



“One Country, One People”: Aspects of Nationalism in the *Sabhaparva* of The *Mahabharata*

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Abstract: The concept of nation is modern in the Western sense, but in India the concept of nationality is as old as the Vedas. The British, like the Mughals before them, certainly contributed to the political reunification of the land. They united politically an existing civilization entity. The geographical and spiritual oneness in India is time and again emphasized in ancient Indian classical texts especially in *Mahabharata* which annals the continuity of great Indian tradition. The roots of India's nationhood lie deep in its history. The Sabhaparva (The Book of the Assembly Hall) gives special importance on the duties of a king and emphasized the importance of tireless and sincere endeavours for the welfare of the state. In such thoughts on welfare and security of a state, national feeling is hinted at. In spite of the fact that the then India was divided into many states, its people were mentally and culturally united with a common bond in the form of eternal rules of life and thus formed, to use Anderson's phrase, 'an imagined community'. This paper aims at finding the traditional roots of nationalism in Sabhaparva and proposes to investigate whether the concept of Ernest Gellner that nationalism creates nations is true in case of India or not.

Keywords: Civilization, tradition, nationalism, culture, imagined community.

'Nationalism' is very much an ambiguous term. Scholars present different opinions about the definition and origin of the term. Peter Alter argued that the roots of modern nationalism are to be found in late 18th century Western Europe and North America, whence it subsequently spread to the whole of Europe and eventually to all parts of the world (Alter 18). According to him the term first appeared in a work by German

philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder in 1774. In Germany, at the end of 18th century, it meant national aspiration, even national fervour. It was then adopted into French and designated an exaggerated devotion to one's own nation. In English, the term becomes associated with national individuality, national character and love for the fatherland. The negative connotations of the term were reinforced by its

association with Nazism during the World War II. Today nationalism is basically used as an ideology and as social/political movement. Prof. Hans Kohn defines the concept as “a state of mind, in which the supreme loyalty of the individual is felt to be due to the nation state” and adds that it is a living and active corporate will “inspiring the large majority of people and claiming to inspire all its members” (9). Nationalism asserts that “the nation-state is the ideal and the only legitimate form of political organization and that the nationality is the source of all cultural creative energy and economic well-being” (Kohn 9). According to Plamenatz, Nationality is not an inborn characteristic. The individual’s feeling to be belonged to a nation is the result of a continuous process of social learning and habit forming. Nationality in this sense need not be a political entity. It is primarily a cultural phenomenon, although it often takes political form (Plamenatz 25). Nationality is mainly a matter of psychological feeling. It is a belief on the part of its members that they belong together and have common heritage and common traditions. Thus, Liah Greenfeld uses nationalism as an umbrella term “under which are subsumed the related phenomena of national identity (or nationality) and consciousness, and collectivities based on them-nations; occasionally it is employed to refer to the articulate ideology on which national identity and consciousness rest, though not- unless specified-to the politically

activist, xenophobic variety of national patriotism, which it frequently designates” (3). The idea which lies at the core of nationalism is the idea of ‘nation’. Etymologically, the word comes from Latin ‘natio’ meaning ‘the action of being born’. The word was “used before 1800 in Europe to refer to the inhabitants of a country as well as to collective identities that could include shared history, law, language, political rights, religion & traditions, in a sense more akin to the modern conception” (Gat 214).

In case of India, its fundamental unity as a nation and its historic and cultural oneness has never been acknowledged by the Western scholars. It is true that the British Imperialism played a pivotal role in developing a spirit of unity among the multi-lingual, multi-ethnic Indians. The English, no doubt, gave the higher classes of India knowledge of English history and classical literature, whose study breathed into the minds of the educated Indians a love of liberty. Acquaintance with the spirit of European nationalism created a desire for Indian nationality (Saund 196). Nevertheless, attempts to develop the concept of Indian nation were made before the British conquest. The geographical and spiritual oneness in India is time and again emphasized in ancient Indian classical texts especially in *Mahabharata* which annals the continuity of great Indian tradition.

A feeling of “indianness” was very much present in the currency of the concepts of

Bharatvarsha and Hindustan. Jawaharlal Nehru wrote in *The Discovery of India*:

“Often, as I wandered from meeting to meeting, I spoke to my audiences of this India of ours, of Hindustan and of Bharata, the old Sanskrit name derived from the mythical founders of the race” (52).

The understanding and unhesitating acceptance of the identity of India as Bharatvarsha was further formalized in the solemn declaration of our Constitution: “India that is Bharat shall be a union of States.” This declaration puts a historic seal on the identity of our country and nationality (Chattopadhyay 2). At the time of independence, ‘Bharata’, ‘India’ and ‘Hindustan’ were equally worthy names to baptize the newly born nation. But the Constitution of Independent India discarded Hindustan and gave the nation a dual-identity. ‘Hindustan’ was used in Persia in the Third Century BC to refer to the land lying beyond the Indus River. The Persian Hindustan was commonly used during the Mughal rule (Ojha 1).

It needs to be remembered that these terms had different origins, one perceiving the country from what may be called a geographically outer perspective and conveying different meanings in different contexts, and the other term

Bharatvarsha, consistently used in early texts of different varieties, located within a completely different cosmographic structure. The colonial construct of India as a territorial governable unit, separable for administrative purposes from other spaces, insists on the idea of India or Bharatvarsha as an expression of national unity present in the distant past. Bharata is indeed an old name. In the *Purans* and other Sanskrit texts, it refers to the supraregional and sub continental territory where the Brahmanical system of society prevails. The Third chapter of *Vishnupuran* opens with the following verse:

“Uttaramyatsamudrasya Himadrescaivadaksinam
Varsam tad Bharatamnama Bharatayatrasantatih”
(*Vishnupuran*, II, III)

[The country that is situated on the north of the ocean and south of the Himalayn is called Bharata where reside the descendants of Bharata.]

The *Vishnupuran* also indicates how different communities of different *janapads* were located in Bharatvarsha:

“On the East of Bharata live the Kiratas and on the west Yavanas; in the centre live Brahmans, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras, engaged severally in sacrifice, arms, trade, and service” (*Vishnupuran* 120). *Mahabharata* records the glorious history of ancient India. In many of the events of *Mahabharata*, the national feeling is

conspicuously reflected. In the second upaparva of the Sabhaparva (The Book of the Assembly Hall) titled Lakapalasabhakhyana parva (The Halls of the World Guardians) Narada, the divine sage comes and instructs Yudhisthira by asking leading questions on policy. He enquired Yudhisthira:

“Do you properly examine with the six royal virtues the seven means, your strengths and weaknesses, the fourteen factors? Do you examine yourself and your enemies, greatest of conquerors, before making peace, and pursue the eight trades? Your six officers are not corrupted perchance and, though rich, not addicted to vice and fully loyal to you, bull of the Bharatas? They are not left unprobed by reason or messengers? Are your counsels always kept secret by yourself and your ministers? Do you pursue war and peace at their proper junctures, and follow the proper course with those who are neutral and in the middle?” (Buitenen 40).

Like chapter 7 of *Manusmriti*, this upaparva also stresses the duties of a king:

“When you have slept for the first two watches of the night, O lord of the people, do you rise in the last watch and reflect on Law and Profit? After rising on time, knowing your times, do you show yourself each morning to your people with proper adornment amidst your councillors, Pandava? Do properly attired guards in red

clothes attend on you with sword in hand for your safety, slayer of enemies? Do you examine the court cases fully and act like a Yama to those who must be punished and those who must be honored, whether you like them or not?” (Buitenen 43).

Thus the Sabhaparva gives special importance on the duties of a king and emphasized the importance of tireless and sincere endeavours for the welfare of the state. In such thoughts on welfare and security of a state, national feeling is hinted at. Before leaving, Narada expresses to Yudhisthira his father Pandu’s wish to perform the great Sacrifice of Consecration and advises to “rise watchfully to the protection of the society of the four classes, prosper, rejoice, and satisfy the brahmins with gifts” (Buitenen 43). Yudhisthira, like his forefathers, always engaged himself in righteous duties sanctioned by the Vedas. He, like a father, took care of the blind, mute, lame and helpless.

Yudhisthira’s aspiration to beget the covetable position of an emperor by performing the Rajasuya Sacrifice (The Royal Consecration) may be interpreted as an expression of national feeling as through establishing suzerainty over the entire country, there was an endeavour to establish a federal type of political unity. This was definitely instrumental in further strengthening the bond of cultural unity. On the very day of the Ujain brahmins and Kings

assemble in the court of Yudhisthira. Bhishma, Dhritarastra, Vidura, and the hundred Kaurava brothers headed by Duryodhana, came to attend the ceremony. Suvala, the king of Gandhara, Mahavala, Sakuni, Karna, Dronacharya, Kripachariya, Aswatthama, the king of Sindhu, the king of Simhala- in other words almost all the kings of the then India assembled in the ceremony of the Sacrifice. It must be noted here that though the erstwhile India was divided into numerous states, nevertheless, the people of India were mentally and culturally united with a common bond in the form of eternal rules of life and thus formed, to use Anderson's phrase, "an imagined community".

Benedict Anderson defined nation as "an imagined political community- and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It 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). During the Mahabharata days, though the people of India were living in different states from the administrative point of view, human and cultural values made them united socially, economically, religiously, philosophically and culturally. The common bond that united the people of different states of India is the concept of 'Dharma' which is not in essence a defined religion, but an openness of

spiritual experience. Paramahansa Yogananda in his translation of the *Bhagavad Gita* provides a beautiful definition of the term 'Dharma' in ancient Indian context:

"Dharma is often translated as 'religion' or 'duty'. It is a comprehensive term for the natural laws governing the universe and man, inherent in which are prescribed duties applicable to given circumstances. Broadly speaking, man's dharma is to adhere to that natural righteousness that will save him from suffering and lead him to salvation" (Yogananda 158).

This ancient Indian concept of Dharma presents a unified world view and does not allow individuals or groups to have feelings of enmity and hatred against any other individual or group. The Indian concept of nationalism is mostly development or welfare-oriented. The Battle of Kurukshetra fought between the Kauravas and the Pandavas is called a dharma- yuddha because it was for the establishment of universal moral principles and administrative ethics. In Yudhisthira's style of running the administration and protection of the state we find the reflection of national thought.

John Plamenatz in "Two Types of Nationalism" argues that Nationalism is "the desire to preserve or enhance a people's national or cultural identity when that identity is threatened, or the desire to transform or even create it where it is felt to be

inadequate or lacking” (23). During the Mahabharata days many kings like Duryodhana, Jarasandha, Sisupala are found to have made efforts for establishing despotic rule ignoring the interest of the people. But Krishna with the intention of establishing a realm of justice on the basis of human values proved them false and established the ‘dharma- rajya’ under the leadership of righteous king Yudhisthira. Nationalism is different from Patriotism in the sense that Patriotism is the devotion to the community one belongs to and has existed for as long as there have been communities. National consciousness is only a lively sense of, and perhaps also a pride in, what distinguishes one’s own from other peoples. Nationalism, as distinct from mere national consciousness, arises when peoples are aware, not only of cultural diversity, but of cultural change and share some idea of progress which moves them to compare their own achievements and capacities with those of others (Plamenatz 24). Ernest Gellner considers Nationalism as “primarily a political principle” (1) and argued that it is nationalism which engenders nations not the other way round. Can Gellner’s concept of Nationalism creating nations be true in case of ancient India, as we find that a sentiment of cultural unity was very much prevalent among the people in those days, though many scholars, including Hans Kohn, suggest that nationalism in the West is essentially different from that in the East?

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