



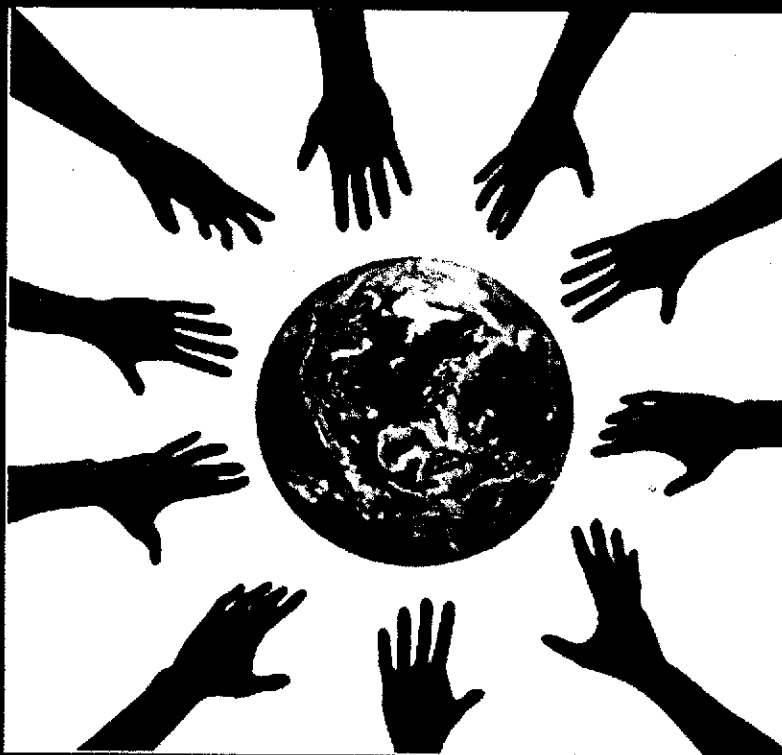
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Interrogating the Nation: A Study of Benedict Anderson and Partha Chatterjee

Sunil Dutta

Associate Professor of English, Sonari College, Sonari

&

Anjali Saud

Assistant Professor of English, Sonari Commerce College, Sonari

The concept of nation has become a central and recurrent issue of discourse among the academics. The nation, which is said to have originated in the west, is a significant social and political organization in this changing world. The idea of nationalism is often held responsible for the fragmentation of the present world and creation and multiplication of nation-states, resulting in two World Wars, various territorial disputes, invasions, partitions, national chauvinism, xenophobia, ethnic conflicts, sectarian violence, religious intolerance and terrorist activities across the globe. Harish Trivedi's comment in this regard is worth quoting:

In the beginning was the World, whole and entire, but now it lies fragmented in narrow warring Nations. Though the nation was invented, or imagined into existence, only in the nineteenth century in Europe, it has since been the cause of untold conflict and misery, leading to two grotesquely wasteful World Wars (—so called, however, and not international wars). The harmful phenomenon of the nation has rapidly multiplied in the rest of the world, beyond the West, and it has there too aroused the worst of loyalties and passions (ix).

Such conflicts, events and upheavals across the world stimulated the interest and attention of the social scientists, historians and other theorists, mostly related to postcolonial studies, to engage in the interrogation and negotiation on the issues of nation and nationalism. Thus the concept of nation is brought to the fore and has proved to be a relevant, meaningful and significant idea even in this age of globalisation/ globalism. It is seen that the terms "nation" and "nation-state" are often used interchangeably. This paper is an attempt to discuss the issues in question as problematized by Benedict Anderson and Partha Chatterjee.

There are divergent and contesting definitions of the term "nation". Some theorists consider nation as a cultural entity and some others describe it as a political formation. *The Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) describes the term "nation" as "an extensive aggregate of persons, so closely associated with each other by common descent, language or history, as to form a distinct race or people, usually organized as a separate political state and occupying a definite territory". Antony Smith defines nation as a "named human population that shares myths and memories, a mass public culture, a designated homeland, economic unity and equal rights and duties for all members" (43). The word "nation" is traced to the Latin term "*natio*". In this context, Timothy Brennan observes that the nation refers "both to the modern nation-state and to something more ancient and nebulous—the "*natio*" — a local community, domicile, family, condition of belonging" (45). The nation has become a political unit following the well-known principle of "one nation, one state". Historically, the notion of nationalism

developed in the minds of a community of people sharing many or some of the factors like race, language, religion, tradition, culture, political aspirations and geographical territory.

Interestingly, traditional definitions of nation and nationalism have come under severe strain due to contemporary studies and research in different disciplinary fields. While in political and social sciences the nation has been traditionally seen as an actual geo-political entity, recent studies focus more on the conceptual aspect of the nation. It has been, for instance, suggested that the nation is formed and created in the minds of the people who are culturally homogeneous.

Among others, British Marxist scholar Benedict Anderson and Indian political scientist Partha Chatterjee have grappled with the problem in their own ways. It is widely agreed that Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983) is a ground-breaking work which initiates the deviation from the received notions of nation and nationalism. Anderson feels that nation-ness and nationalism are cultural artefacts of a particular kind and says "nation-ness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time" (3). Anderson writes, "In an anthropological spirit, then, I propose the following definition of the nation: it is an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (5-6). For him the nation is imagined because "the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (6). In this context he says, "All communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity – genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined" (6). The nation is limited because even the largest nation "has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations" (7). It is imagined as sovereign because "the concept was born in an age in which Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm" (7). It is imagined as a community because "the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (6) which bind its people together, irrespective of class, race or gender. It is this comradeship or fraternity that inspires millions of people "to kill" or "die for such limited imaginings" (7).

Anderson observes that the nation as 'imagined community' originated as a result of secularization in the age of Enlightenment. Print capitalism, particularly the novel and the newspaper, created the cultural conditions necessary for the idea of nation to become the political norm and the development of modern nationalism. Anderson argues that the print-languages laid the bases for national consciousness in three distinct ways. Firstly, "they created unified fields of exchange and communication below Latin and above the spoken vernaculars. Speakers of the huge variety of French's, English's or Spanish's, who might find it difficult or even impossible to understand one another in conversation, became capable of comprehending one another via print and paper" (44). Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, "print-capitalism gave a new fixity to language, which in the long run helped to build that image of antiquity so central to the subjective idea of the nation" (44). Thirdly, "print-capitalism created language-of-power of a kind different from the older administrative vernaculars" (45). All these point to the fact that nations are not natural, but have been constructed for convenience of a certain kind of people. Therefore, Anderson describes nationalism as a cultural construct.

He argues that "nationalism has to be understood by aligning it not with self-consciously held political ideologies, but with the large cultural systems that preceded it, out of which—as well as against which—it came into being." (12). The two relevant cultural systems are the religious community and the dynastic realm. In his view, nationalism emerged towards the end of the 18th century in Western Europe, following the disappearance of religious thought: "...in Western Europe, the eighteenth century marks not only the dawn of the age of nationalism but the dusk of religious modes of thought" (11). While responding to Anderson's formulations on nation and nationalism, Ania Loomba comments in *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*: "The final form of the nation that Anderson considers is that of the 'nation-state' which was ushered in after the First World War and cemented after the Second World War" (158). In *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction* (1998), Leela Gandhi has appropriately summarized Anderson's chief contentions as: "The nation, then, is the product of a radically secular and modern imagination, invoked through the cultural forms of the novel and newspaper in the godless expanse of what Anderson calls 'homogeneous empty time.'" (104-105)

When Anderson says: "If nation-states are widely conceded to be 'new' and 'historical', and 'the nations to which they give political expression always loom out of an immemorial past, and, still more important, glide into a limitless future'" (11), he means to say that nations are a historical and forms of mythology. Thus Anderson explores the core issues related to the creation and spread of such communities throughout the globe.

However, the exclusive imaginative category of the nation asserted by Anderson has been contested by critics on several grounds. The prominent thinker Partha Chatterjee offers different opinions on the trajectory of nationalism in India. In his influential book *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World* (1986), Chatterjee examines the key issues concerning the existing nation-states and argues that Indian anti-colonial nationalism was not constructed according to a European model. He explains that the origins of the nation in the West have much to do with the pursuit of a set of human ideals called the European Enlightenment. Of course, Chatterjee challenges Anderson's argument that anti-colonial nationalism is a derivative of European nationalism, suggesting obliquely that history happens only in Europe. Chatterjee claims that there is a distinct Indian model of nationalism and argues that anti-colonial nationalism in India was not constructed according to a European model or even in direct reaction to a European model. Rather, there was a complicated relationship of borrowing and difference between the anti-colonial and European nationalisms. In this context, Chatterjee writes in his book *Nation and Its Fragments*:

If nationalisms in the rest of the world have to choose their imagined community from certain 'modular' forms already made available to them by Europe and the Americas, what do they have left to imagine? History, it would seem, has decreed that we in the postcolonial world shall only be perpetual consumers of modernity. Europe and the Americas, the only true subjects of history, have thought out on our behalf not only the script of colonial enlightenment and exploitation, but also that of our anti-colonial resistance and postcolonial misery. Even our imaginations must remain forever colonized (5).

Chatterjee makes a distinction between nationalism as a political movement and nationalism as a cultural construct. The former combats colonialism and the latter allow the

colonized people to put forward their autonomy. He claims that cultural national identity in once colonized countries pre-dated any nationalist political action directed against the imperialist powers. As Ania Loomba refers to Chatterjee's critique of the Andersonian historiography:

Such histories mistakenly believe that nationalism is only a political movement. Instead, he claims that well before it launches itself against the colonial state, anti-colonial nationalism attempts to create 'its own domain of sovereignty within colonial society'. It does so by dividing the world into a material, outside sphere constituted of the economy, statecraft, science and technology, and a spiritual, inner domain of culture (which includes religion, customs and the family). The supremacy of the West may be conceded in the former, whereas the latter is claimed as the essence of national culture. (159)

To quote Chatterjee's own words in this regard:

The colonial state, in other words, is kept out of the "inner" domain of national culture; but it is not as though this so-called spiritual domain is left unchanged. In fact, here nationalism launches its most powerful, creative, and historically significant project: to fashion a "modern" national culture that is nevertheless not Western. If the nation is an imagined community, then this is where it is brought into being. In this, its true and essential domain, the nation is already sovereign, even when the state is in the hands of colonial power (Fragments 6).

Like Partha Chatterjee, Harish Trivedi too finds serious problems with Anderson's paradigm. Anderson, for instance, has argued that nations came into existence as a secular entity, following the demise of religious thought. But this may be true about the Western world only. Trivedi writes: "The partition of the colonial nation into two independent nation-states, India and Pakistan, in 1947 was brought about by the primacy of religion which Anderson regards as a spent force which the nation comes to replace" (Trivedi xv). Further, in India, "many religions and many more languages, including the eighteen inscribed in the constitution as 'national languages', have coexisted within the same nation-state for six decades now, giving the lie to not only Anderson's theory, but also to most other theories of nationalism" (Trivedi xvi).

Interestingly, Anderson's postulations about the linkage between the novel and nationalism and Chatterjee's linking of colonialism with national culture find corroboration in Edward Said's correlation of imperialism and culture. From one point of view, imperialism is a form of aggressive nationalism where one nation dominates or rules some other nations. Said's argument about colonialism make one see that colonialism and nationalism are closely linked or interconnected. In fact, colonialism or imperialism is nothing but the dominance of one nation over others. In this dominance, Said sees culture as being very closely related to politics. In other words, culture of imperialism cannot be separated from the politics of imperialism. As he puts it in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993):

A radical falsification has become established in this separation. Culture is exonerated of any entanglements with power, representations are considered only as apolitical images to be parsed and construed as so many grammars of exchange, and the divorce of the present from the past is assumed to be complete. And yet, far from this separation of spheres being a neutral or accidental choice, its real meaning is as an act of complicity, the humanist's choice of a disguised, denuded, systematically purged textual model over a more embattled model,

whose principal features would inevitably coalesce around the continuing struggle over the question of empire itself. (67)

It can be said that in spite of the emergence and increasing influence of globalism, nationalism continues to be a predominant idea/ideology which keeps defining and redefining territorial boundaries as well as national identities. Therefore, nation and nationalism constitute a challenging and rewarding field of study cutting across various disciplines. Nations across the world are seen as fundamental requirements of human existence and the prime category of one's identification seems to be national –viz. American, Indian, and so on. For this to happen, nations are construed or as Benedict Anderson famously says, imagined as a homogenous entity and nationalist ideologies in a given nation are supposed to hold good for all its citizens. However, this requires a homogenization of aspirations and ideologies which finally does not work as any given nation is basically a conglomeration of diverse and heterogeneous identities, cultures, races, languages, religions and so on. That is why nations are being structured and restructured continually.

From the above study, it can be concluded with little disagreement that Benedict Anderson and Partha Chatterjee have added a new dimension to the notion of postcolonial nation by defining it as a cultural formation and a central definer collective identity in colonial and anti-colonial contexts. Nations bind together the individuals who imagine themselves as fellow nationals and kindle feelings of community for them. In fact, they share collective identity.

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