

ETHNIC NATIONALISM: THE NEED TO REVISIT TAGORE'S VIEW ON NATIONALISM IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Sakaldip Singh

Independent Scholar

Abstract

This paper has been written by keeping three objectives in mind to justify the title of this paper, the very first objective of this paper is to reveal the destructive nature of ethnicity by unearthing historical dimensions and lamenting on the present global phenomenon. The second, objective is to show, a complex affinity of ethnicity with nationalism and the ideological construction of ethnic nationalism with the views of Mariategui, Lawson, Foucault, Ernest Gellner, Anderson, and Hobsbawm. The last, objective is how to get emancipation from the ideological construction of nationalism with the help of cosmopolitan figure Rabindranath Tagore.

Keywords: *Ethnicity, Ethnic Conflicts, Nation, Nationalism, True Freedom, Ethnic cleansing, False Ethnic Consciousness.*



Scholarly Research Journal's is licensed Based on a work at www.srjis.com

Introduction:

In the present political sphere and our day-to-day conversations, the word like Ethnic Groups, Ethnicity, and ethnic conflicts are appearing to be common terms but by nature these are very complex. This is also applicable to the terms nation and nationalism. This phenomenon is evident in the social sciences as well. In the early twentieth century, Max Weber, a prominent Social Thinker rejected 'ethnic community action' as an analytical concept. He also assumed the phenomenon like ethnicity and nationalism would lose their importance and eventually disappear as the outcome of modernization, industrialization, and individualism, Weber was not alone, many social scientists expressed the same view. However, over time, they were proven wrong. This is evident after the end of the Second World War, the political magnitude of ethnicity, nationalism, and other forms of identity politics grew many folds in the discourse of world politics, and it is acting to be a dominant factor in the 21st century. In the last decade, it is observed that the number of research publications on ethnicity and nationalism in the field of political science, history, sociology, and social anthropology has grown enormously. The incident, which arrested the attention of academicians of the different fields, was the Serbian program of 'ethnic cleansing', started in 1992, aimed at removing all Bosnian Muslims, known

as Bosniak from Bosnian territory. The Serbian program of 'ethnic cleansing', that led to extreme disorder and ethnic violence, triggered many academician and theorists of social sciences to analyze the nature of ethnic nationalism not simply as the reflection of primordial identities but as socially constructed identities, where the question of serving interests to some groups is involved. This program of 'ethnic cleansing' also helped to analyze the nature of 'ethnic solidarity' at the time of civil war, through the fact that it forced many Serbs who had the vision to establish a multiethnic, democratic Bosnia-Herzegovina. The appeal to these kinds of ethnic solidarities seems to be 'ancient' and 'apparently ' natural', which led to the new 'ideological mobilization', demanding its adherent to get ready to kill others and sacrifice their life for their nation.

After the French Revolution, the idea that state boundaries should correspond with 'national communities', which has been the main source of political legitimacy around the world. In the first phases of the nineteenth century, when nationalism began to expand from Western Europe, that was ethnic, in nature. A tendency to define the nation in terms of ethnicity led to violent processes of unification and secession, as happened in Germany, Italy, and most of Eastern Europe. At the onset of the 20th century, ethnic nationalism came to disarray political borders even more, which led to the breakup of multiethnic empires, including the Habsburg, Ottoman, and Russian ones. The notion of nationalism had tremendous effects on changing the size of Europe's political unit, which in turn created the problem of balance of power, and also the reason behind two World wars.

After the Second World War, political leaders and thinkers of different fields were critical of ethnic clashes, conflicts, and wars, which were legitimized in the name of nationalism and nation. They, therefore, stressed the need for establishing different kinds of liberal norms and institutions. Various Principles, such as territorial integrity and universal human rights, and bodies, such as the United Nations were set up to reduce ethnic nationalist conflicts across the world. the end of the cold war and the idea of globalization, a notion, where the political boundary would not be a barrier, created optimism among the entire world community that this would make a road to the era of peace between and within the nations of the world. But, all hopes were shattered by new sources of domestic and international tensions. There was a resurgence of ethnic conflicts in different parts of the world, some of these led to the disintegration of so many states, particularly the USSR.

Present Scenario:

In the present times, the reason for concern is that the idea of ethnic nationalism is coming back with new vigor, influencing and guiding the mind of various political leaders in the world, which has shaped the discourse of politics in many nations. It is evident in the case of Brexit, where British voters choose to leave the EU out of a conviction that the 'post-national' image of that body undermined British sovereignty and threatened to flood the United Kingdom with immigrants from Africa, the middle east, and the less developed parts of Europe. In that same year, Donald Trump won the White House by infusing the fear that the United States was being invaded by Mexicans and Muslims. Other leaders across the world have desirously embosomed their version of ethnic nationalism; it is clear from the fact that right-wing populist parties, which oppose the EU and immigration, have gained greater electoral shares. The revival of anti-Semitism in Hungary and Growing discrimination against Roma in Italy. Ethnic nationalism has its presence, also in India, Russia, Turkey, and Brazil, in different forms. The formidable thing about ethnic nationalism, in the present days, is that it could bring the diabolic phenomenon of the past.

Ethnic Nationalism:

An Ideological Construction: Nationalism is perhaps the most influential ideology of the last couple of centuries and continues to be a dominant actor in the present century. It is not a straightforward ideology but a complex one. Nationalism has many forms and perspectives, like, fascist, liberal, socialist even Marxist. As an ideological discourse, nationalism has evolved through different stages: Protonationalism-Early Modern Nationalism-Nationalism in the age of Revolution-Post Cold War Nationalism. In the study of politics, the issue of 'political interest' and the question: Who gains and who loses? is very significant. In the case of nationalism, as a part of the study of politics, there is considerable debate among political scientists as to who gets benefits from nationalism as an ideology. For the first time, the term 'ethnicity' was used by U.S sociologist David Riesman in his book 'The Lonely Crowd' published in 1950, where he defined it as the 'quality of an ethnic group', however, it is derived from the Greek word 'ethos' which originally meant heathen or pagan. Over a long period, 'ethnic' began to refer to 'racial' characteristics... In everyday language, the term 'ethnicity', still is surrounded by the issues of minority and race relations but in social anthropology, it simply refers to aspects of the relationship between groups that recognize themselves as culturally distinctive. Nowadays there has been a shift, in nature, of ethnic goals from cultural, linguistic, and religious to socioeconomic and political. Like ethnicity, nationalism magnifies the cultural

Copyright © 2020, Scholarly Research Journal for Interdisciplinary Studies

similarity of its defenders, and by implications, it demarcates boundaries vis-à-vis others, who thereby become an outsider.

As the direct rule or the rule by the state expanded across entire Europe, the welfare of common Europeans was to be decided by the state which was never before. The state becomes the manager of internal and external affairs, internally, the state started to take decisions on the tax system, issue of the national language, education system, and military affairs. On the other hand, externally, the state started to control the movements of goods and people across boundaries, imposed various kind of tariffs and customs and the instrument of economic policy, people from adjacent states were considered as distinctive kinds who deserves limited rights, which created a sense of homogeneity within state and heterogeneity among states. (Tilly 1990: 116). The more materialist and state-centered view have a strong tendency to see not only nationalism but also nationhood as basically flowing from the rise of European modernity. As Giddens (1984: 116) puts it:

By a "nation" I refer to a collectivity existing within a demarcated territory, which is subject to a unitary administration, reflexively monitored both by the internal state apparatus and those of other states... A "nation", as I use the term here, only exists when a state has a unified administrative reach over the territory over which its sovereignty is claimed.

This kind of view sees the relationship between nationalism and ethnicity as more or less coincidental and implied that it is the state which acts as a thriving force to determine their relationship. It is the modern state that defines nationhood and preexisting ethnic relations, sometimes it is revised or redefined either to coincide more or less coincide with its boundary or as the basis of countering the demands or movement for the formation of the new state. Such demands or movements are rooted in power relations, not in ethnic solidarities.

In another important study on nationalism, political theorist Benedict Anderson defined nation: "it is an imagined political community-an imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign". In the above-said definition, he did not depict 'imagined as 'imaginary' but as the people who define themselves to be members of a nation, who will never know most of their fellow members, meet them or even hear of them. Gellner and Anderson both have focused on the issue that nations are nothing but ideological construction or manifestation, seeking to make the liaison between cultural group and state. Research on ethnic has shown that ethnic identities attain their greatest importance in the situation of flux, change, resource competition, and a threat against boundaries. Like other ethnic identities, national identities are constituted with the relation to others; the very idea of the nation presupposes that there are other nations, or at

least other peoples, who are not members of the nation. As Ernest Gellner argues in *Nations and Nationalism* (1983), nationalism is used as an ideological tool by the elite classes to mobilize people to welcome change in society. On the other hand, those who do not seek change in society; also use nationalism as ideological support, by resorting to some ancient ethnic past in their attacks on modernity.

Hobsbawm in his notable work 'Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality' published in 1990, has categorized nationalism as a sort of second-order-political movement standing on the 'false ethnic consciousness'. Hobsbawm and Ranger's (1983, Hobsbawm 1990) argued that the "traditions of nationalism" are "invented", therefore, it is less real and valid. They argued that ethnicity helps to produce this kind of false consciousness but cannot explain it because of its deep embeddedness in the political economy not in culture. They also regarded "the tradition of nationalism as 'manipulative creation' on the assumption that all traditions are "created and none of them truly primordial, and all traditions are internally contested and subject to continual reshaping.

The idea of nationalism is very debatable due to the presence of diverse opinions. Foucault calls it a 'discursive for the nation. Mariategui, in his notable work 'Seven interpretive Essays on Peruvian Reality' (1928) portrayed Nationalism as an abstraction, an allegory, a myth that does not correspond to reality. Lawson was associated with black nationalism in the U.S.A described "Nationalism as a reaction of the people who feel culturally at a disadvantage", in his famous interview on 'The Hate That Hate produced', 1959. But without discussing the opinion given by Ernest Gellner and Anderson the objective of this paper will remain incomplete. Ernest Gellner exerts highly influence on nationalism by defining the concept like this:

Nationalism is primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be accordant or coherent. A nationalist movement is one actuated by the sentiment of this kind. With this definition at first glance may seem a straightforward one, but it turns out to be circular. As, what is the 'national unit'? Gellner goes on to explain that, he sees it as synonymous with an ethnic group or at least an ethnic group that nationalists claim exists. In brief, nationalism is a theory of political legitimacy, which requires that ethnic boundaries should not be cut across the political line. It is evident that the way this term is used by Gellner and other contemporary social scientists, directly or indirectly, establishes a peculiar link between ethnicity and state. Nationalism is, following the view of Gellner, an ethnic ideology, which holds that their group should dominate a state. A nation-state, therefore, is a state

Copyright © 2020, Scholarly Research Journal for Interdisciplinary Studies

dominated by an ethnic group, whose symbols of identities such as language or religion are frequently embedded in its official symbolism and legislation (Nations and Nationalism, 1983) Why Do We Need to Revisit Tagore's view on Nationalism? Given the present global phenomenon of ethnic nationalism, the most striking question that arises in the discourse of politics is: do we need to subjugate ourselves to the idea of nationalism? What kind of ideological discourse, we need to adopt on the issue of nationalism? And so many of this kind. By going through the destructive nature of ethnic nationalism, some learned people may urge to adopt inclusiveness and a synergic interaction among different cultures. Some others can call for a fresh debate on the idea of nationalism and some others may suggest digging out our history. If we follow this, will find people, who have provides us with an alternative discourse that warns us against a flagrant understanding of nationalism, such kind of warnings can be found in the writings of Rabindranath Tagore, whose ideas, discourse, and understanding of nationalism is worth revisiting.

Rabindranath Tagore was not a conventional political thinker as per set rules of theorization to the study of this field. But due to his profound power of seizing and holding, he has provided us very insightful thoughts on the various issues of the social and political importance of his time, which are still paving the way to numerous problems of our time. The idea of nationalism also could not escape from the vigilance of his critical mind. Although he took part in the process of the Indian national movement, wrote various famous patriotic songs like 'Amar Sonar Bangla Ami tomay bhalo basi', 'Banglar Mati Banglar Jol', and 'O Amar Desr Mati'; criticized the very idea of nationalism as deceptive and counterproductive. As he expressed:

“ I deeply feel for the races who are being insulted and injured by the ruthless exploitation of the powerful nations belonging to the West and the East. I feel as much for the negroes, brutally lynched in America, often for economic reasons, and for the Koreans, who are the latest victims of Japanese imperialism, as for any wrongs done to the helpless multitude in my own country.”

(*Letters* 127-28)

Tagore was critical of the Indian nationalist leaders, including Gandhi for their adherence to the temptation of nationalism by taking unusual discordant steps in their fight for the independence of the country. On the other hand, Tagore advocated for a moral and spiritual struggle against the British Rule, because he believed that mere political freedom cannot bring about perfection in human beings.

Tagore expressed most of his ideas on nationalism in his essays and lectures such as 'nationalism in The West', 'Nationalism in Japan', 'Nationalism in India', 'Construction versus

Creation' and 'International Relations'; also in some of his famous novels as well, such as 'Ghare O Baire', 'Char Adhya' and in his several poems of Gitanjali. In his various writings, Tagore described nationalism as a social construction, a mechanical organization, and a product of the western idea of capitalism. According to him, nationalism is not a voluntary behavior of one's own choice and consent, it does not manifest the self-expression of individuals, as social beings. Nationalism is, unable to create a living bond in a society where the principle of cooperation and brotherhood is followed, but a political and commercial union of a group of mechanical people, without any moral and social considerations. Therefore, he further enumerates that for having such attributes maximization of profits becomes the main motive of nationalism. In his criticism of popular nationalism, he displayed to us its inhumane and aggressive nature, which stimulated the seizure of other nations and plundering their resources, being unethical, its impact on the world would be inimical to the larger interests of humanity on every occasion.

Tagore deemed nationalism, as a threat to humanity for having the propensity of material and the rational, which ruthlessly destroys the human spirit and emotion by subjugating his innate goodness and divinity to a soul-less institution. He opined that the very glorification of a nation denies the superiority of soul, god, and conscience and encourages the cultivation of absolutism, fanaticism, and hatred among nations. Thus every nation is nothing but a threat to the existence of other nations. Tagore also pointed out that in the name of national self-fulfillment, war is regarded as legitimate or even a holy action. Tagore, being a cosmopolitan, championed the idea of creation over construction, placed imagination over reason, and loved natural over artificial.

In his 'construction versus creation' projected construction as an expression of want, but creation is for itself that expresses our very beings. Therefore, Tagore suggested a moral and spiritual fulfillment of mankind. He believed that political freedom cannot bring about perfection and fulfillment in a human being, it is only possible through 'complete awakening' or 'full-self expression, what he regarded as 'true freedom'. According to him true freedom lies in the realization of man's oneness with the supreme man, which promotes the quality of harmonious behavior to love his fellow man, destroys all kinds of hatred, and lust for power. True freedom paves the way for moral emancipation. He visualized four stages in the realization of true freedom: realization of freedom at the individual level, freedom from the individual to community, from the community to the universe, and from the universe to infinity.

The realization of true freedom helps, a man to free from possessiveness, to break the bondage of narrow vision, and to become cosmopolitan.

References:

- Alam, F. (2015). *Tagore and National Identity Formation in Bangladesh*. In B. Bannerjee (Ed.), *Rabindranath Tagore in the 21st Century: Theoretical Renewals* (p.227). New Delhi: Springer.
- Bhattacharya, S. (2015). *Rethinking Tagore on the Antinomies of Nationalism*. In K. L. Tuteja & K. Chakraborty (Ed.), *Tagore and Nationalism* (pp. 23-24). Shimla: Springer.
- Calhoun, C. (1993). *Nationalism and Ethnicity*, *Annual Review of Sociology*, 19, pp. 213-17.
- Chakrabarty, B. & Pandey, R. K. (2015). *Modern Indian Political Thought: Text and Context* (Sixth ed., p .65). New Delhi: Sage.
- Eriksen, T. H. (2010). *Ethnicity & Nationalism* (3rd ed., p. 117). London: Pluto Press.
- Quayum, M. (2017). *Empire and Nation: Political Ideas in Rabindranath Tagore's Travel Writings*, *South Asian Review*, 26(2), pp.45-51. doi: 10.1080/02759527.2005.11932400