THE INDIAN NATION: IDEATION THROUGH CONFLICTS

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The recent victory of Simranjit Singh Mann of the separatist political party Shiromani Akali Dal (Amritsar) hints at the resurfacing of a subdued secessionist ideology in Punjab (The Hindu, 2022). Typically, a secessionist ideology suggests a fracture in the idea of a nation. Here, I use the word nation with ample caution and am aware of the different debates it espouses (Gupta & Mantri, 2020).

These fractures, with their roots in discontentment that communities may have with the state, are in no way novel. They represent historic demands which predate the very foundation of the Indian nation-state. Therefore, to attempt to understand these present-day fractures, one must revisit the processes that developed this idea.

The construction of the idea of the Indian Nation has been heavily debated among scholars (Subrahmanyam, 2015). These debates are especially conflicted when it comes to the impact of colonialism on the subcontinent as well as the contribution of the colonial experience to the idea of the Indian Nation. To summarize this conflict a potent question that needs to be asked is: Did the colonial experience fracture the core patterns of Indian society or were the colonial masters compelled to adapt to native styles and merely preside in a glorified manner over the more subterranean movements of Indian history.

This article attempts to present this debate and their relevance to the Indian state in the twenty first century.

Benedict Anderson has presented nationalism as socially-constructed community wherein people consider themselves to be part of a group through a belief in collective myths about the past (O'G, 2016). However, this past may vary depending on the school of thought one prescribes too. In India, we can divide the conflicting strands of Indian nationalism and its origins into two schools.

The first is the constructivist school that firmly believes in the idea that India as a nation-state was a colonial invention. They cite the British's historically unprecedented imperial control over the entire subcontinent to justify their claims. In this version the argument goes that it was only the British who managed to extend control over the entire subcontinent, thus bringing the entire region for the first time under a single political entity, therefore it is only the British who should be credited for germinating the idea of an Indian nation. Furthermore, they also cite Britain's specific and colonialism's general use of systems of knowledge to subjugate, divide, classify, and control indigenous populations thus uniting in India's case, its various castes (jatis) (Khilnani, 2017) into a unilinear national identity. This unification involves the introduction of a common language of the state in a land of multilinguality as well as the construction of a justice system that applies a uniform code of legal conduct on the entire populace (Singha, 2000). While one could argue that these attempts were made to not 'unify a community into a nation'

but to create a community of loyal subjects for the Empire, there is some merit to the justifications provided by the constructivist school (Samaddar, 2010).

However, the school overlooks some unique characteristics of the British Raj in India, such as the relationship between several independent princely states and the British government. The pricely states, comprised of semi-autonomous regions with local rulers who were often quite outspoken. The rulers adhered to norms signifying notional subservience to the paramount British power such as making appearance at Imperial Darbars of 1877, 1903 and 1911. But they also organized resources against the continuance of the Raj by donating to political parties and providing safe haven to their functionaries.It is important to note that these regions comprised over forty percent of the subcontinent. In the first three decades of the twentieth century, many of these states such as Baroda and Mysore initiated reforms centered around universities, which can be understood as 'strikes against specific sites of British dominance'.

Yet, these princely states were accommodated into the British hierarchy of rule, arguably, to keep alive these regional aspirations of sovereignty and fracture any nascent development of strands of subcontinent-wide national identity. While the success of such a strategy is debatable, it is certain that the British were not the only political machine operating in the subcontinent (Bhagavan, 2003). Therefore it is a bit unseemly to attribute to the British with the unison of national identity in India especially in light of the existence of other sovereign spheres(Bhagavan, 2003) in the form of the princely state.

On the other side we have the 'civilisation school'. In this author's opinion it is the more colonial view of Indian nationalism. It posits that India as a nation has existed since time immemorial, or more specifically, since the first vestiges of classical Indian civilization established itself along the banks of the River Indus. This conception divides the history of India into three rather simplistic phases : 'a formative one ending at the close of the first millennium of the Christian era, a second phase of confusion and decline, roughly coterminous with Islamic rule and a third - which may still be continuing - of resurgence and a return to roots. Versions of this school of thought, in recent years, have become more and more prominent in light of the political ascendancy of Hindutva-based parties in India.

This view of Indian history, positing India as a civilisational state with the majority religion as its basis is quite facile. It transplants 'word-for-word' Britain's justification for its empire in India. Colonial scholars identified Indian history with a similar tripartite division which presents Indian civilisation as homeostatic and unchanging (Mill, 1997). They argued that India as a civilization is only able 'to export culture' while being unmoved by foreign ideologies except in an overwhelming negative and self-defeatist sense.

This perceived lack of 'modernity' as well as 'individual rights' became the core of the civilizing process of Britain and under the aegis of introducing these systems to India, Britain justified its abhorrent imperialism in India.

By presenting the colonial encounter as interaction between a force of modernity (read the British) with a timeless and static India, we ridicule India and its multi-cultural past. This is demonstranted in the studies undertaken by several generations of historians of India. In the author's humble opinion, it is more sensible to view India as a crossroads open to external influences as well as assimilation of the same rather than as a crude and simple 'exporter of culture'. By placing Indian nationalism in a tradition of assimilation we may become more equipped to accommodate the many fractures that the Indian state faces in the twenty-first century.

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