



Nation and Liminality

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Nation and its Minorities

Having dealt with all the forms of ideological self-representation of nationalism in India as well as the aspects of illegitimate nationalism of Tagore and Gandhi, it becomes inevitable not to gloss over the contemporary debate of trans-nationalism or counter-nationalism. These sets of thinkers reject the very ideology of nationalism regarding it as broadly based on the Enlightenment project of modernity which they believe as unsuitable for illiberal Afro-Asian societies based primarily on identity groups and identity politics. Juxtaposing nationalism with minority and gender, they believe that nationalism by nature is a monistic doctrine quite prone to practice official version of singularist nationalism and hence does not fit into a plural society. Akhtar Majeed argues that when the identity of an ethnic group, or a minority, is not recognized it becomes more assertive and tries to transform into an entity different from national identity. When such groups become conscious of their identity and ask for equality, the artificial edifice of the nation may feel threatened. He further argues that minorities are generally touchy about symbols of their ethnic-cultural identity and they hold on rigidly to all their distinctive possessions in an attempt to preserve their identity, particularly if the demand to change such identity comes from outside the group. The very concept of a ‘national culture’ is often questioned, particularly by the minorities in a plural society, in view of traditional divisions between high and low cultures. Can the ‘culture of the majority’ be termed as the national culture or the latter has to include variants and colors of all the streams in the nation? Majeed adds further that culture can become a vital element for citizenship, in nation-building, a confluence between people and nation, but a culture based on the invented traditions and on the theory of irredentism cannot perform this function because it can only create divisions in the process of nation-building.ⁱ

In the same fervor, Aditya Nigam in his article ‘National Minorities’ argues that the emergence of the question of national minorities has highlighted the extremely problematic relationship that all nationalisms have with minority cultures. Yet, there was a time, for instance, when we all lived with the happy dream that nationhood is the last station on the road to final emancipation embodied in the ideal of a universal abstract citizenship – unmarked by any identity but that of ‘man’. ‘Man’ subsumed the woman as he subsumed all possible cultural identities – other than national identity.ⁱⁱ Nigam cites Partha Chatterjee would show how the nationalist discourse in its exploitative venture in the colonial era appropriates the women’s question as well as caste question into its inner domain and refuses to make it “an issue of political negotiation with the colonial state”ⁱⁱⁱ Nigam concludes his argument saying that one is not so sure that we can think of a nationalism that does not carry



the seeds of xenophobia within it and in purely empirical terms we have yet to see such nationalisms. And this is all the more likely to be the case when we talk of anticolonial nationalisms, for it is here that the awareness of belonging to a subject people can take the most virulently xenophobic forms. It is more fruitful that rather than seek to humanize and transform nationalism, we strive towards a different kind of society where citizenship is not predicated upon 'belonging' in some kind of primordial cultural sense but upon a lived relationship to a place and people. Clearly, argues Nigam, such a notion of citizenship needs to be worked out in practice and will have to go through an endless process of innumerable trial and error. It is also clear that nationalist and state elites are not going to be convinced easily about such proposals. What we need then, asserts Nigam, is to subject our nationalist assumptions to continuous and rigorous critique. As to the location of critique, Nigam suggests unhesitant that one way is to mount a critique of 'discrimination against minorities' from the vantage point of a secular credo that occupies a kind of archimedean 'nowhere' – a 'state-like position' from where it can speak with the equal distance from all communities. Such a critique is not directed at nationalism as it is against what it calls communal politics – that is, politics that is aggressively built around community identities.^{iv}

Nigam also invokes Edward Said proposing, against such an understanding, a notion of secular criticism that is based on identification with minority cultures. In Saidian terms, Bruce Robbins suggests, the term secular stands in opposition to national rather than religious identifications and belief systems (as cited in Aditya Nigam, 'National Minorities', 2002). He sees the condition of national minorities as symptomatic of a general xenophobia that is an always-present possibility within the structure of nationalism. Said therefore, invites us to see the state of homelessness and exile as an abiding condition of modern existence, or as Mufti puts it, sees this state as the paradigmatic trope for minority existence in modern times (Ibid.). Finally, Aditya ends up with the argument that repression and assimilation of 'minority cultures' goes hand in hand with the project of nationalism. In fact, the very production of the national majority, through such assimilations, creates the minority culture as its other.

Liberal theorists have been alleged generally of ignoring issues regarding minority rights as group rights, their legitimate share and adequate space in the structures of power and privileges particularly due to their strong commitment to the autonomy of the individual. They have placed the autonomy factor as the bedrock of western liberal democracy which is regarded as the decisive factor for the notion of equality and stability of electoral democracy. But in the recent years, maintains Arshi Khan, the liberal contractualists have faced some challenges from their liberal fraternity who have argued strongly for the rights of the deprived people, national minorities, ethnic groups, and women. But all such liberal discourse, adds Khan, based on emerging realities in western societies and the new social movements, have finally pledged to conform to the autonomy factor which undermines the limit of reasonableness of the demand of minority rights or group rights particularly in non-western societies. Arshi Khan blames the liberals to have failed to evolve since renaissance in not shifting significantly in their emphasis on individuality as the yardstick for justice, as group rights were always suspected by them of being antithesis to the freedom and choice of the



individuals. He held that the liberals came up with the package of multiculturalism to look at the issue of the recognition of differences including the rights of minorities not as group rights but as the rights of persons belonging to minorities.^v

However, the claims for minority rights (for justice and equality) gained importance with emerging faults and challenges in western societies and finally with the collapse of authoritarian establishments in central-eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Federal liberal democracies like Canada, Australia, United States, Switzerland and Germany successfully worked out to share powers with linguistic groups. ‘Anglo-conformity’ and ‘melting-pot’ models were given up. The US, Canada and Australia rejected the assimilationist projects and adopted towards immigrants, settlers and indigenous populations who want to maintain various aspects of their ethnic heritage.

In this debate, Arshi Khan argues, Liberals tend to delineate a dichotomous relationship between the ‘internal restriction’ (on an individual) and ‘external protection’ (by the state) in order only to make the ethnic group rights subservient to the majoritarian state. He cites Surinder S. Jodhka, “Communities prioritized norms and values of the collectivity over the individual” (S.S. Jodhka, *Community and Identities*, 2001, 18). Amidst others, Kymlicka has strongly argued for the rights of minorities saying that minority rights cannot be subsumed under the category of human rights but with certain fundamental conditions. In particular, he stressed on two important points or constraints: “minority rights should not allow one group to dominate other groups; and they should not enable a group to oppress its own members. In other words, liberals should seek to ensure that there is equality between groups, and freedom and equality within groups. Within these limits, minority rights can play a valuable role within a broader theory of liberal justice.”^{vi} Liberals of different varieties have maintained, to the utter dislike of Majeed Khan, the factor of the absence of ‘internal restrictions’ within the minority or group which can be recommended for ‘external protections’. Although Kymlicka has been criticized by a host of minority rights theorists for what they have called ‘individualist reductionism’.

Another noted theorist, Bill Bowring claims that groups do have an existence separate from the individuals who compose them. Bill quotes Rom Harre, who pointed out that structured groups, that is collectivities, are ontologically prior to individuals. It means that groups have real existence; things can be said about them which cannot be said of the individuals which compose them; they have causal powers which are greater and different from the wills of individuals.^{vii} Roy Bhaskar’s theory of critical realism indicated that “Society pre-exists the individual”.^{viii} Isaiah Berlin emphasized group rights as the third form of liberty. He criticized the liberal tradition, especially Mill, for not understanding the desire for group recognition. He was convinced that unless this form of liberty is recognized it would be impossible to understand why individuals belonging to certain groups accept the curtailment of their individual liberties but still feel enjoyment of group liberty.^{ix} Otto Gierke argued that modernity is built upon the obliteration of the idea of group rights, which was the hallmark of the medieval configuration of power between eleventh and fifteenth centuries in Europe. He



regarded the idea of political association, recognizing only the sovereign individual and sovereign state, as a flawed conception of political life. He argued that the modern idea of unity was a mythical entity and that political life embodied an irreducible multiplicity, which was expressed through group identity and membership. He also refuted the idea that the individual existed before or independent of group to which he or she belonged. Instead, he argued that group identities were as real as individual identities and they were socially and morally constructed through the inter-subjective process of mutual recognition. He insisted that the way people are connected makes a difference to the kind of group to which they belong.^x Roughly speaking this whole school of minority and group rights seeks to distinguish between Membership-blind model of justice and Membership-sensitive model of justice with the greater insistence on the adoption of the latter. They also bring attention towards the large unrepresentational site of liberal democracy along with the politico-legal recognition of preferential treatment with special rights of ethnic minorities by the state.

With view to this Young calls for ‘deliberative democracy’ in order to secure representational guarantees on the reason that existing electoral and legislative processes are ‘unrepresentative’ in the sense that they fail to reflect the diversity of the population in terms of presence. She appeals to two ideals of social justice (fundamentally required for democracy) – self-development and self-determination. These two general values correspond to two general conditions of injustice – (1) oppression, institutional constraint on self-development, and (2) domination, institutional constraint on self-determination. She interprets the value of self-development along lines similar to the value Amartya Sen calls for equality as capabilities. Just social institutions provide social conditions for all persons to learn and use satisfying and expansive skills in socially recognized settings, and enable them to play and communicate with others... in contexts where others can listen. Self-determination consists in being able to participate in determining one’s action and the condition of one’s action; its contrary is domination.^{xi} Applying this theory to Indian case, Akhtar Majeed concludes that provisions for cultural and religious rights of minorities, particularly for the members of the Muslim minority in India, have appeared to be ineffective due to their marginalization in power structures at various levels. Any minority, Akhtar believes, particularly in the country of communities having strong consciousness of religion at the inter-community level, would face great difficulties in sustaining these rights together with deliberate or unintended process of exclusion. What is really required, he suggests, is to insure inclusion both at the levels of political representation and governmental agencies. Finally, rights for minorities are necessarily required for ensuring equality and justice in a country where both the majority and minorities are supposed to be the prisoners of consciousness rooted in history (Majeed Khan, *Minority Rights and Liberal Neutrality*, op. cit., 53).

Ayesha Jalal argues that discomfort with difference is a function of the inclusionary nationalism and, its concomitant, equal citizenship which are among the defining features of modern nation-states. But despite ample evidence on the ground, the paradox of inclusionary nationalism ending up as a narrative construction of an exclusionary majoritarian identity has



rarely commanded attention from the votaries of the nation-state. In India matters are further complicated, continues Jalal, by the fact that the inclusionary idiom is expressed in an artificial binary opposition between secular nationalism and religious communalism. To be secular and nationalist for a Muslim entails publicly disclaiming too close an association with the specific traits of the minority community, religious and cultural. Otherwise there is no escaping the pejorative level of 'communalism'. But the protagonists of Hindutva, says Jalal, can get away critiquing the state's pseudo-secularism while pitching their bid for the nationalist mantle. Thus she concludes that the problem of difference in South Asia as a whole and of Muslim identity in particular cannot begin to be addressed without forsaking the dichotomies between 'secular' and 'religious' as well as 'nationalism' and 'communalism'.^{xii} Ayesha Jalal and Sugata Bose together in their article 'Nationalism, Democracy and Development' note that instead of acknowledging the flaws in the idioms of inclusionary nationalism, state managers have responded to exclusionary challenges by reinforcing the ideational and structural pillars of the nation-state. The disjunction between official policies and societal demands and expectations has never been more critical. Instead of molding the inherited state apparatus to better reflect the emotions that had fired the nationalist movements, the imperatives of strategically placed elites in the late colonial era allowed the state to highjack the very idea of the 'nation' and become the sole repository of legitimate nationalism.^{xiii}

Gendering the Nation:

Similarly 'nation' has also been juxtaposed with gender and in particular with women as another group which, in spite of constituting half of the population, has been on the fringe and remarkably a historic victim of poor representation which made Virginia Woolf declare – "As a woman, I have no country" (Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas*, 1938, 168). Wendy Robbins notes that women and girls are the majority of world's people; yet, of the world's more than 180 countries today, only 14 are headed by women. Women's representation in Parliaments and courts of justice around the world does not remotely match their strength of numbers in the population. Of the 14 of the 53 countries of the commonwealth that recognize Elizabeth II as their queen and head of state, only four have a woman as her representative, i.e., as Governor General.^{xiv} Paradoxically, creation myths and archaeological evidence from different parts of the world suggest that the primal force of existence was a female deity and that ancient societies were likely to have been matriarchal. "She (woman) is there at the beginning of the lives of individuals and of nations", states Elleke Boehmer in "Stories of Women and Mothers", the splendid lead article in *Motherlands* (She also asks a rhetorical question pregnant with implications for women authors in Africa, Canada and everywhere: "Do nationalist vocabularies not implicate women in certain paradoxes of identity and affiliation?" Elleke, 'Stories of Women and Mothers', 4).

Robbins further suggests that Benedict Anderson, in his celebrated though myopically male-centered *Imagined Communities*, points out that nationalism describes its object using either the vocabulary of kinship (motherland, patria) or of home in order to denote something to



which one is ‘naturally’ tied. Women are often depicted, and depict themselves, as reproducers of the nation. Mother India, Mother Africa, Mother Ireland, and so on, are all part of a popular imaginary.^{xv} Some feminist analysts have explained the exclusion of women from the discourse on nation as following, paradoxically, from this very connection to home, i.e., the confinement of women to the private sphere and their exclusion from the public political sphere (See Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*, 1988). Home is a highly gendered structure. Anne McClintock’s *Imperial Leather* explores the hierarchy implicit in the concept of home, whether writ large or small. The metaphoric depiction of social hierarchy as natural and familial – the “national family”, the global “family of nations”, the colony as a “family of black children ruled over by a white father” – depends on the prior naturalizing of the social subordination of women and children within the domestic sphere.^{xvi}

Elleke Boehmer postulates that the “motherland” of male nationalism may “not signify ‘home’ and ‘source’ to women”. She observes that the male role in nationalist scenarios is typically metonymic; that is, men are contiguous with each other and with the national whole. Women, by contrast, appear “in a metaphoric or symbolic role” (Boehmer, op. cit., 6). They have not infrequently been constructed as the symbolic bearers of a collectivity’s identity and honor, (Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation*, 45) and female figures often boldly signify ‘homeland’ and ‘home’. Canadian critic Dina Georgis, in her article “Mother Nations and the Persistence of ‘Not Here’”, parses this with respect not only to imperialism, a discourse in which the disempowered colony is constructed as passive and unruly, but also with respect to nationalism and nation states (Yuval-Davis, *Ibid*, 45). Published in the *Canadian Women’s studies’* special issue (2000) on National Identity and Gender Politics, Georgis’ article begins: “Established in feminist postcolonial studies is that embedded in the formation of the nation, especially colonized nations, is a maternal and feminine trope”. It continues: “As a symbol ...the female body has not only been deployed to sustain nationalist regimes within nation states” (Georgis, op. cit., 27).

Thus, not only is imperial Britain, adds Wendy Robbins, represented as female (‘Britannia’) but so also are the revolting American colonies, symbolized by the female iconography of the Statue of Liberty; not only are the loyal French colonists deported from Acadie symbolized by Longfellow’s ‘Evangeline’ but so, too, is the mother country of France, at least in its revolutionary incarnation as ‘Marianne’. In the nineteenth century, political cartoonists also featured the new dominion as female: ‘Miss Canada’, daughter of ‘Britannia’, typically courted by, but independent enough to resist, her annexationist ‘Cousin Jonathan’ – the USA. The simultaneous symbolic celebration and political repression of women is not uncommon. Even the legal equality granted to women under the constitutions of modern states is more often than not circumscribed by family legislation – privileging men in the areas of marriage, divorce, child custody, maintenance, and inheritance rights (Robbins cites Deniz Kandiyoti, op. cit., 171). Such examples provide evidence for feminist theorists that “women are typically constructed as the symbolic bearers of the nation but are denied any direct relation to national agency”.^{xvii}



Emphasizing that women's participation in nationalist movements is much more than just symbolic, Lina Sunseri notes in her article 'Moving Beyond the Feminism versus Nationalism Debate': "Historically, women's participation in anti-colonial liberation movements has been vital; but [it] has not translated into enduring gains for women in the new nation"^{xviii} Sunseri also quotes Cynthia Enloe's observation: "[A]fter national liberation, women generally have been pushed to domestic roles". National liberationist movements have a very instrumental agenda; typically they "mobilize women when they are needed in the labor force or even at the front, only to return them to domesticity or to subordinate roles in the public sphere when the national emergency is over"^{xix} Robbins quotes Elleke Boehmer, "Despite professed ideals, nationalisms do not address all individuals equally: significant distinctions and discriminations are made along gendered (and also class and racial) lines..." To this list of distinctions and discriminations, she adds religion, language and sexual orientation (Ibid. 180). Before ending up this debate on gender-nation dichotomy, Arun Prabha Mukherjee needs to be mentioned regarding her questioning Anderson's position; she asks: "If nations are experienced as 'imagined communities' and evoke discourses of kinship and home, why does the narrator in Dionne Brand's short story, "At the Lisbon Plate", describe herself as '[a] woman in enemy territory'?"^{xx} Elsewhere, in *Chronicles of the Hostile Sun*, Brand uses the trope of homelessness to describe her relationship with Canada:

I am not a refugee,

I have my papers,

I was born in the Caribbean,

practically in the sea,

fifteen degrees above the equator,

I have a Canadian passport,

I have lived here all my adult life,

I am stateless anyway.^{xxi}



Notes

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- ⁱ. Majeed, Akhtar – ‘Minorities and Nation-State’, in ‘Nation and Minorities’ (edt.), 2002, Kanishka Publishers, New-Delhi, pp. 1-15.
- ⁱⁱ. Nigam, Aditya – ‘National Minorities’ in “Nation and the Minorities” (edt), Majeed Akhtar, 2002, pp.16.
- ⁱⁱⁱ. As cited in Aditya Nigam, Ibid, 22.
- ^{iv}. Ibid., pp. 26.
- ^v. Khan, Arshi – ‘Minority Rights and Liberal Neutrality’, in “Nation and the Minorities”, (edt.) Majeed Akhtar, 2002, 30-1.
- ^{vi}. Kymlicka, Will – “Multicultural Citizenship a Liberal Theory of Minority Rights”, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995, pp. 195.
- ^{vii}. Bowring, Bill – ‘Multicultural Citizenship: A more viable Framework for Minority Rights’, In Deirdre Fottrell and Bill Bowring, eds., Minority and Group Rights in the New Millennium, The Hague/Boston/London: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1999, pp.2.
- ^{viii}. Bhaskar, Roy – ‘Reclaiming Reality’, 1989, mentioned in Bill Bowring, Ibid., pp. 21.
- ^{ix}. Berlin, Isaiah – ‘The Two Concepts of Liberty’, Four Essays on Liberty, Oxford, OUP, 1969, pp. 158-9.
- ^x. Gierke, Otto – ‘Community in Historical Perspective’, Cambridge: CUP, 1990.
- ^{xi}. Young, Iris Marion – ‘Inclusion and Democracy’, pp.32.
- ^{xii}. Jalal, Ayesha – ‘Exploding Communalism’, in “Nationalism, Democracy and Development”, ed. Bose and Jalal, 1997, Delhi, OUP, pp. 100-102.
- ^{xiii}. Ayesha Jalal & Sugata Bose, ‘Nationalism, Democracy and Development’, 1997, p. 2-4.



^{xiv}. Robbins, Wendy – ‘Gendering Imaginations: Stories by Some...’ in “Nation in Imagination”, Edited by C. Vijayasree, Meenakshi Mukherjee, Harish Trivedi & Vijay Kumar, Orient Longman, New Delhi, 2007, pp. 168.

^{xv}. Ibid., p. 169.

^{xvi}. McClintock, Anne – ‘Imperial Leather’, New York: Routledge, 1995, pp. 358.

^{xvii}. Ibid., pp. 354-55.

^{xviii}. Sunseri, Lina – ‘Moving Beyond the Feminism versus Nationalism Debate’, CWS. Special Issue “National Identity and Gender Politics”, 20, no. 2, 2000, 147.

^{xix}. Kandiyoti, Deniz – “Identity and its Discontents: Women and the Nation”, in Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), 376.

^{xx}. Mukherjee, Arun Prabha – “Canadian Nationalism” in Floating the Borders, ed. Nurjehan Aziz (Toronto: TSAR, 1999), 97.

^{xxi}. Brand, Dionne – ‘Chronicles of the Hostile Sun’ (Toronto: Williams-Wallace, 1984), 70.