

Interrogating 'India' : a Dravidian viewpoint

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ETHNICITY has been characterized as the 'new spectre haunting the power elites of our times', 'variously expressing itself as an assertion of cultures, of communal upsurges, revival of religions, voices and movements of marginalised peoples, regions and nationalities'¹. It seems to us that this phenomenon of 'ethnicity' is the most visible symptom of an organic crisis of that

most sacrosanct of all political institutions—the nation-state.

The disintegration of the Soviet Union, the ethnic strife in Yugoslavia, the simmering discontent amongst Czechs and Slovaks in Czechoslovakia and the continuing national liberation struggles in the third world are all responses to this crisis, which is, in essence, a crisis of political identity. This crisis manifests itself in its most acute forms in the young nations of the third world where 'nation-formation' in the classical European sense did not really take place, and where 'modular' states and decreed nations came into existence. For us in India, haunted as we are by so-called 'secessionist' phantoms, it seems particularly important to

*This paper owes a great deal to an article titled 'Hindu-Hindi-India' by S V Rajadurai that is being serialized in the Tamil monthly *Kannottam*.

1. Rajni Kothari, 'Ethnicity' in *Ethnicity: Identity, Conflict and Crisis* (ed. Kumar, David & Santasilan Kadirgamar, Arena Press, Hong Kong, 1989, p. 15).

review and critically examine the history and process of our nation formation.

Though this critical self-evaluation seems to be the need of the hour, we find that politicians and, to some extent, political scientists continue to refer routinely to the 'sovereignty' and 'territorial integrity' of the 'socialist' Republic of India. Endless platitudes abound about 'national unity' and the catholicity and durability of 'Indian culture'. On the other hand, we find that spokespersons of, for instance, the ULFA or the JKLF consistently mock India's 'pretensions' to being a 'nation'. It seems urgent, then, that we pose certain crucial and important questions about ourselves: How are we a 'nation'? What are the historical and cultural markers of our 'nationhood'? Is our national identity the product of a 'national popular will'?

These questions were posed with great alacrity and boldness by the ideologues of the Dravidian movement in Tamilnadu (among others) during the early decades of this century and we intend examining their contentions by and by. But, more immediately, we would like to note that despite Nehru's claim of the 'dream of unity' which, according to him, 'occupied the mind of India since the dawn of civilisation'² the historical and cultural markers of our national identity are more apparent than real, more constructed than given. Also, our national identity has not been forged through a definitive articulation of a national-popular collective will, as has been claimed.

A people may constitute themselves as a nation on the basis of a) a common language; b) a common religion (though religion's claim to be a cementing force has been falsified effectively and recently during the Gulf War); c) territorial unit and d) a shared economy. Or it may be that a combination of some or all these aspects or sometimes even the absence of one or two of them (consider the nature of Naga insurgency and the deter-

minants of Naga nationhood) may constitute the basis of nationhood. Following Benedict Anderson, we may say that in every instance, nations are 'imagined';³ that is, they are hewn out of popular perceptions and ideologies of community and shaped by a political will that may, in turn, be a partial or adequate representative of the collective will. Thus, as with the nation-states of 19th century Europe, nationalism may, in reality, function as an aspect of ruling class hegemony (consider Germany and France). Nationalism as a partial and inadequate expression of the popular-collective will may yet seek to express itself in terms of collective entities such as language, religion and the community. But national identity, as deemed by the nation-state, need not always be co-terminus with national-popular aspirations.

Antonio Gramsci in his work on the Italian Risorgimento has indicated that the process of nation formation in Italy had been inherently flawed and weak since the constitution of the Italian nation in the 19th century was not premised on a 'national-popular' will but was, instead, articulated as a 'cosmopolitan-abstract' entity. The bourgeois industrialists of the Italian north and the feudal landlords of southern Italy failed to involve the peasantry (the largest section of the population) in the national liberation struggle and, thereby, failed to forge a national identity based on popular perceptions and practices.

For Gramsci, the absence of a national-popular element in the formation of the Italian nation served to indicate the structural limits to nationhood and to the political legitimacy of the Italian nation-state. The constitution of a national-popular will to nationhood, Gramsci pointed out, involved, among other things, the forging of links between a society's intellectuals and the broad masses of the people. Intellectuals were to mediate the political process, disrupt ruling class hegemony and function as 'educators and elaborators of the intellect and the moral aware-

ness of the people-nation'.⁴ (Gramsci never lost sight of the fact that nation formation, if it were to constitute a genuine national (popular) identity, would have to be accompanied by a radical transformation of the relationships of property ownership and production).

If we are to critically examine the emergence of an 'Indian nationalism in the context of Gramsci's arguments, it becomes clear that Indian nationalism was proposed by, and articulated and represented the ideological intent and political interests of cosmopolitan (read: pan-Indian) 'bilingual' intellectuals. These intellectuals sought to give their vision of the 'Indian' nation a political form that derived, more often than not, from colonial-imperial notions of 'India'. Nehru, of course, is our best instance of this bilingual intellectual, enamoured as he was of the liberal political ideologies of the European Enlightenment and convinced of the desirability of emulating the Western world's seemingly uninterrupted, inexorable and triumphant march into modernity.

However, even Tilak and Gandhi were, in their own way, cosmopolitan but they did not seek to identify and coherently articulate a national-popular will. Though Tilak sought to constitute a Mahratta identity (already Hindu-national) on the basis of popular religious and cultural practices, such an identity was meant to confirm and render acceptable Brahmin hegemony. Likewise, Gandhi's efforts at mobilizing hitherto passive sections of the populace in the freedom struggle ultimately served to project the Congress as the arbiter of popular (as opposed to upper class/caste professional) interests. Gandhi not only yoked the popular will onto a partial collectivity but, by a brilliant ideological sleight-of-hand, sought to reshape popular energies within the terms and conditions of *varnashrama* dharma.

These nationalist leaders thus quite unproblematically subscribed to the notion of an already present and unified 'Indian' nation.

2. Jawaharlal Nehru, *Discovery of India* (Signet Press, Calcutta, 1946, pp. 56-57).
3. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (Verso, London, 1983, p. 15).
4. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Cultural Writings* (ed. David Forgacs and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1985, p. 211).

whose timeless nationhood was guaranteed either by a common civilizational impulse or by a Hindu religion that had remained steadfast to its varna and jati principles and resisted disintegration and decay. If, in Europe, the common civilizational unity of Christendom gave way to the modern nation-states of 19th century Europe, in India, the fact of an interlinked but by no means homogeneous civilization was sought to be made the basis of a new nation.

Thus myth substituted for history and whether it was Gandhi or Tilak, Nehru or Savarkar, Patel or Golwalkar, every one of them was convinced of the myth of a unified and timeless 'Bharat'. Thus it was that Nehru, in spite of his adumbrations of India's diverse cultures, failed to interrogate the 'historicity' or otherwise of his notion of a unitary Indian culture that would simultaneously implicate and transcend all diversities. It is not surprising that he never really came to terms with the political limits to 'diversity' in a modern nation-state.

The ideological content of the political rhetoric and practice of the Congress leaders was, of course, determined and mediated by the complex of material conditions and interests that had brought the Congress into existence in the first place. The Congress, since its inception, had remained a forum for bourgeois commercial interests and bilingual professional elites to come together on matters of mutual concern. As the freedom struggle got under way, the Congress sought and won over rural agrarian interests and the zamindars and mirasidars were 'transformed' into 'trustees' of the 'common weal' by the subtleties of Gandhian politics.

These landed interests, together with feudal princelings and big business (with its impatient 'progressive' 'nationalist' sympathisers) thus came to constitute a complex and structured historical bloc. This bloc laid claims to 'popular' nationhood and its claims were sanctified and rendered consensual by a set of seemingly conflicting ideologies—Nehruvian socialism, Gandhian non-violence, Hindu nationalism—that

were, however, rationalized into a singular argument espousing the cause of our independence and unity.

It is important that we understand the principles of cohesion that structured this historical bloc. The single most dynamic element in this structured whole comprised the big bourgeoisie. Most of them were Parsis, Banias and Marwaris who had utilized their far-flung trading networks and the profits made therein to build enough capital to enter large-scale industrial production. They were prominent and active not only along the west coast and in Rajasthan but had spread themselves over the Gangetic plain and made inroads into Calcutta and the north-eastern region. These traders-turned-industrialists were, at best, time-servers and practised a skilful politics of survival. They were hardly 'revolutionary' (in the Marxist sense of the term) and had not really struggled against feudal power or imperial/colonial domination. In fact, they had established collusive interests and relationships with either one or the other.

Thus they worked the stratified caste-bound economy to their advantage; since most of them were 'Vaishyas' (in the Hindi heartland, at least) they managed to control and dominate local trade and banking operations that were chiefly in the hands of the 'Shudra' castes. The Marwari-Bania-Parsi combine never really sought to challenge British commercial hegemony; more often than not they played willing compradors to the imperialists and even when they found themselves ranged against the British on account of Congress-led agitations, they attempted to mediate between imperial and 'national' interests.

In fact, the Congress ideologues' vision of a united free India seemed to the big bourgeoisie a curious reflection of their own interests: the Marwari-Bania-Parsi combine had, after all, had to curb the resistance of 'regional' commercial interests to their domination and hence, were convinced of the desirability of forging a unity of cultures and regions through the agency of a 'common' (read Hindi) language and

through the articulation of the myth of common 'national' origins. It seemed perfectly natural and rational to the big bourgeoisie that free India be strong and united and not only were they willing to abide by Congress ideology on this score but were not averse to forging ahead in realizing this ideology in concrete terms.

Thus, G D Birla, Gandhi's friend and associate in the freedom struggle, argued persuasively, in the context of the Muslim League's insistence of Pakistan, that rather than accommodate Muslim demands within the terms of a federal polity and, thereby, unleash communal violence, India be partitioned for the greater good of its 'unified', 'integral' future!⁵ (The Bombay Plan of the bourgeoisie had no use for a federal polity with concomitant decentralized powers. The plan envisaged a grand [and policing] role for the state in the accumulation of capital and in the establishment of heavy industries. The big bourgeoisie were desirous of a strong centralized state amenable to their interests and were not willing to be receptive to the emergence of regional, sectional interests, as would happen within an authentic federal polity.)

In April 1946, Birla and his cohorts resolved to endorse and support the move for the partition of India and soon set about convincing the Congress of the 'inevitability' of it all. The Congress had, from time to time, raised populist demands in favour of provincial autonomy, but given its cosmopolitan vision of a modern nation-state, it was only natural that it came to renege on its promises. But at least in 1946, at a meeting of the Constituent Assembly, Nehru had moved an objective resolution defining the nature of the Indian Constitution in which provincial autonomy was assured.

Earlier Azad and other leaders had also spoken of the need to demarcate power and authority in a

5. For a detailed analysis of the role of Indian big business in the partition of India, see Claude Markovits, *Businessmen and the Partition of India* (IIM Ahmedabad, 1989).

federal polity. Transport, defence and foreign affairs were to be administered by the central government. Other powers would be vested in the states to be exercised at their discretion or transferred to the centre if they so desired. But by April 1947 Nehru and the Congress were convinced of the 'necessity' of partition! Nehru's volte-face was truly incredible in this instance and only served to lay bare the ironies at the heart of a nationalist politics that relied for its effectivity on demagogic skills and a self-deluding ideology rather on the creation and activation of a popular-collective will.

The partition of India may be considered an emblematic event and one that revealed the limits, terms and conditions of 'Indian' nationalism for what they were. However it was not this event but the creation of free India's Constitution that duly consecrated at the high altar of legality such fictions of nationhood as had emerged out of the ideologies and practices of the Indian National Congress. The Constituent Assembly that represented, in Bettelheim's words 'a minority of the population, a quarter of whose members were not elected but claimed their seats by feudal right',⁶ rationalized Hindu-bourgeois nationalism by several clauses and articles.

Clause 3(C) of Article I in Part I of the Constitution noted that 'The territory of India shall comprise (a)... (b)... and (c) such other territories as may be acquired!' In other words, national unity as an instance of expansionist politics was legitimized by the Constitution. Then again, Article 351 of the Constitution enjoined the government to develop Hindi as 'a medium of expression for all the elements of the composite culture of India'. National identity, premised on the notion of a composite culture, was, in effect, to be affirmed and guaranteed by an arbitrarily chosen language of the Union of India. This Constitutional double-speak has resulted in the non-inclusion of living languages such as

Khasi and Garo (used in administration in Meghalaya), Manipuri, the state language of Manipur, Santhali with a fine literary tradition, and Maithili in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution.

'Indian' nationalism and the constructions of national identity, as these came into being during the freedom struggle, thus remained inalienable aspects of a bourgeois creed that failed to secure popular consent. Though in the years since independence this creed has sought to grant itself axiomatic status and to an extent even succeeded in doing so, its claims have, in the past decade or so, come under relentless scrutiny and interrogation due to the discontent in Nagaland, Manipur, Punjab, Assam and Kashmir. In the context of the stubborn claims to the rightness of this creed (which was reiterated in the White Paper Report on Punjab published in 1984), it seems important to ask and re-ask certain questions that were posed in the heyday of Congress hegemony and posed in as effective a manner as the times would allow.

The constructions of 'Indian' national identity were challenged and rendered illegitimate in the politics and practices of what has since come to be known as the non-Brahmin Dravidian movement. The Dravidian movement initially sought to challenge Brahmin hegemony in the fields of education and administration and subsequently came to pose immense challenges to Brahmin hegemony on the social terrain. By a series of complex and extremely interesting mediations, the ideologues of the movement, prominent among whom was E V Ramasamy Periyar, came to identify the problem of hegemony and leadership thus: Brahmin domination and hegemony ultimately served larger corporate interests (identified with the Indian National Congress) and were opposed to local, non-Brahmin (essentially 'Tamil-Dravidian' as opposed to 'Sanskritic-Brahmin') interests.

Inferences were drawn from history and ancient Tamil literature to indicate the 'foreignness' of the Tamil Brahmins and it was claimed

and 'proved' that Brahmins were actually descendants of Aryan invaders from the north who had, in the course of time, transformed an essentially egalitarian Tamil society into the caste-ridden, obscurantist society that it is in the present. Hindu epics were subjected to extremely imaginative interpretations and were often 'read' as if they were chronicles of the conflicts between Dravidians and Aryans.

Periyar, despite the fact that in almost all versions of the *Ramayana* Ravana has been portrayed as a Brahmin, claimed him for the non-Brahmin cause. In a particularly felicitous interpretation of the epic, Ravana thus became a Dravidian protagonist, a tragic hero no less, who was the hapless victim of Aryan duplicity and cunning. Even as Aryan supremacy was shown to be a sham and a result of control through forced domination, the uniqueness of Tamil society, and particularly the glories of Tamil language and literature, were articulated.

The Dravidian movement's doctrinal anti-Brahminism had as much to do with the politics of nation as with the politics of caste. After Periyar resigned from the Congress over the issue of reservations for the backward classes (among other things), he came to view the nationalist movement as represented in the policies and programmes of the Congress as a sectarian, partisan movement that had no place, either in its organizations or in its ideologies, for the non-Brahmin (Shudra) castes and their concerns and interests. Thus, it was Periyar (among the Dravidian ideologues) who articulated the most radical critique of not merely the upper caste biases in Congress policies but of 'Indian' nationalism as well.

Periyar's efforts at re-defining political identity in a social context raised fundamental questions about the nature of 'domination' and 'freedom'. Periyar was insistent that 'freedom' from imperialist rule did not necessarily mean 'freedom' from the oppressive stranglehold of the caste system. While he was sensitive to the socialist argument about the necessity of challenging and transcending the bourgeois-capitalist

6 Charles Bettelheim, *India Independent* (MacGibbon & Kee Ltd., London, 1968, p. 106).

mode of production, he did not believe that in a socialist utopia the caste system would wither away. Like Phule and, later, Ambedkar, he was acutely conscious that power in Hindu society inhered in and directed and rationalized everyday behaviour and life and served to perpetuate a hierarchy of interests. He was, therefore, firmly convinced that political freedom from foreign rule would be of little or no avail unless and until such molecular changes as would penetrate and shatter the caste hierarchy were to take place.

Periyar sought to create within the non-Brahmin movement a nucleus for carrying out social reform and agitating against the inequities of the caste system. He saw such a movement as strictly non-political (in the initial stages of its inception at least) and committed to reorganizing the community at large. Thus was born the self-respect movement. The movement articulated and developed a discourse (and practice) of 'self-respect' wherein every individual in society was enjoined to refer her/his everyday living to normative standards of rationality and good sense and thereby abjure and reject obscurantist and repressive religious, social and cultural practices. The discovery of one's self-respect was to be the basis on which a new identity would be constituted, *outside* the confines of the caste system.

The discovery and articulation of self-respect involved not only the breaking and shattering of caste taboos and codes that had, traditionally, upheld the 'purity' of the upper castes, but also meant that inter-caste relationships be reconstituted on the basis of a new collectivity—the non-Brahmin collectivity. For even as Periyar identified 'casteism' as a general ideology of exclusion, subordination and repression, he was at pains to indicate that casteism was but the structural logic of a system whose ideological strengths derived from Brahminism.

The assumption of a refurbished non-Brahmin identity also meant that women were drawn into practices of self-respect and acquired a sense of personal worth. The self-

respect movement addressed the gender question at some length and Periyar was insistent that a non-Brahmin identity could not be assumed without a concomitant change in the status of women. Women were to be seen as persons in their own right and marriage and sexuality were proclaimed as choices to be made rather than conditions to be endured. Periyar was particularly sensitive to the politics of reproduction and argued that women ought to take control of their bodies and not submit to the rigorous reproductive logic of the patriarchal family.

Further, he was acutely aware of the fact that women were often burdened with the task of transmitting traditional practices and rituals of religion and culture and that they performed significant mediatory roles in preserving and perpetuating the caste system. Thus, he stated with great perspicacity that the liberation of women was a pre-requisite of a self-respecting society where the inequities of caste would no more obtain.

Even though the self-respect movement started out as a social reform movement, the implications of its achievements were bound to acquire political significance sooner or later. The Indian National Congress was slowly but surely emerging as the legitimate and authoritative representative of the 'common weal', and in the 1930s a pronounced anti-Congressism was voiced in Tamilnadu during the anti-Hindi agitations of this period. A self-conscious 'Dravidian' identity was proclaimed, and this proved to be the spark that ignited the torch of the 'Dravidian' cause in the years to come. The self-respect movement that had envisaged a rational community of self-respecters as an alternative to the Hindu caste system provided the ideological arguments that would bolster the Dravidian cause. Gradually Periyar himself came to identify the transformed caste-space of the self-respect movement with 'Dravidastan'. (Dravidastan in essence meant only the Tamil areas of the erstwhile Madras Presidency.)

Periyar's Dravidianism, which was but Tamil nationalism, has to be

seen as a response to the homogenising drives of the Brahmin-Bania combine which, Periyar judged rightly, would shape the new Indian nation-state. Periyar opposed to the coopting logic of Brahminism and the centralizing dynamic of the modern nation-state the notion of a free and rational Tamil society that would in time evolve into a Tamil nation. He did not propose an alternate theory of the nation-state, nor did he seek to transform the structural relations of economic production that granted material power and political legitimacy to the ritual and social hegemony of the Brahmins and the upper castes.

But Periyar managed to forge a national-popular will that has until recently overtly challenged Brahmin hegemony and covertly remained a comment on the politics of nation formation in India. His outstanding contribution in this respect was to insert caste as a significant factor in the constructions of national identity and to this day this question has not been adequately posed, let alone solved.

However, though the Dravidian movement managed to evolve a consensus on the question of a broad Tamil, non-Brahmin identity as opposed to an Indian, Brahmin-Bania one, it did not effectively articulate a national-popular political theory or strategy to challenge the representative claims of the Indian state. The political consensus evolved by the non-Brahmin movement degenerated into a vacuous rhetoric about the Tamil nation with the entry of the DMK into mainstream politics. The DMK attempted to substitute political consensus with one that derived from cinematic glitz and simulated glory. It lost sight of the interlinked nature of caste and gender oppressions and, more importantly, delinked issues of caste from those of gender.

Women were 'restored' to the domestic sphere and their political function was to henceforth sustain and transmit the 'mother-tongue'. They became, as it were, fecund mothers to the Tamil nation and were asked to mediate social and cultural practices that vindicated and affirmed the honour of the

Tamil male and, by implication, their own and that of the Tamil nation. Periyar's notion of self-respect, a necessary adjunct of the rational Tamil society, was transformed into 'maanam' or chivalric honour that sought proofs of its worth in the protection of women's chastity! Meanwhile, the politics of caste was subsumed into the politics of vote and Periyar's anti-Brahminism was affirmed merely on a symbolic level. The Tamil nation came to be 'imagined' entirely in and through language, and gendered language at that, and even in this DMK practices belied the claims of their rhetoric.

But what is noteworthy is that in spite of various distortions and travesties, the legacy of the Dravidian movement nevertheless manages to irk the pan-Indian ruling classes. In the past decade, these classes have come to display an aggressive nationalism that is compounded of various elements: there is the self-imaging of the Indian middle classes who see themselves as the latest and most complete representatives of a timeless Indian culture. There is the sanctimonious affirmation of a syncretic Indian identity by a new generation of bilingual intellectuals who seek to displace the problematic contradictions of caste, ethnicity and language as these have arisen in the nation-state on to the colonial past.

Further, there is the vociferous Hindutva ideology of the BJP-RSS variety that seeks to lay bare the 'lies' at the heart of Nehruvian secularism. Such a nationalism seems determined to avoid addressing the issue of the crisis of the nation-state. In fact, as Gramsci remarked in another context: 'It may well be that nobody has the courage to pose the question exhaustively because it was feared that vital dangers for the unified life of the nation would immediately result from such a rigorously critical and consequential formulations' (emphasis ours).⁷ Even those who seek to challenge the claims to unitary power of the Indian nation-state, such as the left and non-Congress opposition forces, demand devolution of powers to the states only.

7. Antonio Gramsci, *Ibid.*, p. 199.

In other words, they seek to merely reproduce the logic of the Indian nation-state at local regional levels. The structural logic is thus left intact and the financial power, political hegemony and ideological strengths of the pan-Indian bourgeoisie remain unquestioned. In fact, left parties have shown themselves to be as committed to the cause of the Indian nation-state as the bourgeoisie whom they claim to despise. Not only have they consistently opposed and denigrated movements for national self-determination in the subcontinent in the name of 'internationalism', they have also sought to turn the politics of the nation-state to their own account. Hence we have the bizarre political phenomenon of the left parties in Tamilnadu endorsing the Tamil cause on the Cauvery issue while their counterparts in Karnataka lend support to Karnataka's claims!

But even if the left desists from posing certain questions, these are being posed more or less in a cogent and definitive fashion elsewhere: in Assam, Punjab, Kashmir and Nagaland. The Indian state is of course determined to prevent these questions from being asked. In this context it seems logical that we ask: What is the 'Indian' nation we seek to preserve?

Further Reading

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