

## Nationalisms

Vikas Pathak, *Contesting Nationalisms: Hinduism, Secularism and Untouchability in Colonial Punjab 1880-1930*, Delhi: Primus Books, 2018, pp. xvi + 266, Rs. 1495/-, ISBN: 978-93-86552-79-2 (Hardcover).

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Theories on nationalism are many. Equally diverse are the takes on the rise and spread of nationalism in the Indian subcontinent. Vikas Pathak's book on Indian nationalism, *Contesting Nationalisms: Hinduism, Secularism and Untouchability in Colonial Punjab 1880-1930*, is a new entry into the league. 'If nationalisms in the rest of the world', asked Chatterjee (1997a: 5) back in 1993<sup>1</sup>, '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?' Chatterjee's response here targets Anderson's (2006) thesis on 'imagined community' allegedly founded upon certain forms of Western modularity. While it is of late a cliché to say that nationalism in India is a Western import, very few since Chatterjee have actually studied the peculiarity of Indian nationalism. Curiously, twenty-five years after Chatterjee's critique, Pathak has set out to examine 'whether an emerging Indian nation...meant a negation of ties of religion...in the interest of the construction of the modern citizen [purportedly to have happened in the West], or implied a need to negotiate these in more complex ways' (p.1). For this, one must admit that Pathak's work is congratulatory.

Using colonial Punjab as a case study, this book traces the different—often conflicting—strands of Indian nationalism, what Pathak calls 'contesting nationalisms', and their ideological moorings. It touches upon the discourse of Hindu nationalism, and that of communalism emerging therefrom. Historians, quite intuitively, juxtapose Hindu nationalism with Islamic nationalism in India. Besides, the conflictual Hindu-Muslim relationship, this book, while shedding light on the unsung contributions of the Dalits towards the collective imagination of nation in India, argues that there was (also) a certain form of Dalit nationalist consciousness—the

Dalit national identity was being engendered parallelly with the caste Hindu or the Muslim identities—was in place, and effectively countering the fervour of Hindu nationalism. In brief, *Contesting Nationalisms* identifies 'four visions of nationalism' (p.2) that was in place in colonial Punjab: (1) composite nationalism; (2) secular, citizenship-based nationalism; (3) religious nationalism; and (4) the depressed classes' vision of the nation, which is to say, Dalit nationalism.

Accordingly, the book follows neat chapterization. The introduction (first chapter) maps the contentions among these four strands of nationalism. The second chapter, 'Cultural Contests and Syncretism in Colonial Punjab', gives us a broad overview of the tipping point in history: the shift away from cultures of syncretism in Punjab to cultural-ethnic contestations during the colonial times. The third chapter, 'Composite Moorings of the Nation', focuses on 'composite nationalism': an ideological doctrine that believed in the mosaic of the different communities and harmonizing their interests for the larger sake of the nation. The fourth and the fifth chapters deal with the rise and spread of Hindu nationalism and its tendency to territorialize the nation. The sixth chapter discusses 'secular nationalism' which often had a socialist undercurrent and was based on 'a complete negation of the community-centered discourse' (p. 3). The seventh chapter, before the conclusion, is on Dalit nationalism. This, in my opinion, is the highlight of the book. Notwithstanding the dearth of literatures on Dalit nationalism, this book digs in the archive and some of the expository Dalit documents to demonstrate how the Dalits—alongside the Hindus who, according to them, came from the *outside* (p. 230)—relied on the logic of cultural insiderism in order to lay claim to the territoriality of the nation at a moment when histories

of nationalist struggle were being woven from the perspective of ethnic partisanship, and struggles over the meaning of nationhood.

The book is a welcome break from the chronological style of writing history. Pathak approaches the discourse of 'contesting nationalisms' thematically from the perspective of the 'four visions of nationalism'. However, he fails to provide an explanation to why there are *only* four visions—not more, not less—that he has considered. In principle, I am not opposed to selective representations, but any informed reader here would seek to know why the four visions, in particular, (not some other) warrant representation. Classifications and taxonomies, as Foucault (1972) and Hacking (1999) insist, are problematic, for they involve exclusionary politics, and therefore, perpetrate epistemic violence. From the book, one cannot glean the premise of Pathak's categorization. If we are to believe that the book has adhered to a classificatory practice along ethnic lines, then the omission of Islamic nationalism in colonial Punjab—particularly when Pathak admittedly acknowledges that 'Punjab had a multi-religious society with Muslims comprising about 51 per cent of the population from 1881 till [sic.] 1921' (p. 26)—is rather glaring. Likewise, the exclusion of the Sikh, or for that matter, the Sindhi perspective on nationalism raises questions over the methodological efficacy of the book.

In fact, the book does not provide us any insight on the methodology deployed. This is one major drawback. For example, Pathak, in insisting that the communal strife began with the advent of colonialism and 'there was far greater pluralism and syncretism in precolonial times' (p. 48), retrieves certain early twentieth century *secondary* sources in the section titled 'Discourse of Pluralism in Medieval Times' (p. 48) within the third chapter, while he uses *primary* sources when discussing Dalit nationalism in seventh chapter. Apparently, Pathak's claim is correct. However, this partiality in his treatment of different subjects is questionable, not least because secondary sources, at the best, may reflect on the *discourse*—as the title of the section rightly points to—but not on the *veracity* of the subject in question. Indeed, Pathak is aware that historiographies are often maneuvered to meet political goals, and therefore in the next chapter, he would contend that '[t]he Hindu nationalist scheme [read: historiography] was often teleological: since the "Muslim rule" was the darkest hour, [the] colonial presence was an improvement' (p. 120). In that case, why would Pathak rely on secondary sources alone for making claims on syncretism in precolonial India? Speaking of (post)colonialism, Pathak's passing reference to colonial modernity to have aroused 'two kinds of [Indian] responses: one, an imitation of the cultural innovations

effected by modernity, and, two, attempts at resisting cultural changes taking place by appeals to orthodox beliefs' (p. 27) is grossly simplistic; and is at odds with the notions of 'ambivalence', 'hybridity' (Bhabha, 1990' 1994) and 'derivative discourse' (Chatterjee, 1997a; 1997b)—analytical apparatus that the postcolonial theorists have furnished as alternatives to the much-cliched tradition(al)/modern(ity) dyad.

At least two contemporary scholars have taken up the topic of what may loosely be called 'other nationalisms' as different from imagining nationalism from the contours of territoriality: Ghosh (2016) in the context of colonial Bengal and Devji (2013) in the context of Pakistan. In all likelihood, these two interlocutors—surprisingly, who have not been engaged with—would have provided Pathak with a more robust conceptual framework upon which his thesis on the 'four visions' could be mounted. Last but not the least, the book, as it stands now, needs some editorial intervention. For example, an archival source titled *Bhai Parmananda* housed at the Nehru Memorial Museum Library has been accorded to John Zavos in the 'Bibliography' section. Additionally, there is no subject/theme index, which makes it difficult for a reader to return to the book. Despite these concerns—though serious, this book does a reasonably good job in tracing the multiple visions of Indian nationalism and their contentions for hegemony, and should be of interest to scholars of South Asian history and nationalism, particularly when the concept and definition of 'nationalism' is increasingly becoming a contested topic in contemporary India and beyond.

## Note

1. Chatterjee's *The Nation and Its Fragments* was originally published in 1993.

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