, it also aroused feelings of solidarity in the colonised subjects and saw resistance from them. Though these communities resisted the colonial order, they were also reconciled to it and cooperated with it. New collective identities came into being that led to the formation of nationalist movements seeking political autonomy.

This was a new idiom of nationalism. Rather than insisting on ethnic homogeneity, it emphasised the popular determination to be free from colonial oppression. It was distinct from the old nationalism on two grounds. One, it was inclusive as far as differences of language or ethnicity were concerned, and two, its main focus was the state—the state as an embodiment of the collective will of the nation. The state in these new communities had a lot of legitimacy and power.

*The Nation and Its Citizens* is a comprehensive account of the power of nationalism as an ideology. However, in its overarching take on nationalism, civil society, the state, and the market, it could have linked the contextual specificities of different times and geographical locations. The book could have also given clues to answering how nationalism, a product of the industrial age, metamorphoses in the post-industrial world.

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Also, when artificial intelligence (AI) is making its presence felt in all spheres of life, does nationalism still have the same salience in the popular psyche or is its emotional connect diminishing, necessitating novel ways to instrumentalise it for consolidating state power? These discussions could have added to the wide canvas of the book and nudged the debate on nationalism towards newer avenues.

Apart from these reservations, *The Nation and Its Citizens* is an all-embracing discussion of the different dimensions of a nation. It argues that the idea of an ethnos or ethnically based nation state could easily change into a predatory state that flourishes by calling for the extinction of the “other”. Such a state sees its purity and survival as coming from suppressing all that is different. “Us” and “them”, “citizens” and “aliens”, and “national” and “anti-national” become the defining binaries in such a state.

Muralidharan ends with a statement that is worth taking note of—the creation of such an exclusivist state based on a “pure” nation could soon turn upon itself and even consume the ideal of the nation.

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