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Nationalism: Concept and Reality

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Abstract: Nationalism is a wider concept, which explains the relation between state and its people; it takes an important place in the life of a human being. Nationalism is a type of feeling, when a human being to do everything for his/her nation. In the past time, nationalism was based on race, color, religion, culture, language. But these days these factors also important yet these days, due to information development and globalization, all world has changed into a global village, where people are connected each other with the help of communication means, such as Email, Facebook, Fax, Internet, Messenger, TV, Radio and so on. Even these days inter-states marriages are increasing. So due to these factors, purity of race, culture, religion, values are not possible. Now, this is also a duty of state to works for nationalism. In this research paper I will discuss about the nature of nationalism, types of nationalism, and in a part of paper will discuss about the Indian, western, roman, Greek nationalism.

Keywords: Nationalism, Political, Freedom, Colony, India.

INTRODUCTION

It is observed that nationalism always output of persistence of oppression by religion, caste, and culture. Nationalism, as both an ideology and a political process, has historically been far more complex and context-dependent than often assumed. While commonly celebrated as a natural expression of collective identity or cultural unity, nationalism, in reality, is a political construct that has evolved differently in different regions of the world. The historical development of nationalism in the Western world—particularly in Europe—and in postcolonial societies like India reflects strikingly different origins, motivations, and consequences. Far from being an organic outgrowth of shared heritage or territorial allegiance, nationalism is a product of specific socio-political, economic, and ideological developments. It has often served the interests of elites or state actors seeking legitimacy and consolidation of power rather than being a spontaneous outburst of popular will.

The Western Genesis of Nationalism

The concept of modern nationalism took root in Europe in the aftermath of epochal transformations like the Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation. These intellectual and religious upheavals destabilized the authority of the Catholic Church and introduced new ideas about individual rights, authority, and the nature of political power. Thinkers such as Niccolò Machiavelli, Jean Bodin, and later Thomas Hobbes laid the groundwork for modern political theory, emphasizing the sovereignty of the state and the centralization of power. However, it was not until the rise of absolutist monarchies and the formation of nation-states in France, Spain, and Britain during the 16th and 17th centuries that the political process of nationalism began to crystallize.

These early European nation-states were not formed through popular will but through the centralizing ambitions of monarchs who sought to curb the influence of the Church and feudal lords. The emergence of these states was fundamentally a reaction to fragmented feudal authority and the power of the Papacy, particularly the Holy Roman Empire. Nationalism in its earliest form was less about cultural affinity among people and more about the political consolidation of territory and administrative control.

By the 18th century, two major revolutions—the American and French—are often credited with giving modern nationalism its ideological foundation. These revolutions articulated powerful ideas about the nation as a sovereign political entity governed by the will of the people. However, to view these revolutions purely through the lens of nationalism would be to oversimplify their complex socio-economic underpinnings.

In the American Revolution, for instance, economic discontent and resentment against British mercantilist policies played a more significant role than abstract notions of national identity. Colonists opposed British taxation, restrictions on trade, and the exploitation of colonial resources. Similarly, the French Revolution was driven by economic collapse, food shortages, and the crushing burden of taxation on the peasantry and bourgeoisie under the Bourbon monarchy. While nationalism emerged as a useful ideological banner, the primary motivators of these revolutions were economic and political

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grievances, not a deep-seated national consciousness.

Moreover, even after these revolutions, the promise of democratic rights and civil liberties remained elusive for large sections of society. Universal male suffrage, let alone the inclusion of women and marginalized communities, was not realized until much later. Nationalism, therefore, did not immediately equate to democratic empowerment. Instead, it served as a framework within which the elite could construct legitimacy for the new political order.

Nationalism as Construct: Instrument of the State

As Ernest Renan famously argued in his 1882 lecture, *"What is a Nation?"*, the idea of a nation is not something that arises naturally but something that must be constantly maintained through shared memories and the "forgetting" of certain historical traumas. Nationalism is, therefore, not an innate sentiment but a constructed myth that serves the needs of the modern state. It is invoked to unite disparate populations, justify territorial claims, and promote loyalty to state institutions.

Benedict Anderson's idea of the nation as an "imagined community" further underscores this view. Nations are socially constructed through shared symbols, myths, language, education systems, and mass media. They are not pre-existing entities waiting to be discovered; they are brought into being by modern political, economic, and cultural institutions. The development of print capitalism, for example, played a pivotal role in shaping linguistic communities into imagined national communities.

In this sense, nationalism is more of a top-down project than a bottom-up movement. It is often deployed by ruling elites, monarchies, or revolutionary leaders to legitimize state authority, gain popular support, or rally people against a common enemy. Whether it was Bismarck's unification of Germany, the Risorgimento in Italy under Mazzini and Garibaldi, or the nationalist fervor stirred by Napoleon, nationalism has historically been instrumentalized for political ends.

The Indian Context: A Colonial Disruption

Unlike in Europe, where the evolution of nationalism was closely tied to the organic development of centralized political states, in India, the process was profoundly shaped—and interrupted—by colonialism. Prior to British rule, India consisted of diverse kingdoms, empires, and ethnic groups with distinct cultures, religions, and languages. There was no singular Indian nation in the Western sense; rather, India was a subcontinent marked by pluralism and multiplicity.

British colonialism further disrupted the possibility of organic nation-building by imposing an alien administrative structure and economic system that prioritized extraction over integration. The British not only exploited India's resources but also deepened existing divisions by implementing policies such as *divide and rule*, caste-based enumeration, and religious categorization in the census. These policies reified social categories and prevented the emergence of a pan-Indian national consciousness.

Even during the Indian freedom struggle, the nature of nationalism was fraught with contradictions. Leaders like Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Lala Lajpat Rai, and Bipin Chandra Pal—often categorized as extremists—promoted a form of Hindu revivalism that alienated large sections of Muslims and other minorities. The invocation of Hindu symbols like Gita, Ganapati, and the worship of 'Kali' restricted the appeal of nationalism to a particular religious group, failing to generate an inclusive idea of nationhood.

Gandhi, although more inclusive in his approach, also remained deeply rooted in Hindu traditions. His efforts to bridge the Hindu-Muslim divide, particularly through the Khilafat Movement, were well-intentioned but ultimately short-lived and failed to create lasting unity. Moreover, Gandhi's commitment to an idealized vision of village republics and his emphasis on spiritual over structural reforms made it difficult to institutionalize a coherent, modern national identity.

Challenges to Nation-Building in India

When India finally achieved independence in 1947, the new state inherited not a unified nation but a fragmented civil society scarred by communal violence, partition, and regional disparities. The Indian Constitution attempted to address this by emphasizing secularism, federalism, and democratic governance, but these were political and constitutional frameworks imposed on a society still struggling to overcome deep social divisions.

The post-independence Indian state, led by Nehru and the Congress Party, attempted to foster nationalism through institutions, planned

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development, and public education. However, the pluralistic nature of Indian society—comprising multiple religions, castes, languages, and ethnicities—posed continual challenges to the creation of a cohesive national identity. Regional movements, linguistic agitations, caste-based mobilizations, and religious nationalism continued to fragment the national consciousness.

This was further complicated by the fact that the dominant discourse of nationalism in India remained largely elite-driven. Figures like Nehru, Ambedkar, and Patel tried to construct a national narrative from above, often marginalizing grassroots voices or subaltern experiences. As Partha Chatterjee has argued in *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*, the Indian nationalist discourse was a derivative form of European political ideas, repurposed to address colonial conditions but unable to fully escape the ideological structures imposed by the colonial state.

The Role of Culture and Spiritualism

One of the distinctive features of Indian nationalism was its cultural and spiritual dimension. Thinkers like Swami Vivekananda attempted to reimagine Indian identity through a blend of Vedantic spirituality and political assertion. He emphasized the cultural unity of India based on a shared spiritual heritage rather than political uniformity. However, this too was limited in its ability to accommodate India's full diversity, particularly its Islamic and tribal populations.

Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's novel *Anandamath* and the hymn *Vande Mataram* became symbols of Hindu nationalism, excluding non-Hindu communities from the national narrative. In this sense, Indian nationalism oscillated between inclusivity and exclusion, between political unity and cultural majoritarianism.

Nationalism as an Instrument of Power

In both Western and Indian contexts, nationalism has repeatedly served as a tool for legitimizing state power rather than empowering citizens. It has been used to mobilize masses during times of war, suppress dissent, and justify internal surveillance or external aggression. In India today, nationalism is often invoked in the name of unity but used to silence critics, marginalize minorities, or enforce conformity.

This instrumental use of nationalism is not a deviation from its historical path but a continuation of its original purpose. Whether in the hands of European monarchs, colonial powers, or postcolonial elites, nationalism has often been less about collective liberation and more about consolidating control.

CONCLUSION

Nationalism, far from being a natural or timeless sentiment, is a historically constructed ideology that has served different functions in different contexts. In the West, it emerged as a political process tied to the formation of centralized states and the decline of religious authority. In India, it was shaped by colonial disruption, religious pluralism, and elite-led efforts at national integration. In both cases, nationalism has been a double-edged sword: a force for liberation and solidarity on the one hand, and a tool for exclusion and domination on the other.

To understand nationalism today, we must move beyond romanticized notions of cultural unity or patriotic fervor and examine the historical, political, and economic forces that have shaped it. Only then can we hope to build truly inclusive and democratic national communities.

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