

The Emergence of India as A Nation

(With special reference to English literature)

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The present paper intends to make a brief foray into the much discussed and hotly debated topic of the emergence of India as a nation, with certain specific insights and special references from the realms of the world of English literature. The concept of the nation is one of the most powerful and ubiquitous organising principles of our times. As the language of nationalism fuels crisis, so the concept of nation emergence through language. The nation comes to life in texts other than those which are ostensibly nationalist: it is sustained in the discourses of gender and sexuality, in discussions of economics and ecology, in the language of everyday and of theory. So, the present paper tries to explore how the idea of nation circulates and regenerates itself through a wide variety of literary texts.

The question of 'What is Indianness?' is to be decided at the very outset of the present discussion. Indianness is not the pride of any single civilization; on the other hand, it signifies a concept that encapsulates a lot of space with a plethora of languages, different groups and various cultures. Dr Shashi Tharoor used the beautiful metaphor of a large 'thali plate' with a variety of sumptuous dishes to depict the plurality of India as a country with its vast array of customs, religions, languages and traditions. Indianness is of course like the proverbial elephant experienced by half a dozen blind seekers: one feeling its tail and describing it is a rope, another passing hand on its flank and describing it as a mountain and yet another hugging one of its legs and taking it as a pillar. So, the underlying truth is that the elephant has certain specific characteristics, which are different from that of a monkey or a tiger. Likewise, India too has her different

but specific characteristics, that will definitely find its echoes in various shades in Indian literature.

Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore rightly said,

'The inmost creed of India is to find the

One in the many, Unity in diversity. '

The concept of India as a single nation has existed in the consciousness of the Indian people for 2000 years or more. It is seen in ancient religious texts, for example in Parashara's description of Bharathato Maitreya in the Vishnu Purana. It is seen, even earlier, in the Mahabharata, in the 9th chapter of 'Bhishma Parva'. We also found this consciousness in Buddhist and Jain literature. Therefore, when Tagore spoke in what had become the national anthem of India, of "Punjab, Sind Gujarat, Maratha, Dravid, Utkal, Banga", he was not introducing a new consciousness, but merely expressing and reiterating one which had long existed. National consciousness was present in India in the ancient and medieval periods. This essence of consciousness of Unity in Diversity has always been the crux of Indianness.

"Getting its history wrong is part of being a nation", so commented Ernst Renan, one of the early political thinkers to have pondered seriously over the vexatious question of nationalism in modern times. The ideological moorings are often more important than physical or military means for the construction of a nation. This fact has been proved time and again in modern times. The failure of some of the modern democratic nations is a clear testimony to this fact. Those countries that were set up purely on the basis of military might or on the basis of religion often fail to fructify the expectations of modern democracy. A typical example is our own neighbouring state of Pakistan and some of the sub-Saharan African countries.

Literature plays a vital role in the construction of a modern nation. Indian English literature is perhaps the only one, among the many literatures in India, whose history and genealogy cannot be traced to the pre-colonial world. The first specimen of Indian

English literature was a piece of travel writing published in two volumes by Dean Mahomed from Ireland in 1794 entitled the 'Travels of Dean Mahomet, a native of Patna in Bengal, through Several Parts of India, while in the Service of the Honourable the East India Company, Written by Himself, in a Series of Letters to a Friend.' The genre of Indian English literature, with her various avatars of Anglo-Indian literature, Indo-Anglian literature, Indo- English literature, Indian Writing in English and Commonwealth literature, has gone through several debates and ideological questions marked by the colonialist cultural projects, the emergence of a nationalist consciousness and the introduction and expansion of the discipline of English studies.

The historical constitution of Indian English literature can truly be located in the late thirties or early forties of the 20th century in the lectures and writings of scholars like K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar and C. D.Narasimhaiah. Iyengar's massive historiographical work 'Indian Writing in English' traced the origin of the genre to the early writings of Raja Ram Mohan Roy in the 19th century. Roy almost single handedly brought about a renaissance in Indian thinking and paved the way for Indian English literature by pleading for English education rather than oriental education in India. Roy was followed by other writers such as Henry Derozio, Toru Dutt, Manmohan Ghose, Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, Sarojini Naidu, Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan and others, who wrote, as if they were contributing to the British literature.

A nation may be either a geographical territory, a construct, or as Edward Said maintains, an 'an imaginative geography'. As a nation, India is different from other nations, for the conditions which went into its making were different. Attempts at imaging India in literary narratives are varied and complex because the very perception defies consensus. The concern of the present paper is to explore the dominant trends in imaging India as a nation in literary narratives.

H. Hatterr, the Eurasian protagonist of G.V. Desani's masterpiece novel 'All About H. Hatterr', propelled by India's strangeness and difference, warns thus:

Warning!
Improbable you say?
No, fellows,
All improbable are probable in India.

Hatterr's warning speaks about an India that continues to elude and betray all attempts at rational understanding, for it is anybody's heaven or hell, dream or nightmare. Such extreme images of India put us into a conundrum in finding answers to such questions: Is India real? Is it a nation? Whose India is it anyway?

India seduces and baffles all those who encounter her, for India's vastness, confusion and contradictions have defied comprehension. Scanning through the web to have a touch of India's soul is like chasing one's shadow in darkness. As Adela in E.M.Forster's 'A Passage to India' wonders: "How can the mind take hold of such a territory?" India has always been a separate world, hard for any writer, Indian or non-Indian, to penetrate? Although writers on India struggle hard not to be defeated or overwhelmed by its sublimity, scope and awful dimensions, they mostly end up either idealising India or negating all that it stands for. Images of extreme negation or admiration continue to dominate the literary imagination of India.

The post-1947 Indian nation-state originates from British India. But it does not imply that the British invented for us our Indianness. Mainland India was culturally free even during the pre-British period and there was pan-Indian awareness despite differences among the people. This was the same Indianness successfully invoked by Gandhi, thereby uniting the people of this country against British imperialism. The identity of that Indianness is part of one's character, of one's consciousness, a dynamic representation in which one lives and dies. The argument here is that the British representation of our Indianness is only a trapping of the externals, a depiction of the 'without' not the 'within' of the personality of Indianness. E.M.Forster rightly calls this as the failure of the British due to their "underdeveloped hearts".

There was a sustained attempt to appropriate Indian cultural identity during the British times. India was already renowned for its fabulous wealth and as a great civilization to the West. The British, as a colonial power, ruling over 'the jewel in the crown', could not at the cognitive level accept the fact that the ruled is superior to the ruler in any manner. As V.G.Kierman opines, "by thinking badly of their subjects, they [the British] avoided having to think badly of themselves". From this cognitive awareness followed the projection of India as a depraved country and the British on God's behalf took upon themselves the great burden of leading India from perpetual darkness to light. This was actually an extension of the universalist and exclusivist Euro-centric discourse. By declaring that "Europe is the end of history, Asia its beginning," Hegel had set the tone for such a discourse. Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness' is a fine testimony of this Hegelian discourse. V.S.Naipaul's 'An Area of Darkness' and David Rubin's 'The Greater Darkness' are works on India of the same paradigm.

The Indians as a subject nation underwent cognitive shifts in recognizing and articulating their national identity, in the course of their long colonial transactions. The colonial subject position may be compared to the subject position of women, who also undergo different cognitive shifts challenging patriarchal monolith. Elaine Showalter argues that any minority group (or dominant group as in the case of the colonised) find its self-expression relative to a dominant society. She posited three major phases that she claimed were common to all literary sub-cultures; first, a phase of imitation; second, one of protest; and third, a phase of self-discovery. Like women, Indians also moved from a phase of imitation to self-discovery under colonialism. They first resisted, maintaining their feudal identities with their feudal rulers, then succumbed to the British rule for some time, thereby creating a mimetic discourse. Then they protested against the colonial masters, that was part of the consolidation of an emerging national identity. This resulted in a shift from an individual cognitive awareness to a higher level of cognitive bonding leading to the freedom struggle. The struggle was definitely to recover the lost Indian pre-colonial self and to resist the cultural forces released by British imperialism.

Some of the Indian reformists like Raja Rammohun Roy could not get away with the west as an important vector in asserting their Indian identity. Others like Raja Rao were successful in recreating a living myth of the pre-colonial Indian selfhood. They also succeeded in articulating a pan -Indian nationalism. For writers like Nirad.C.Chaudhuri, who embraced the negative perception of the Indian identity, the future of the Indian nation-state lies in following the West. But for R. K.Narayan,the future lies going back to India's glorious culture, while having a healthy scepticism about most things western. Modern writers like Shashi Tharoor are very much vocal in their criticism of British colonial rule. Tharoor's 'Battle of Belonging' speaks at length on Indian nationalism, patriotism and related matters. He is a strong votary of anti- colonialism. He always spoke at length how Britain became a superpower at the expense of India. India's GDP was 23% of world GDP at the beginning of 18th century. It had plummeted to less than 4% by the time India became a free nation.

Thus, India's arduous journey over the centuries has enabled and facilitated its emergence as the largest and one of the most powerful democracies of today. We should look forward to an India that is progressive, modern,rationalistic,scientific, technologically driven and updated. Let harmony and oneness be our binding forces.

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