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NATIONALISM IN SOUTH ASIA : TRENDS AND INTERPRETATIONS

B.C. Upreti

Nationalism is a complex phenomenon and it may have different bases and expressions in different situations. As a political tool it may incorporate different symbols and values and may contain positive as well as negative connotations. Nationalism has been a strong force of political expressions in the western countries that differs from the nationalism in developing countries in many ways. In South Asia nationalism took roots during the struggle against the colonial rulers. The question of nationality and nationalism has been tedious in South Asia due to the complex nature of society, politico-economic discriminations and divergence, etc. The regional and ethno-cultural issues have been significant in South Asia. Therefore, there have been sub-nationalistic tendencies in these countries. This situation has also been interpreted as great nationalism and little nationalism. Nationalism has obtained different shapes and expressions in South Asian countries, such as secular nationalism, lingua-cultural nationalism, religious nationalism, linguistic nationalism, aggressive nationalism, etc. Nationalism has succeeded in attaining the objective of unity in diversity but it has also proved to be a divisive force. Whether nationalism has relevance in the context of globalisation and privatization is an important issue. In the context of South Asia one would argue that nationalism has relevance as a tool of political expressions.

Nationalism has been a strong force of political expressions in the Western World. The impulses of nationalism gave way to the formation and reformation of states in Europe in the late 18th and early 19th century. The rise of nationalism led to the breakdown of many political entities, which derived their homogeneity and unity on the basis of ethnicity, language, culture, etc. These homogenous cultural groups consequently emerged as independent nation states. Thus, nationalism played a significant role in the liquidation of great empires and formation of new states. In the third world the idea of nationalism was borrowed from the west in the context of the rise of indigenous movements to fight against the colonial rule. However, it is believed by many, that the third world countries lacked conditions in which nationalism took roots in Europe and consequently played a vital role in the emergence of nation states. The underlined assumption is that nationalism has not been a powerful political ideology in the context of the third world countries. As such the question arise does nationalism has any relevance in understanding the political dynamics of the third world countries in general and the South Asian countries in particular? Moreover, in the recent phase, in the wake of globalizations and liberalization, it has been widely propounded that the traditional conceptions of nationalism, nation and sovereignty have lost their significance. To what extent this formulation is true in the context of South Asian states is an important issue.

In what respect nationalism in South Asia has been different from the west has also been an important issue. In the context of Indian nationalism particularly, different explanations have been put forward. In recent decades there have been deviations in the form and contents of nationalism in South Asia, leading to the trends of sub-nationalism and secessionism.

The present paper is an attempt to understand the forms and trends of nationalism in South Asia.

NATIONALISM: CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

Nationalism has been defined by a number of scholars. But these conceptual frameworks have different in terms of the contents and the characteristics of nationalism. In the context of western world nationalism was seen as a consciousness among a community leading to its self-assertion and the consequent emergence of a state. The Marxist on the other hand linked nationalism to the class struggle. On the other hand many scholars have opined that both these theoretical constructs regarding nationalism are not applicable to the third world countries, where nationalism has been broadly viewed as a nationalist movement against the colonial rule. It is difficult to trace-out any clear-cut theoretical framework regarding the third world explanations of nationalism. Secondly, they are an admixture of liberal western and Marxian theoretical constructs. One may also add here that in the third world countries nationalism has acquired different forms and there have been varied interpretations of nationalism. As a result it is difficult to provide an acceptable concept of nationalism in the context of the third world. There can be some broad generalizations only.

Nationalism has been seen as a state of mind of human beings - a manifestation of certain ideological goals which they wish to realize through united efforts.¹ Nationalism is believed to be strongly rooted in the, thoughts and behaviour of people.²

Nationalism has been looked upon as a political doctrine of self-determination.³ in this context nationalism may be viewed as a particularistic phenomenon that intends to draw a distinction between people on the basis of various socio-cultural categories. On the basis of distinct cultural categories they claim for the right to self-determination and claim their right over a territory so as to emerge as a distinct political identity.⁴ Gellner states that nationalism is a political principle, which holds that the political and national unit should be congruent.⁵ Smith on the other hand, has viewed it as a sentiment which he believes is as old as history.⁶ Karl Deutsch dealing with the issues of nation and nationalism quite, at length viewed it as a positive historical frame which channeled racial mobilization in an era of rapid urbanization and stimulated cultural mobilization in era of social alienation.⁷ There are many other scholars who have viewed nationalism in terms of a process leading to various disparate ethnicities towards right to self-determination.

It is clear from some of the above stated definitions that nationalism has been viewed in the western world, as a process through which an ethno-cultural identity moves towards self-determination. In Europe nationalism took roots as a demand for self-determination since the late half of the 18th century. It was cultural homogeneity and ethnic cohesion, which formed the basis for the organisation of the homogenous cultural identities into an autonomous nation-state. It was due to the rise of nationalism that many empires with heterogeneous cultural groups got disintegrated and new independent states emerged with homogenous cultural identity. The ultimate goal of nationalism was to achieve statehood. In this way, in the European context, nationalism can be viewed as a process whose ultimate objective is to draw a distinction between the people on the basis of ethno-cultural identities and than claim its sovereign rights over a particular territory. Nationalism was a divisive force in the European context.

The Marxist theoreticians viewed nationalism and national movements as a struggle against feudal or imperialist powers.⁸ There are a number of scholars who have viewed nationalism in the context of developing countries and have tried to define it accordingly. There are many scholars who consider it a struggle against the colonial rule. The indigenous elite in these countries represented the nationalist forces.⁹

Hechter has defined nationalism as a popular protest against oppression.¹⁰ Paul Brass has associated nationalism with ethnicity and believes that both are connected with the working of the modern centralized states. Ethnic mobilization and national formation are associated phenomenon.¹¹

These definitions explain particular situations of the rise of nationalism. It is difficult to generalize these situations. For example ethnic mobilization may arouse nationalism but it is not necessary that all kind of ethnic mobilizations have nationalistic aspirations.

It can be said that nationalism is an ideological phenomenon adhered by a group or a community for the attainment of a political objective. Thus, nationalism is a political instrument. How the nationalistic aspirations of a community or a group are used would depend on the objectives behind arousing these aspirations. As such nationalism can have both negative and positive connotations.

NATURE AND DIRECTION OF NATIONALISM IN SOUTH ASIA

The South Asian countries with the exception of Maldives to a large extent have multi-ethnic, multi-racial, multi-lingual and multi-religious societies. All these countries are faced with the problems of horizontal and vertical disparities. These complexities and divisions have made the question of nationality and nationalism very tedious. The South Asian states lacked that ethno-cultural homogeneity which affected a process of fusion to unify people into a political community.¹² It was for this reason that in the wake of nationalist movement the indigenous leadership had to discover threads of homogeneity.¹³

Nationalism took roots in South Asia in the form of struggle for independence. The basic objective of this struggle was to overthrow the colonial rule and establish self-rule. Their nationalist ethos, were represented by the indigenous elite which tried to mobilize the people against the alien rule. Due to the discriminatory policies of the colonial rulers regional and ethno-cultural questions also emerged. But they did not come in conflict with the nationalist aspirations. These two streams have been defined as great nationalism and little nationalism.¹⁴ The ethno-regional identities which emerged as little nationalism during the colonial rule have continued after independence. Many of them have become more assertive in the post-independent era. Hence, there is problem of sub-nationalism in most of the South Asian countries. Many of these smaller identities questioned the legitimacy of the post-colonial states and sought to form a new political community. It posed a serious challenge to the state.¹⁵

The ideologies of anti-colonialism which bind the people together had in fact given rise to sentiments which were above ethnicity, race, religion and culture. But the post-colonial states could

not maintain these sentiments. The hegemonic political order, majority-minority constructs the emergence of contradictions in terms of religion, language, ethnicity and region largely owing to the state policies and attitudes, gave rise to numerous social movements with their sub-nationalist aspirations.¹⁶

The contradictions emerging within the societies due to the faulty policies of modernization and development further sharpened these sub-nationalist identities. However, it can be said that in most of the cases the sub-nationalist movements have not been able to gain the character of a national movement. The objective conditions that determined by articulation of loyalties, economic and developmental issues, etc. are also important. One reason why the sub-nationalist agitations have not gained success in South Asia is that the 19th century tradition of nationalism, both liberal and revolutionary and democratic as represented by Gandhi, Nehru, Z.A. Bhutto, and Bandaranaike, are still overwhelmingly accepted in these countries.¹⁷

In South Asia nationalism has exhibited positive connotations in most of the cases and it has succeeded in establishing unity in diversity. But it has also played a role in consolidating the separatist identities and leading them towards self-rule as in the case of Bangladesh. Nationalism also has strong secularist and fundamentalist tendencies. On the whole it can be said that the South Asian nationalism has both positive and negative features. Nationalism has by and large, proved to be a strong force of unity and integrity.

SOURCE OF NATIONALISM IN SOUTH ASIA

A large number of factors have contributed to the growth of nationalism in South Asia. The history of the Indian sub-continent and its glorious traditions are important sources of nationalism in almost all the countries of the region. The notions of composite culture, civilization state etc., draw their inspirations from the history and traditions of the subcontinent. The historical events, symbols, traditions, etc. have played a significant role in uniting the people into a single national entity.

The colonial rule and the quest for independence and self-rule have been important sources of the growth of nationalism in South Asia. In fact, the ideology of nationalism was articulated in these countries, in the wake of struggle for independence. In Nepal and Bhutan the absence of colonial rule was taken up as a source of national pride and identity. It gave them a sense of superiority in comparison to those countries, which were under the colonial rule. These countries although lacked the kind of nationalist ethos which took roots during the course of struggle for independence in the colonial states.

Religion, culture, language, ethnicity etc., have been sources of nationalism in South Asia. There has been coexistence of religions and cultures thereby giving way to the growth of a composite culture. There have been traditions of religious tolerance. There are examples of coexistence of religions, cultures, languages and ethnic groups. But at the same time the question of identity, majority-minority conflicts, etc. have played a disintegrative role and encouraged sub-nationalist tendencies as well.

In the multi-structured societies the unification of people in the form of one strong national identity has necessitated liberal democratic structures participatory and secular politics, modernization and development leading to growth and prosperity, equality and freedom. All these have been sources of nationalism in South Asia. One may, however, observe that the decline of participatory and secular politics, majority polity leading to social dis-equilibrium, modernization leading to disparities, etc. have given rise to ethno-regional movements which have challenged the national integrity and unity.

It may be added here that one single factor has not been responsible for contributing to the strong waves of nationalism or giving way to sub-nationalist tendencies. It has been a cumulative effect of various factors and forces. However, it is possible to establish a causal relationship between different sources. Nevertheless, it can be said that in every case one or a combination of few sources furnish the core of nationalism and others play subordinate role.

For the smaller countries of the region, their smaller territorial identity, the indo-centric nature of the region, dependence and conflicts with India etc. have at times worked as sources of nationalism and has given rise to an aggressive nationalism.

Dimensions of Nationalism

The countries of South Asia have different expressions of nationalism despite its many common sources. A brief overview of dimensions and directions of nationalism in these countries will be helpful in understanding the phenomenon of nationalism in South Asia.

Nationalism in India: In South Asia nationalism as an ideology and as a political force has been articulated, by and large in India alone.¹⁸ In India nationalism has been viewed in various ways such as ancient civilizational entity,¹⁹ composite culture,²⁰ political entity, religious entity, territorial entity, linguistic entity and great nationalism - little nationalism.²¹ Without going into the details of these explanations, it can be said that in India nationalism as a political ideology represents the liberal democratic and secular outlook promoting the notion of unity in diversity. It was shaped during the course of Indian national movement and draws inspirations and sustenance from the great historical traditions, the ideology of the leaders of nationalist movement, the constitution, democratic political institutions and processes, secularism, freedom and equality, modernization and development. The liberal and secular nationalism was maintained so long as these structures and processes worked well. However, the erosion of democratic institutions, political hegemonies, rise of fundamentalism, politicization of ethnic, caste, linguistic and religious groups, failure of modernization giving rise to regionalism, etc. created distortions. It gave rise to social movements, regionalism and sub-nationalist movements. It has weakened the liberal and secular ethos of Indian nationalism. However, the Indian nation has remained intact because the core institutions and values shaping the liberal secular nationalism are still intact, despite many attacks and challenges.

Nationalism in Pakistan: Pakistan emerged as an independent state with the partition of India in 1947 on the plea that Muslims constituted a distinct identity. Religion was the basis of separate identity of Muslims. Hence religion became the basis of Pakistani, nationalism.²² The Islamic symbols

and ethos became the basis of Pakistani state. The Pakistani ruling elite, however, failed in broadening the bases of nationalism due to the decline of democratic institutions, rise of military dictatorship, failed development and rise of fundamentalism. The religion proved to be insufficient to maintain the identity of the Pakistani state. The linguistic separatism compounded with territorial identity lead to the disintegration of Pakistan in 1971.

Ethno-regional identities also began to surface in Pakistani politics and they claimed to be separate nationalities. After 1975 the Pakistani rulers began to promote Islamization and fundamentalism for their own political interests.²³ It further narrowed down the religious contents of Pakistani nationalism.

Nationalism in Bangladesh : The distinct linguistic identity provided input to the independence of the eastern wing of Pakistan as an independent state, of Bangladesh. After its emergence as an independent state Bangladesh followed a liberal democratic model and paved way for the growth of secular nationalism in the country. But it was not very late that the secular nationalism of Bangladesh lost the track. In 1975, after the military takeover of politics, the country began to promote the religious and fundamentalist bases of nationalism. The principle of secularism was dropped.²⁴

In 1990 Bangladesh again moved to a democratic political order. Nevertheless, the Islamic slogans and symbols are present in the politics of Bangladesh. Some that believes it the military bureaucratic elite and the fundamentalist forces use them as instrument of political mobilization. It is true to some extent, but one can say that with the fundamentalist forces joining the government. The atmosphere in favour of the growth of a secular nationalism is not encouraging.

Thus, language, secularism, religion, has been important sources of Bangladeshi nationalism. They have given different shape and direction to nationalism. The different sets of ruling elite of Bangladesh have chosen different sources of nationalism. It is due to this reason that with the change of regimes the contours of nationalism have also changed in Bangladesh.

Nationalism in Sri Lanka: In Sri Lanka nationalism took roots as a struggle against the colonial rule. The western educated elite represented it. It began as a composite nationalism.²⁵ However, the ground realities of politics in the country proved to be different. It was not very late that the democratic governance of Sri Lanka began to pick up the religio-cultural symbols of the majority Sinhalese. ²⁶ It gave rise to religio-cultural nationalism in Sri Lanka, which was essentially the Sinhala nationalism. The other communities, particularly the Tamils were alienated. The Sinhala dominated ruling elite ignored the demands of Tamils. It ultimately gave rise to Tamil separatism in the Island country. The Tamil sub-nationalism has thus become a major challenge to religio-cultural nationalism in Sri Lanka.

Nationalism in Nepal: Nepal escaped the colonial occupation and therefore the role of traditional symbols has been less complicated in shaping the nationalism. The founders of the Kingdom of Nepal promoted religious identity of the state and gave rise to Hindu nationalism. Attempts were made to integrate various non-Hindu communities through a process of Hinduisation.²⁷ The promotion of Hindu nationalism also gave legitimacy and substance to the institution of Monarchy. Hence, there

was a convergence of interests between monarchy and the propagation of Hindu nationalism. However, it is believed that religion has not been a source of tension or conflicts in Nepal, nor it has been used for political mobilization. 28

The religious identity of the state, in Nepal is under attack in the recent years and the non-Hindu communities are challenging it. The Mongolians have started asserting for their distinct ethno-cultural and linguistic identity. 29 They are against the Hindu character of the state and demand for a secular nationalism.

Nationalism in Bhutan: In Bhutan Drukpa culture and the institution of Monarchy have been the main sources of nationalism. The monarchy represents the Drukpa culture and Bhutan's national identity has been closely related to the Drukpa culture. Thus there is a close inter-linkage between the Bhutanese national identity, monarchy and the Drukpa culture. The Bhutanese ruling elite has promoted this inter-linkage. The ruling elite of the country has allowed modernization and development only to the extent that it does not disturb the existing inter-linkages.

As Bhutan feared a threat to its cultural identity from the Nepalese migrants, it imposed a 'cultural code' on the Nepalese, which was basically a Drukpa culture code. It gave rise to a conflict with the Nepali migrants in the country. 30

Nationalism in Maldives: Maldives has a homogenous society. A country of 1990 coral islands, Maldives has a distinct territorial identity. Except for some minor disturbances during mid-eighties, peace and stability has been maintained in the country. There have been very few governmental changes. 31 Manmoo Abdul Gayoom has continued as ruler of the country since 1978.

TRENDS AND INTERPRETATIONS

Nationalism is a complex phenomenon. There have been different theoretical constructs and interpretations. It is a political tool, which can be shaped by different symbols, values and components in different contexts. The objectives of nationalism may also differ from one situation to another. Nationalism can have both positive and negative connotations.

Nationalism in South Asia has been much different from the nationalism, which developed in Europe. It began to take roots in South Asia as an ideology of struggle against the colonial rule. The leaders of the independence movement were inspired by the western democratic ideology and education. But the objective conditions were different. The struggle for independence required support and involvement of different communities, regions and groups. Thus, the struggle for independence provided a platform for the growth of a secular nationalism whose primary objective was bind the people together irrespective of caste, creed ethnicity, language and religion.

Such a model of nationalism was substantiated by the creation of liberal democratic institutions and ideology in the post independent era. However, there have been serious problems of its sustenance and growth. India alone has succeeded in promoting a broad based nationalism. Sri Lanka had to shift to a narrow based religio-cultural nationalism. Pakistan emerged on the basis of a distinct religious,

identity, which too failed in securing the integrity of the country. Bangladesh emerged on the basis of its distinct linguistic identity. Its rulers tried to move to a broad based secular identity but failed very soon. Bhutan and Nepal still largely depend on their traditional political institutions, culture and religion in order to shape up their national identity.

India too has not been able to secure its secular identity. The ethno-regional movements, fundamentalism, erosion of democratic ideology and institutions, etc. have posed challenges to it. India has, however, succeeded in maintaining its unity and integrity as it, is still adhered to its core values of national identity, laid down during the course of nationalist movement.

The South Asian Countries thus represent both the broad based and the narrow based nationalism.

The growth of sub-nationalism is a significant trend in South Asian context. It is not necessary that all types of sub-nationalist movements contain popular sovereignty concepts. They may be resistance movements. The South Asian countries have so far succeeded in containing sub-national movements, except in the case of East Pakistan where apart from linguistic identity of Bengalis, the objective conditions were entirely different. But then one has to accept that the sub-nationalist trends are a serious threat to the nation-building process and need to be addressed immediately by the ruling elite in South Asia.

Does nationalism has any relevance in an era of globalization is an important question. Globalization assumes liquidation of national boundaries and sovereignty of nations. Once there is decline of nation-states the concept of nationalism obviously become irrelevant. Therefore, it has been argued that nation and nationalism are no more a global political programme.³² It has been argued that the emergence of the united Europe in the form of European Union may lead to complete disappearance of nation-states.³³ But, it has to be understood that globalization is an economic concept and nation and nationalism are political conceptions. Globalization seeks integration of economies in which the state can be instrumental. The political implications of globalization are that the nation-states follow liberal economic policies. It does not call for the disappearance of state itself. In Europe nation-states have not disappeared despite the emergence of a strong economic union.

Hence, globalization and nationalism do not appear to be contradictory to each other. Moreover, there are so many socio-economic complexities in the third world countries due to which the notions of nationalism and sovereignty are still relevant. The European countries are passing through an era of advanced capitalism, which is a distant dream for the South Asia countries.

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