

The case for reclaiming Indian nationalism

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2019 may well be termed the year of nationalism. Over the past twelve months the nationalist rhetoric of leaders of the most populous states in the world – Trump in the US, Putin in Russia, Bolsonaro in Brazil, Xi Jinping in China and of course Narendra Modi here in India – has only gained in stridency. This wave of nationalism appears to have confirmed its historically notorious association with prejudice, xenophobia, racism, chauvinism and conflict.

Yet the problem is not so much nationalism per se but the way in which the boundaries of national belonging are being drawn. Who belongs and who does not? This is the key question that any political community must ans-

wer about itself.¹ The Modi government in India is representative of the present crop of right wing populist regimes in violently redrawing the boundaries of the nation to intersect with those of the ethnic majority, explicitly and egregiously excluding ethnic minorities. Such exclusionary definitions of nationalism should be, and indeed are being bravely, vigorously resisted. Yet, in this essay I argue that we must do so without giving up on the concept of nationalism itself.²

1. R. Bendix, *Nation-Building and Citizenship: Studies of Our Changing Social Order*. University of California Press, Berkeley, 1964, p. 90; M. Walzer, *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality*. Basic Books, New York, 1983, p. 55.

This is because in as much as nationalism is today, and has historically been associated with division and destruction, it can also be a powerful, constructive force. At its core nationalism is about 'love' that generates a spirit of 'fraternity' and 'unity'.³ As a shared overarching identity nationalism can unify diverse ethnic groups. Further, nationalism can be an important driver of political, economic and social freedoms.⁴

The challenge, I argue, is, therefore, not just to resist the exclusionary definitions of nationalism put forward by the ruling regime but equally and critically, to fight to reclaim the very idea of the Indian nation away from the Hindu right. We cannot allow the language of nationalism to belong exclusively to the Sangh Parivar. Instead we must work to reclaim it and return it to foundational inclusive understandings of who is an Indian.

Nations like all political communities have boundaries. The key question is – who is in and who is out. Most nations answer this question in their constitutions, which specify who is considered a member of the nation, and who is not. The Indian Constitution gives an unequivocally inclusive answer to this question of who belongs.

In deliberate rejection of the two-nation theory, and the creation of Pakistan on religious lines, the foundational boundaries of the Indian

nation encompassed believers of all religions (and non-believers), speakers of all languages, members of all castes and tribes, and residents of all parts of the country.⁵ To be sure there were at the time, competing, narrower visions of who was an Indian, such as that of Savarkar, but these did not garner popular support. It was a plural, inclusive vision of India that was shared across various strata of society and which was enshrined in the Constitution.

Whether it is the attempt to exclude Muslim immigrants as citizens through the proposed Citizenship Amendment Bill, the National Register of Citizens, which threatens to render Muslims who might have been born and lived in India for decades stateless if they don't have the necessary documents, the revocation of the special status granted to Kashmir in Articles 370 and 35a, the rewriting of history textbooks, or the condoning of violence against minorities – it is this constitutionally enshrined vision of the Indian nation that the BJP is eroding and which must thus, be opposed. Indeed, such resistance is very much in place. Especially insofar as, despite its relentless and aggressive peddling, it is unclear how much popular support the BJP's exclusionary recasting of Indian nationalism enjoys.

Even though the BJP has been decisively elected to a second successive term in office, its attempt to impose an exclusionary definition of an Indian is a primarily top-down project. It is driven by the systematic, sinister machinations of the highest echelons of the party. The intensity and extent of support that this grossly circumscribed version of Indian nationhood enjoys within the populace is

5. M. Tudor, *The Promise of Power: The Origins of Democracy in India and Autocracy in Pakistan*. Cambridge University Press, 2013.

highly debatable. Many commentators have pointed out that votes for the BJP should not be interpreted as an endorsement of Hindutva. Social schemes such as the distribution of toilets and cooking gas, and the absence of a cohesive opposition, figured prominently in people's decisions to back the incumbent party. Further, the BJP has witnessed serious electoral reversals, most recently in the state assembly elections in Maharashtra.

Additional evidence for the shaky popular support for the BJP's exclusionary nationalism can be found in the significant resistance to its policies – whether it is the uproar against the Citizenship Amendment Bill, statements against the National Register of Citizens, or the refusal of detained Kashmiri political leaders to sign release bonds.⁶ Such was the outrage at Amit Shah's alleged declaration about the imposition of Hindi as a national language earlier this year that he was forced into the uncharacteristic position of backing down and clarifying that he had in fact sought only to encourage the learning of Hindi as a second language.

The BJP regime's recasting of Indian nationalism as Hindu nationalism violates foundational, constitutionally enshrined conceptualizations of who is Indian and must be resisted. Further, it rests on precarious popular foundations and is already being vigorously

2. P. Singh, 'Nationalism Can Have its Good Points. Really', *The Washington Post*, 26 January 2018.

3. B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso, London, New York, 1991, pp. 7, 141, 143; J.S. Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government*. Longmans, Green, and Co., London, 1875; E. Renan, 'What is a Nation?', in S. Woolf (ed.), *Nationalism in Europe: From 1815 to the Present*. Routledge, London, (1882) 2002.

4. A. Sen, *Development as Freedom*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001.

6. S. Karmakar, 'CAB Protest: Three Killed, Assam Remains Volatile', *The Deccan Herald*, 12 December 2019, <https://www.deccanherald.com/national/cab-protest-three-killed-assam-remains-volatile-784985.html>; 'Chorus Against "Divisive" Bill and NRC', *The Telegraph*, 11 December 2019, <https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/chorus-against-citizenship-amendment-bill-and-nrc/cid/1725874>; P. Ashiq, 'J&K leaders refuse to sign Release Bonds', *The Hindu*, 26 November 2019, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/jk-leaders-refuse-to-sign-release-bonds/article30079167.ece>.

contested. If that much is clear, what is less clear is what should come in its stead? For most scholars and commentators the answer would be no more nationalism.

This response is certainly understandable. The present tide of exclusionary nationalism has brought up memories of the division and destruction wrought by it in the past. Many scholars have gone so far as to say that the last analogous global surge of nationalism was in the 1930s and 1940s in the years preceding the Second World War. Writing in this context, Albert Einstein had famously described nationalism as the ‘measles of mankind’. Rabindranath Tagore had referred to it as ‘a great menace’. Earning further epithets of ‘evil’,⁷ ‘the pathology of modern developmental history’,⁸ and as ‘the starkest political shame of the twentieth century’,⁹ who would not wish for an end to nationalism? Indeed predictions of the demise of nationalism have brought together scholars as ideologically divergent as Marxists and neoliberals.

Yet as consistently as scholars have prophesized its decline, the phoenix of nationalism has risen from the ashes of its last incarnation. Since the treaty of Westphalia established nationalism as the legitimate basis for political rule, nation states have been the basic organizing units for the global polity. We continue to live today in a world of nation states. Even with some attenuation of their power associated with processes of globalization, nations remain the central form of political

7. K.R. Popper, *An Unended Quest: An Intellectual Autobiography*. Routledge, London, 2005, p. 120.

8. T. Nairn, *The Break-up of Britain: Crisis and Neo-Nationalism*. New Left Books, 2003, p. 347.

9. J. Dunn, *Western Political Theory in the Face of the Future*. Cambridge University Press, New York, 1979, p. 57.

community. They are the key units for administering, and providing justice around social and economic issues, and for providing voice and accountability to the people.¹⁰

Nations are clearly here to stay. Identification with, and allegiance to nations is here to stay. To hope that the decline of Hindu nationalism will open up to a post-national future is unrealistic. It might also be undesirable. This is because to give up on nationalism is to give up on a potent force that has enormous constructive potential.

An instructive way to understand this constructive potential of nationalism is to approach it in social psychological terms as a group identity.¹¹ As a group identity, nations answer both a basic biological need for group living, and a psychological need for community as a source of validation and esteem. Belonging to a national political community has been shown to protect people from feelings of alienation and solitude. Nationalism is described as an ‘essential condition’ for the realization of individual autonomy and freedom.¹² Further as a group identity, nations have a unifying potential, bringing together people from diverse ethnic groups. The mutual commitments and ethical obligations of nationhood can encourage the realization of collective projects of freedom.

There is a vast social psychological research on the powerful, positive consequences of group identification.¹³ Laboratory and field experi-

10. M.C. Nussbaum, *For Love of Country?*, J. Cohen, (ed.), Beacon Press, Boston, 1996; D. Rodrik, *The Globalization Paradox: Why Global Markets, States, and Democracy Can't Coexist*. Oxford University Press, 2011.

11. E. Theiss-Morse, *Who Counts as an American?: The Boundaries of National Identity*. Cambridge University Press, 2009.

12. Cited in A. Patten, ‘The Autonomy Argument for Liberal Nationalism’, *Nations and Nationalism* 5(1), 1999, p. 6.

ments in social identity theory have consistently and robustly demonstrated that once people feel part of a group, their affect toward that group and its members becomes more positive.¹⁴ Liberal nationalist scholars have described this as the ‘deep and important obligations [that] flow from identity and relatedness’.¹⁵ The crux of the argument is the power of what Yael Tamir has termed ‘The Magic Pronoun: “My”’.¹⁶ The obligations owed to those we consider as our own are different from and more wide-ranging than those we owe others. A sense of belonging together leads to the transcending of purely reciprocal compromise, on which interpersonal relationships, in general, might be said to be loosely premised, and triggers prosocial behaviour. Interestingly, these positive behavioural effects for group identity have been found to occur consistently even when the basis for group identification was seemingly trivial. It is therefore not surprising that in-group favouritism has been found to be particularly strong when the basis for the superordinate group identification is a powerful, emotionally resonant national identity.

Further, it is important to note that these positive effects of group identification do not require groups to be homogeneous. In fact all groups, especially larger superordinate groups such as nations, encompass a diversity of smaller groups, such as ethnic and class groups. By the well known ethnic fractionalization index,¹⁷ for exam-

13. G.W. Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice*. Addison-Wesley Pub. Co, Cambridge, MA, 1954.

14. J.E. Transue, ‘Identity Salience, Identity Acceptance, and Racial Policy Attitudes: American National Identity as a Uniting Force’, *American Journal of Political Science* 51(1), 2007, p. 79.

15. Y. Tamir, *Liberal Nationalism*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1993, p. 99.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 95.

ple, India, is one of the most diverse countries in the world. A host of studies have demonstrated how bringing together a number of smaller groups together within a single overarching identity is an important unifying mechanism. At the root of this are two well documented facts: first, that our identities are malleable and second, that we all hold multiple identities.

As historian Linda Colley writes in her influential book about the forging of a British identity, ‘identities are not like hats. Human beings can and do put on several at a time.’¹⁸ We can layer identities and taking on superordinate identities, such as nationalism, does not require the elimination or abandonment of other subordinate identities, such as ethnicity. This was the premise of Indian nationalism, which was based not on uniformity but on a national unity that included and respected diversity along various cleavages – class, religion, region, language, caste, and indigeneity.

Experiments within a branch of social identity theory termed the Common Ingroup Identity model demonstrate that when different groups coalesce in a shared identity, members’ perceptions change from ‘us’ and ‘them’ to an encompassing national ‘we’. The perception of a common ingroup, such as a nation, extends or redirects the cognitive and motivational processes that produce positive feelings toward ingroup members to former outgroup members.

An online survey experiment that I conducted with my coauthors

17. The ethnolinguistic fractionalization index (ELF) measures the likelihood that two randomly selected people from a given population belong to different ethnic groups. It is based on primary data from the Atlas Narodov Mira, originally compiled by Soviet ethnographers in 1964.

18. L. Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837*. Yale University Press, 2005, p. 6.

demonstrates this unifying power of nationalism in the case of India. First, we found that at least as of 2012 when we fielded our survey, for most of our respondents, national symbols continued to carry their historically inclusive meaning. Exposure to the flag and a map of India, for example, cued a pan-religious Indian nationalism that included both Hindus and Muslims.¹⁹

Further, we found that the increased salience of this inclusive, Indian national identity promoted generous behaviour across religious lines. When Indian nationalism was made prominent, Hindu respondents did not discriminate against and contributed roughly the same amount of money to Muslim as to Hindus in the context of our experimental scenario. Moreover, exposure to a shared Indian identity had a strong, positive, and statistically significant effect on contributions from Hindus to Muslims.²⁰

In addition to this unifying potential of bringing together people from various groups into a deep comradeship,²¹ nationalism can also be a powerful motor for the realization of collective projects. Returning to social psychology, a host of studies have found that the ‘we-ness’ that emerges from a shared identity, such as nationalism, fosters an idea of a ‘linked fate’ and a ‘shared destiny’ – a sense that my welfare is connected to that of my fellow group members, a feeling that we are all in this together. This leads to a prioritization of, and willingness to work for collective projects, notably the realization of social, economic and political freedoms.

19. For more details on our experiment, please see V. Charnysh, C. Lucas, and P. Singh, ‘The Ties That Bind: National Identity Salience and Pro-Social Behavior Toward the Ethnic Other’, *Comparative Political Studies* 48(3), 2015, pp. 267-300.

20. Ibid.

21. B. Anderson, 1991, op. cit., p. 7.

In different parts of the world at various points in time a strong and inclusive nationalism has been a powerful force for the extension of social services. The strengthening and widening of national solidarities in the wake of the Second World War, for example, played a key role in the establishment of welfare states across Europe.

In Britain the experience of the war brought together working class and upper classes, on the one hand, and the Welsh, Scots, Northern Irish and English, on the other. This intense, inclusive British nationalism was an important driver for the institution of radical and unprecedented ‘cradle to the grave’ social policies including education, health, and housing that were made freely available to all citizens irrespective of their ability to pay for them. Scholars have argued that the gradual constriction of this social support network over the past few decades has eroded this sense of British belonging, reflected by last month’s election results that clearly showed cleavages along the lines of the Scots, Irish and English.

Nationalism has also driven movements for political freedom of their homelands. A strong, inclusive national identity was a key driver of the struggle against colonial rule not only in India, but across countries in Asia and Africa from the 1940s to the 1970s. Through the 1990s, nationalism powered the overthrow of Communist regimes in the Soviet Union and across Eastern Europe and Central Asia. The leaders of anti-communist movements may have invoked liberal-democratic principles in order to delegitimize communist dictators, but numerous scholars have shown how nationalism was the strongest force mobilizing the masses against communism.

In my book, *How Solidarity Works for Welfare: Subnationalism and Social Development in India*, I delineate the additional constructive potential of an inclusive nationalism, such as Indian nationalism, that nests powerful identities, such as regional-linguistic identities, within them. In contrast to the European model of nationalisms based on single languages, Indian nationalism has rested explicitly on the recognition of multiple languages. In response to popular movements, in the mid-1950s, the States Reorganization Commission redrew colonial provincial boundaries along linguistic lines.

Following the logic of the constructive potential of group identities delineated above, I showed how these subnational identities have in turn been important drivers for social welfare. Drawing on a combination of statistical and comparative historical analyses of Indian states from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, I show that states with a more cohesive subnationalism, such as Kerala and Tamil Nadu, were more likely to institute and maintain a progressive social policy and witness better developmental outcomes as compared to states with more fragmented subnational identities, such as Uttar Pradesh.²²

Political theorist Margaret Canovan described nationalism as a 'battery that energizes much of politics'.²³ Like all batteries it can be used to power divisive projects, as it is doing across the world today. But, as I have sketched briefly in this essay, it can and has historically also driven progressive projects, of unifying ethnic groups, and fostering freedom. Many

scholars and commentators have in the past, and especially in the wake of the present wave of exclusionary nationalisms, argued for a post-national, cosmopolitan future. Yet whether we like it or not, nations and nationalism are here to stay. But such arguments are more than just unrealistic, they are also potentially dangerous. By giving up on nationalism we cede the question of who belongs to the nation, to the violently exclusive castings of the Right.

In as much as we must, and are vigorously resisting the exclusionary nationalism of the ruling regime, we must equally work to reclaim the idea of the Indian nation and return it to the foundational inclusive conceptualizations enshrined in our Constitution. This work of reclaiming an inclusive Indian nationalism will need to happen as much in the artistic and activist as in the scholarly realm.

In the US, for example, where I teach, one of the most powerful acts of resistance to the White, Christian, anti-minority, anti-immigrant nationalism of Trump are a set of posters by Shepard Fairey – the artist behind the iconic 'Hope' portrait of Barack Obama in 2008. Called 'We the People' these posters reclaim an alternate, inclusive idea of America.²⁴ Originally released on the eve of Trump's inauguration as President and ubiquitous on placards at protest marches across the country since, the 'We the People' posters juxtapose selections from the American constitution with images of Muslim, Latina, and African-American women, coloured in the hues of the American flag. Loudly and proudly they proclaim: This is what our nation stands for. This is what we look like. We all equally belong.

22. P. Singh, *How Solidarity Works for Welfare: Subnationalism and Social Development in India*. Cambridge University Press, 2015.

23. M. Canovan, *Nationhood and Political Theory*. Edward Elgar, Cheltenham, UK, 1996, p. 72.

24. P. Singh, 'Flag Belongs to the Left, Too', *The Providence Journal*, 14 November 2019.