

UNIMAGINING INDIA: EXERCISES IN REFLECTIVE NOSTALGIA

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“The Nation Unbound: India in the 1940s”-A workshop on this rather intriguing theme was held at the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, Shimla, on May 10-12, 2012. Conceived as a series of open conversations and arguments that would eventually be written up as discrete papers, the workshop was concerned with unpacking this momentous decade. The concept note for the workshop stated:

... these were years that held a clutch of possibilities, when it seemed that utopias could be made, even as the long night of struggle that demanded the energy of peasants, tribals and workers, mutinous navy men and dislocated populations appeared unending. While there was an undoubted eagerness to rule and command, there was also the curiosity to experiment, and economists, scientists and law-makers in equal measure sought to envision a just future. There was much pragmatic planning, a weary cynicism that accepted the division of land and people, yet there was an equally pertinent idealism that was angered by inequality and injustice and which strove to imagine a different nation. What could have been the contours of another nation or other possible nations?

The workshop did not disappoint: it provoked reflections on shared, contentious and frustrating histories whose effects we continue to live and realize in our present, and suggested how we may renew our past, in a spirit of reflective rather than sentimental nostalgia. The presentations covered much ground, both conceptually and empirically, and it became clear that some of the rich insights that emerged needed to be worked on before they could be put out for wider critical circulation. On the other hand, there were finished papers too, compact in their content and analysis. As a preview to those remarkable discussions, whose content we hope to make public sometime in the future, we thought we would publish these four papers.

Sumanta Banerjee’s “Looking Back at the 1940s: Nationalism and Internationalism, Lost Opportunities and Future Possibilities”, as its title makes clear is magisterial in scope. It maps somewhat broadly the contours of what its author, while quoting Merleau-Ponty, refers to as a ‘truth that missed its chance’. While marking the productive moments of this historical

'truth', the paper yet calls attention to the three major contradictions of the period that veered inexorably as it were towards a tragic denouement: the class question in relationship to the anti-colonial and nationalist struggles on the one hand, and international anti-fascism on the other; the communal question, the consolidation, during the 1940s, of Hindu and Muslim political identities; and finally the question of the revolution, which hinged on the contentious and deeply riven politics of communism in the Indian context. Banerjee argues that each of these questions excited the imagination of political and social actors, cultural workers and artists, but also proved frustrating to those that addressed them seriously.

The reasons for the frustration were many - the nature of the times, for one, when everything seemed at once imminent yet not easy of realization. Armed struggle in Telengana had its successes, anti-fascist internationalism was a heady reality, yet either had to settle into futures which the actors involved anticipated. Yet, Banerjee reminds us the alternatives that lay imminent in that decade are not to be scorned and here, he goes on to detail the very diverse positions on the national question that were articulated during this period-in CPI documents, in the speeches of Sarat Bose, in the demands that emanated from the North-West frontier provinces and so on.

Sajal Nag's "The Possible Nations: Alternative History of Ideas and Images in North-East India (1940-50)" returns to this self-same question of other possible nations from an altogether other context: of Naga, Mizo and Manipuri struggles over questions of identity, nationhood and sovereignty in the 1940s, and the mix of influences that shaped each of these struggles. He makes it clear that he is concerned more with articulated ideas, images and discourses than actual developments. Importantly, he refuses to do what is now almost commonplace with those who interrogate the idea of India, which is to outline the many 'other' nationalisms that Indian nationalism subdued. Rather, he demonstrates the complex histories of these other nationalisms, their internal divisions and their essential ambiguity with respect to whether they ought to integrate or not with independent India. World War II, left internationalism as well as the complex legacies of Christianity and colonialism in the North-East emerge as important moments in the history of this region in the 1940s. Given this mix of influences, we realize that there is no one 'North-Eastern' response that may be understood as such, and that in their various moments of emergence, Naga, Mizo and Manipuri nationalisms imagined very different futures, drawing on very different memories. For the Nagas, the colonial and missionary construction of their irredeemable 'difference' from all things 'Indian' appeared to have been decisive, whereas for the Mizos, the question of identity was underwritten by republican as well as

recidivist notions of the future. In Manipur, it was not merely separation from India that mattered, but the emergence of a popular framework for rule, which tragically was not allowed its historical due. At once terse and tangential, Nag's rather whimsical paper maintains a studied irony with respect to the verities of nationalisms as they emerged in parts of the North-East in the 1940s.

V. Geetha's paper, "Stateless Tamils: The Many Ironies of Nationhood in India and Ceylon, circa 1948" shares somewhat common ground with these other two papers, in that it looks at the dilemmas of imagining a different nation, from the vantage points afforded by class and ethnicity. It examines the dilemma of diasporic labour from India when faced with the prospect of emerging nations—Tamil labourers in Sri Lanka were declared stateless in 1948 on account of their non-native origin, but the new Indian nation could not also easily accommodate them. While it appeared that the communists in Lanka would speak their cause and provide them a political habitation, if not actual citizenship, this dream turned sour, with the repression that they faced; a repression that, as Geetha points out, was not unique, for it happened so in India, as well as in nearby Malaya. In all these places, the left parties were either decimated, as happened in Malaya, or as was the case in India and Sri Lanka, they followed the parliamentary path and over time accommodated themselves to the logic of the nation. Geetha wonders aloud if this logic could have been subverted and other nations imagined: she points to moments in the late 1940s in Old Madras, when the great anti-caste radical E.V. Ramasamy Periyar's Dravidian nationalism addressed issues of class and caste in tandem, in and through its critique of the Indian nation. However, this politics, which was sadly not sufficiently heeded by the Left, in India remained a 'local' affair, limited by its appeal to an 'other' nationalism and by its inexperience in class politics.

Syantoni Dutta's "Remembering the DVC dream: Of Nationhood and Development Visions" is perhaps the only paper in this collection that seeks to locate fissures within the national imagination, rather than without it – she examines the difference that men like Meghnad Saha and Kapil Bhattacharjee attempted to inscribe within the larger development discourse to do with rivers, electricity and industrialization. Taking the Damodar Valley Corporation experiment as her context, she traces arguments to do with riverine projects in the immediate decades before and after independence. Her citing of Saha is interesting in this context, since he is at once committed to social justice as well as to social plenty, and he relies on rationality, the scientific mind and state planning to deliver either. It is this insistence on measuring 'plenty' through the prism of justice that perhaps makes him a science dissenter in the 1950s, when he

is disillusioned with the reckless corruption and authority that planning had unleashed. Sayantoni contrasts Saha's resolute commitment to modern science with the republican idealism of Kapil Bhattacharjee, who turned a critic of river valley projects in the 1950s, and argued that planning did not take into account the interests of the people, particularly peasants who stood to be affected by it. She suggests that in the nation-building project of modern science, there were discordant moments, and that it is important to heed that history of ideas. While it has been possible to look outside of this project to develop a critique of it, as those who argue along with Gandhi do, it is not often that one builds on the dissent within. This paper, thus, demonstrates how the project of the nation was not as hegemonic or 'given' as it sometimes appears, but actually far more provisional, contested and hazy.

Nilanjana Gupta's "Telling Stories/Reading the Nation: News and The Newspapers in the Forties" zeroes in on the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* to trace the ways in which newspapers and newspaper editors themselves played out the national imagination, as well as the relationship between nationalism and entrepreneurship evinced in the advertisements of the times. It claims that the self-conscious nationalist positioning of the newspapers meant that the notion of newspapers as sites for reasoned debates was never really possible for these newspapers like the ABP, which did their best to construct a political readership. Perhaps, the most poignant revelation is that even newspapers like this prove that while independence may have been integrated easily into public consciousness, the actuality of the Partition of India was not so easily assimilated into the notion of the new nation in the early years of independence.

Uma Chakravarti's study "A Moment of Possibility: The 1940s in Lahore" focuses on two Pakistani women's representation of the times leading up to the Partition, and after. Mumtaz Shah Nawaz's *The Heart Divided* (1948) is set in the 1930s and early 1940s, and Mehr Nigar *Masroor's Shadows of Time* (1987) covers a span of almost a century, ending in the 1980s. The fact that both are so concerned with the unravelling of history is itself a reflection of "the way the late thirties and forties shaped the emergence of the [political] Muslim woman and her growing awareness of a Muslim history that was distinct from other histories around her." These novels represent three ways of looking at the past: the Pan-Islamist, the nationalist, and the communist. It appears that, for Pakistani women writers, a separate state for the Muslims was inevitable, and the endorsement of this separate state by the communists reconciles for them the apparent difference between the nationalist and the Communist positions. Chakravarti claims that "freedom from foreign rule seamlessly melds into freedom and liberation from the prison-house of custom

especially for the young women in the narratives and so for them the public world that can give them entry into the political world is structurally linked to the way the private world of the household must transform. The feudal Muslim household must give way to a new way of living and being.”

Taken together, these papers offer tantalizing glimpses into dispersed and complex histories, of events, ideas and movements, which are all too often re-arranged to fit the exigencies of the national story. The making of the Indian nation we realize has been, ironically enough, a complex and inexorably local process in that the nation emerged in and out of particular historical compulsions and memory. Rather than counterpose ‘other’ nations and nationalisms to India, these papers, as indeed all other presentations at the workshop, suggest that the intersections and alignments of the 1940s, as well as the points of divergence were not only defined by national borders, or the nation-state, but hinged on longer and more durable ties and divisions, by linked and separate geographies and histories.