

Indian Nationalism: A Layman's View

R.P. SHARMA

“India a Nation! What an apotheosis!
—E.M. Forster (1924: 317)

Nationalism is a paradox. It is attachment to the native soil. It is devotion to the state. It binds people to a family, a clan, a village or a city. It relates people to the whole state, whatever may be the size or the type of the state. It is parochial and sectarian. It is all-inclusive, all-accepting and secular. It is a state of mind which displays supreme loyalty to the nation. It is an ideology which synthesizes historicity with territoriality; it is historicity territorialized and territoriality historicized. It is founded on primordial elements like race, language, cultural tradition, religion and territory. It is based only on a territorially anchored political union. It separates people from the state. It draws a line of demarcation between the constituents of the command structure of the state and the targets of the command structure of the state. It ties people to the state as an inviolable fraternity. It unites people into an integrated and integrative population. It divides people into the proletariat and the bourgeois, the subordinate and the dominant, the classless and the classy. It demands autonomy and separation. It insists on integration and sovereignty. Its alchemy transforms insurrection into patriotism. It looks upon everyone as a brother or sister. It treats a compatriot as an alien. It is a solution as well as a riddle and it is the riddle that invites the observer to look into its form and function with honesty, openness and caution.

Etymologically derived from the Latin ‘nasci’ (to be born), a nation is ideally a community of ‘natives’, “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 organised as a separate political state and occupying a definite territory" (OED 1933: 30-32 & 1976: 1135-1139). When a nation becomes a state, there comes into being a nation-state. But as there is no one-to-one correspondence between a nation and a culture, a nation and a language, or a nation and a system of faith, the nation-state as a matter of fact remains an ideal. Besides, as nations and states generally converge on certain commonalities, there are nations divided into states and states divided into nations. In the ultimate analysis, a nation, like a state, is found to be a construction forged out of disparate classes and communities and as such they turn out to be as vulnerable as states in terms of their structural viability. A nation is ordinarily felt to be a more attractive construction than a state simply because a nation may be a metaphor or a fantasy whereas a state has to be a reality and a concreteness. A nation may be a dream whereas a state has to be an actual fact of daily experience. A nation may be, a state is. A nation may become a state but a state must have a nation, historical or improvised. A state without a nation would be a self-denying decree whereas a nation hoping to become a state is a lucrative scheme. The scheme often tends to be subversive or secessionist for the obvious reason that now the accepted model of territorial organization is the state and nationalism is required to transcend nativism and encompass statehood (cf. Johnston 1988).

In today's world, nationalism has to situate itself in relation to the state which occupies a bounded territory and enjoys political sovereignty. Nationalistic claims for autonomy, self-determination and territorial reorganization (often known as sub-mini or neo-nationalisms) have to contend with a power structure vested in the state which they seek to challenge and undermine. The powerful state mobilizes its power structure to neutralize or suppress such separatist/autonomist nationalisms by using force as well as by highlighting and exaggerating the inherent heterogeneity of the latter's constituents. The command structure of the state repeatedly refutes the separatist/autonomist nationalisms' claims for territorial, social and political unity by pointing out to them that such unity never existed or had long ceased to exist (cf. *ibid*).

Even though it is increasingly felt nowadays that nationhood

should geographically coincide with statehood so that every state becomes a nation-state, nationhood and statehood could be viewed as distinct entities. Statehood is a political entity since it involves a mere territorial polity but nationhood is a politico-cultural entity since it refers to a territorial community bound together by a shared history and ideology as well as by a shared polity or a common desire to share a polity yet to be contextualised. Nationalism may therefore be considered a complex or configuration of historicity, territoriality and ideology.

Nationalism is Janus-faced with respect to both time and space (cf. Anderson 1988). It looks backward and forward at a time. It juxtaposes an inadequate and impotent recent past and immediate present against a remote, glorious and heroic past, real or imagined, with a view to gaining sufficient support for a supposed wonderful future. Such sharp temporal juxtapositions are crucial to a strategy which seeks to unite otherwise disparate constituents. Projections of a plentiful future are intended to offer something to everyone. The temporal strategy guarantees not only freedom from oppression; it also offers a huge bonus in the form of a future overflowing with milk and honey so that everyone gets a fair share of the manna.

As regards space, nationalism is both "internally unifying and externally divisive" (ibid). It simultaneously looks inward and outward. Looking inward, it tries to unify the heterogeneous segments of the population within its territory. Looking outward, it tends to divide one nation and territory from another. It defines people as belonging or not belonging to a territory and tradition rather to an economic, linguistic, religious or ethnic division in order to play down internal dissensions and conflicts. Political objectives are couched in nationalistic rather than in sectarian terms and most sources of internal divisions are externalized so that the necessary degree of cohesiveness is achieved.

A territorial form of ideology, nationalism is so constructed as to represent the interests of the entire population, even though it serves the interest of a particular group. The 'national interest' is in fact the interest of the core group. Nationalism cannot be neutral to class or group interests. The nationalist ideology is characterized by an easily definable group or class content, with some groups or classes standing to gain more than others. A national population

may be divided into dominant and subordinate groups, core and elective groups or into groups which lead and control and groups which are led and controlled. Such controlling and controlled groups may be labelled as the elite and the populace, the former being privileged over the latter in all respects except in respect of number. Nationalism is the construct, preserve, privilege, monopoly or luxury of the elite even though it is so severely limited in number; the populace, because of its overwhelming number and unlimited manpower, is drawn into and made to suffer for nationalist causes and movements, despite the fact that it is naturally innocent of and traditionally indifferent to the politicization of region, religion, language or ethnicity. In times of crisis, while the elite goes to classy prisons, the populace faces batons or bullets or goes to the gallows. The change of regime does not matter much to the populace. It suffers humiliation, harassment and exploitation under alien and oppressive regimes. It continues to suffer humiliation, harassment and exploitation under indigenous, humanitarian and nationalistic regimes with the only difference that now these disabilities are more subtle and better phrased. The change of regime means a transfer of power to the elite. As soon as the transfer of power is effected, the elite has all the resources and powers of the new state at its disposal. It is found to be expedient in the interest of the reigning elite to invoke the 'national interest' in order to sustain support from the overwhelmingly numerous populace. It is unfortunate that it should be so but it is so.

Enigmatic, amorphous and indeterminate though it is, nationalism is a modern phenomenon, coinciding with the rise of capitalism. Attachment to the native soil, to the tradition of the family and the clan and to established territorial authorities have been with man throughout history but it was not until the last quarter of the 18th century that nationalism came to be recognized as an embodiment of the abstract consciousness of a nation as a unified or unifiable community (cf. *Ency Brit* 1945: 150-51 + 1980: 851-53, Singhal 1967: 3, Guha 1987: 28 & Bairathi 1987: 2). It is far more systematic, pervasive and complex than patriotism. As an articulate fusion of people's feeling and thought for a territory defined in terms of a viable politico-cultural entity, nationalism became one of the most important turning points in recent times. The American and the

French revolutions are generally regarded as its most powerful manifestations. Gradually, it penetrated other parts of the Western world so much so that the 19th century acquired the label of the 'age of nationalism'. By the turn of the century, it spread to Asia and Africa so that the 20th century witnessed in them the theatres of political change which increased and expanded from year to year, if not from month to month or from day to day.

Despite its inherent flaws and inadequacies, nationalism deserves to be seen as the most vital determinant of political change in recent history. Never before did so many and such far reaching changes take place on so vast a scale as they have done during the last two centuries. All such changes and metamorphoses have been motivated and conditioned by nationalism. Almost all parts of the world, whether developed or developing, capitalist or socialist, democratic or totalitarian, radical or traditional, or white or black have been influenced by nationalism. It is a process or a doctrine which provides a rationale for classifying peoples along defined or definable boundaries as well as for identifying them with politico-cultural systems. It may mean different things to different nationalities. It may mean love of nativeness, desire for political independence, belief in inherent superiority to others, plans for economic betterment, protection of cultural identity or apotheosization of territorial boundaries. It is not yet a neatly defined or definable concept, vision, feeling, process or community. It is still a vague, indeterminate and undecidable combination of various beliefs, values and interests contextualized in a given historical milieu in which truth and fiction, hope and hostility, or exploitation and welfare are inextricably mixed. In spite of all such inadequacies, nationalism still remains the most controversial, and hence fascinating, constituent of contemporary political thought.

II

As a conscious, organized and articulate movement, the development of Indian nationalism coincided with the coming into being of the Indian National Congress in 1885. The British conquest of India gave Indians a political sense of unity and that sense of unity shaped a political process in the form of a liberal movement symbolized by the Congress which became the custodian of the destiny of Indians.

The Congress decided to shape the social, cultural, economic and political aspirations of the people according to the demands and values of the bourgeoisie (cf. Desai 1973: 55, Chandra 1979: 137, Habib 1987 & Sarkar 1990: 16). These outmoded demands and values could not represent the interests of the common people of India. The Congress remained a bourgeois organization from Ranade and Gokhale to the framers of the Constitution. The Congress had been founded with the blessings of the British. Independence had been achieved through a negotiated transfer of power from the British. The partition of India had been decreed by the British. India had joined the British Commonwealth. The Constitution of India had been framed on the model of the British bourgeois parliamentary form of government. The leaders of free India could not break away from their multi-dimensional bourgeois history and they formed and remained a bourgeois government. There had been slogans of socialism in pre-independent India. The Constitution created a government which established an economy that was to be a combination of capitalism and socialism. There were excursions into some form of socialism for some time but once again the Union government has returned to its original bourgeois roots and we have an economy today which has a clear tilt towards free market economy.

A logical consequence of the bourgeois formation of the Congress came to be manifested in its systematic marginalization of the masses. As the sole organ of the wishes and aspirations of Indians, the Indian National Congress has traditionally kept the masses away from its power structure. It is significant to note that between 1885 and 1918 the Indian National Congress passed only four resolutions concerning the peasantry and none regarding workers, even though they constituted ninety percent of the country's population (Sarkar 1990: 4). When Gandhi came to be the leader of the Congress in 1920, things seemed to change but they did not. The masses were sometimes involved in activities organized by the Congress. They took part in the agitations and rallies but they were never allowed to become an independent political force. Their participation in decision-making never became a question for the Congress. Even when they took part in the political activity, their activity was "rigidly controlled from the top" (Chandra 1979: 128).

The participation of the masses in the power structure of our democracy is yet to be recognized as an important ingredient of nationalism. Pavement dwellers, daily wage earners, homeless workers, landless labourers and toiling peasants are yet to become the vital determinant of nationalistic politics in India.

Given its ideology, constraints and orientations, the Congress naturally emerged as the mouthpiece of a nationalism that was and is riddled with confusions, ambiguities and contradictions. A century of Congress history has given us a form of nationalism which baffles logical reasoning. The Congress stands for nationalism, democracy and secularism. It fights for the whole of India and accepts partition on communal grounds. It vows to throw the British out of India and bargains with the British for independence. It achieves independence from the British and joins the British Commonwealth. It swears in the name of non-violence and loses a million innocent lives on the eve of independence. It fights for the safety, security and well-being of Indians as a whole and then becomes a party to a crisis which renders millions of Indian refugees. It chooses to stay neutral to the tug of war between the two power blocs and then sometimes tilts in favour of the one, sometimes in favour of the other, as a matter of chronic symptom. It evolves a system of education that keeps dithering from decade to decade. It swears in the name of the poor and the weak but never succeeds in reducing violence against them. It formulates an electoral system in which elections are so openly rigged. It loves secularism but fails to separate religion from politics; the government media organizes or describes religious functions, government ministers take part in religious ceremonies and electoral support is manipulated in the name of religion. The Congress claim for democracy is a riddle: Gandhi's 'inner voice' and Indira Gandhi's 'consensus' discourage genuine debates. Organizational elections are not held. Party chiefs and chiefs of government in the provinces are nominated from the top. The Congress government maintains its democratic form with draconian laws like the National Security Act, the Defence of India Rules, the Maintenance of Internal Security and the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act. Indian nationalism is a form of nationalism in which the power to define what is "national" and "anti-national" vests in those who hold political power. Even after

half a century of independence, our nationalism maintains a clear separation between the elite and the populace. It may therefore be useful to examine Indian nationalism in terms of variables like religion, language, race and region.

Most educated Indians squarely blame the British for having encouraged Muslim separatism leading to the partition of India in August 1947. Few educated Indians seriously like to take stock of the real causes of partition which was clearly based on communalism. But did communalism become divisive all of a sudden? Was it only Muslim communalism that caused partition? Were Muslims and Hindus ever genuinely united? Are Muslims and Hindus monolithic communities? Were all Muslims and Hindus involved in partition? Was it one section of the Muslims or of the Hindus or of the two put together that brought about partition? Was partition the result of a mutual and long-standing distrust between certain sections of the two communities? Whom did partition help and whom did it harm? Question like these stare us in the face if we try to understand the psychology of partition politics and we may have to look back in history to answer questions like these.

Viewed as a story of invasions and conquests, the history of India may easily be divided into three broad parts: the Aryan invasion and conquest, the Perso-Arabic invasion and conquest and the British invasion and conquest of India. The first brought Hinduism and Sanskrit, the second brought Islam and Persian and Arabic, while the third brought Christianity and English, to the conquered territory. Apart from their chronology, what should deserve our attention here is the sequentiality between the first and the second and then between the second and the third in order to place the second in relation to the first and the third. The British invasion and conquest of India eliminated Muslim suzerainty in India once and for all and placed Muslims with Hindus at the same level. The consequence of political levelling outplaced Muslims in an awkward position vis-a-vis Hindus, not only because the former had lost power but also because hence forth they were obliged to contend with the overwhelming majority of the latter in any future arrangements to share power and resources of the state. The Muslim elite naturally found it impossible to reconcile itself to the loss of power and privilege which it had enjoyed throughout its history in

India as well as to the necessity of vying with its former subjects in order to get its fair share in the power and resources of the state. What further aggravated their sense of embarrassment and discomfiture was a growing sense of resurgence among the Hindus with regard to religion, history and language. Hindu revivalism started in all these dimensions. Hindu organizations began to be formed in quick succession and many educated Hindus began to claim in public that India was a Hindu country and as such the Hindu Raj had to be restored. A Hindu revivalist put it like this in 1872: "I see in my mind the noble and puissant Hindu nation rousing herself after sleep and rushing headlong towards progress with divine prowess. I see this rejuvenated nation again illuminating the world by her knowledge, spiritual and cultural, and the glory of the Hindu nation again spreading over the whole world" (Raj Narain Bose cited in Sarhadi 1974: 8). Swami Dayanand founded the Arya Samaj in Bombay in 1875. Then came up the Ram Krishna Mission, the Hindu Mahasabha, the Rashtriya Swayam Sewak Sangh and others. Even the Congress used terms like Swarajya and Rama Rajya which, many thought, smacked of the Hindi-Hindu bias getting an upper hand in nationalist politics. Some Congress leaders were openly linked with Hindu revivalist organizations. Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya, for example, freely sailed between the Hindu Mahasabha and the Congress. He represented Hindu communalism at the Second Round Table Conference in 1931 and returned to India to become the President-elect of the annual Congress session in 1932 (Chandra 1979: 265). A number of Congress leaders often spoke of India having suffered under the Muslim rule. Almost all Congress leaders joined in the glorification of Shivaji, Rana Pratap and Guru Govind Singh (*ibid.*, p. 267). The Congress as a whole advocated the adoption of Hindi in the Devanagari script as the official language of India (*cf.* Sarhadi 1974: 13). Developments and outbursts like these created doubts in the minds of the Muslim elite which could no longer chart out a safe future for itself in a predominantly Hindu polity.

Communalism was created by the elite in the two communities for their own sake and in their own interest. The generality of Hindus and Muslims had always lived together in harmony as Indians (*cf.* Hasan 1979: 308). But the Muslim elite, like the Hindu elite, chose to create divisions between Muslims and Hindus to

secure a safe niche for itself in the future power structure in the sub-continent. Sir Sayed Ahmad Khan viewed the formation of the Indian National Congress with suspicion. He felt that if the democratic representative government advocated by the Congress was accepted, Muslims would be dominated by the majority Hindus. It was at this stage that the Aligarh Institute Gazette started its campaign against the representative ideology and communal organizations like the Central Mohammedan Association of Bengal, the Anjuman Islamia of Madras and the Mohammedan Central Association of Punjab came into being. The All India Muslim League was formed in 1906 to represent Indian Muslims in general (Sarhadi 1974: 19-23). The parting of ways between Gandhi and Jinnah at the Nagpur session in 1920 pushed the latter, once known as the ambassador of Hindu-Muslim unity, into Muslim communalism (ibid, pp. 27-28). A number of prominent Muslim leaders joined communal politics in the following years with the result that by the time of the First Round Table Conference Muslims and Hindus were divided into two irreconcilable camps. In February 1940 Jinnah announced: "There are in India two nations who must share the governance of their common motherland" (cited ibid, p. 32). With this announcement Indian nationalism formally split into Muslim nationalism and Hindu nationalism. The subsequent partition of India was a logical consequence of this split.

The partition of India need not be taken as the result of the consensus of Hindus and Muslims in general. Neither the Congress nor the League ever thought of taking the partition issue to the respective masses. Partition was imposed upon them from the top. It should be seen as the result of the elitist consensus represented by the Congress and the League to share power in the post-independence power equation. Maulana Azad had the requisite insight to tell a Muslim gathering in Delhi on 23 October 1947: "History alone will decide whether we have acted wisely and correctly in accepting partition" (cited in 1995). That our leaders did not act wisely and correctly is evident from the Kashmir ulcer alone. The Indian community was battered, bruised and fragmented for no convincing reason. Millions were caught up "in the cross-fire of religious hatred and were indeed hapless victims of a triangular gameplan worked by the British, the Congress and the

League" (ibid). In the aftermath of partition, a Muslim peasant told a civil servant: "We have been chopped in pieces like butcher's meat" (ibid). To understand what this peasant meant we have only to recall that of the 80 million Muslims in undivided India, 35 millions stayed back in truncated India, 39 millions were already in the territory known as Pakistan in the post-partition parlance, while only 6 million Muslims migrated to the two Pakistans (Singhal 1967: 21 & 28). The two-in-one nation could not survive long. When Bangladesh came into existence, the migrant part of the population had to once again migrate to Pakistan which did not want to take them while Bangladesh was bent on pushing them out. The lucky ones of these migrants could somehow inch their way into the target country while a large number of them are still stranded in a country which does not want them. Anyone who is familiar with the actual position of the Bihari Muslims in Bangladesh and of the Muhajirs in Pakistan may appreciate the extent of the fall-out the partition of India had on its once-native population. Which band of nationalists, Muslim or Hindu, is interested in these hapless and hopeless, destitute and desperate, and loveless and landless millions?

III

The language question has long been an enigmatic aspect of Indian nationalism. One does not understand why our democratic government has never thought it fit to put the languages question to the people of India who speak hundreds of language in their daily transactions. Every Indian knows that we are the most multi-lingual country in the world: we speak as many as 1652 languages (cf. Shrama 1990). We all know that language is a very powerful instrument of integration. We also know that it can at times become a menacingly divisive force; the break-up of Pakistan is a recent example. It is astonishing why our democratic government does not understand that linguistic chauvinism may turn explosive and threaten the very fabric of our socio-political formation.

The Indian National Congress under Gandhi's leadership defined its linguistic principle which has not achieved any concrete results in more than three quarters of a century. The twin-components of its linguistic principle relate to (i) the creation of unilingual states within the Union of India and (ii) the choice of the

official language of the Union of India. One of the immediate results of Gandhi's leadership of the Congress manifested itself in the form of a principled preference for Hindi. "The Gandhian constitution", writes a commentator, "created Provincial Congress Committees based on the local language and number of Congress delegates and AICC members soon became proportional to linguistic populations. Political power in the Congress moved sharply and clearly to the Hindi-speaking areas as indicated from the list of Congress Presidents and Congress Working Committee members drawn therefrom" (cited in Sarkar 1990: 8). This preference for Hindi ultimately got Hindi adopted by the Constituent Assembly as the Official Language of the Union of India. The Congress also committed itself to the principle of having the boundaries of states redrawn on linguistic lines. It went in for the creation of as many unilingual states as possible. It went on reaffirming its stand on linguistic states from time to time till it was faced with the monster of partition in the forties. The election manifesto of the Congress for the first time in 1945-46 showed its reservation on the principle of linguistic states. Only in the face of imminent partition the Congress began to realize that its linguistic principle for reorganization of states would create more problems than it could solve. After independence, the Congress attitude to the linguistic problem showed a perceptible change. Addressing the Constituent Assembly on 27 November 1947, Jawaharlal Nehru said that the linguistic principle had to be subordinated to the "security and stability of India" (cited in Singhal 1967: 35).

But as the Congress had consistently advocated the reorganization of provinces on linguistic basis, it found it very difficult to make a volte face on this crucial issue when it had the power to redeem its pledge. The Congress government therefore appointed a Linguistic Provinces Commission headed by a retired High Court Judge in 1948. The Commission examined the problem and came to the inevitable conclusion that the creation of unilingual states would not be a feasible proposition in view of the fact that every state would still contain linguistic minorities. It was found undesirable even from the point of view of national unity and integrity which was already under stress. The Congress then formed a high-power committee consisting of Nehru, Patel and Patabhi.

This high-power committee studied the Commission's report and came to the same conclusion. Since the Congress had promised to create a Telgu-speaking state to be known as Andhra Pradesh, it found itself in a very embarrassing position when it wanted to shelve the proposal. There were loud protests and it had to adopt the proposal so that the state of Andhra Pradesh was created on 19 December 1952, even though the new state was not fully unilingual. Now, the creation of Andhra Pradesh led to a spate of regional linguistic demands and agitations for the creation of more and more linguistic states, thereby giving rise to linguistic nationalism which came as a sequel to communal nationalism. It was shocking that in less than half a century of its active political career, the Congress, which had always professed its principled belief in secularism and patriotic nationalism, created, out of its own ranks, the communal and the linguistic forms of divisive nationalism.

A States Reorganization Commission was appointed in 1953 to once again look into the problem of redrawing the state boundaries. The Commission accommodated the linguistic principle to some extent but it could not decide upon the division of the states of Bombay and Punjab. The Commission also pointed out the impracticability of the 'one language one state' theory as well as the possible repercussions of this theory on national solidarity. The Commission's verdict on bilingual Bombay and Punjab met with virulent criticism. The ruling party could not hold on to its position for long and both states were divided in a few years.

A logical corollary of linguistic nationalism manifested itself in the unavoidable choice of the official language of the Union of India. Patriotic fervour would not allow patriotic Congressmen to have an exoglossic and imperial language as the official language of free India. It was felt that Hindi should become the official language of the Union, not only because the Congress had consistently used it for that purpose but also because it was in consonance with its patriotic nationalism. But its own rank and file was not undivided on this issue. During the two or three decades preceding the advent of independence, Congressmen had branched off into different forms of linguistic nationalism. Everyone loved his own language. The choice of the official language came to the Constituent Assembly as one of its most contentious issues. After a long and acrimonious

debate, the choice between Hindi and English was put to vote and the figure on each side was 78. It took quite a huge amount of persuasion and pleading for one member on the English side to abstain so that Hindi won by a one-vote majority. But English was to continue as the Associate Official Language of the Union till 15 January 1965.

Not knowing what to do after 15 January 1965, the Congress government appointed an Official Language Commission in the mid-fifties. The first report of the Commission appeared in early 1956. It was a majority report which contained a note of dissent in the Appendix signed by several members. The report wanted the government of India to take steps to speed up the replacement of English by Hindi while the note of dissent made it clear that the report did not show any understanding of the sentiments and logic of the non-Hindi speaking people. The note of dissent warned against any clandestine attempt by the government to impose Hindi on non-Hindi speaking people. The All India Language Conference held on 8 March 1958 vigorously supported the content of the note of dissent. Speakers like Rajagopalachari, Frank Anthony and Master Tara Singh made it abundantly clear that the imposition of Hindi could be disastrous for the unity and integrity of India. The Conference adopted a resolution which recommended the continuance of English as the associate language of the Union without any time limit (cf. Sarhadi 1974: 84). It was in deference to the sentiments of speakers of languages other than Hindi that the Indian parliament passed the Official Language Act 1963 and further amended it in 1967 to provide for the continuance of English as the Associate Official Language of the Union of India without any time limit. Thus a policy of bilingualism at the national level was formalized by the Congress government. The extant truce between Hindi and English in respect of the official language of the Union of India and the official indifference to the creation of new unilingual states are sad reflections on the inherent contradiction in the form of nationalism that the Indian National Congress had evolved over the century.

IV

Votaries of communalism or linguism seem to realize that nationalism is divisible in terms of communalism, linguism, racialism (or racism) and regionalism but what they do not seem to realize is that each of these 'isms' is divisible in terms of the other three so that by the time all the permutations are worked out the minimal unit is reduced to the individual. The individual cannot be further divided because the individual has a body and the vivisection of the body is a punishable offence under the law, no matter what the aim of vivisection may be. Votaries of isms have therefore to be told clearly that as no ism is sacrosanct, stable, indivisible or final unless reduced to the individual unit, it may be expedient for them to content themselves with nationalism itself. If they do not understand this simple arithmetic of self-defeating and self-reducing "ismic" divisions, they should be prepared to face the consequences of viciously endless divisions and splits.

History provides evidence that Hindu nationalists have not been aware of the vicious circle they landed themselves in when they indulged in their kind of racialism. At the beginning of Hindu history itself a binary division between 'self' and 'other', 'we' and 'they' or between 'Aryan' and 'non-Aryan' was made. The non-Aryan has been given various names e.g. Dasa, Dasyu, Shudra, Antyaja, Harijan, Bahujan, Dalit and Anusuchit. The non-Aryan has been technically known as Hindu but has never been accepted by the Aryan as his equal or as part of the we group. The non-Aryan has always been identified as part of a separate or separable racial community. As the non-Aryan is the other, he is inferior and hateful. An invocation in the Rig-Veda makes it so explicit: "We are surrounded on all sides by the Dasyu tribe . . . their rites are different: they are not men! O destroyer of foes! Kill them. Destroy the Dasa (Dasyu) race" (cf. Sharma 1995: 16).

The Vedic canon believes in the divine origin of the Aryan and non-Aryan races. An explicit account of such divine origin is found in the Yajur-Veda: "Prajapati, desirous of offspring (performed the Agnishtoma sacrifice) and created . . . god Agni (and) Brahmana among men and goats among brutes from his mouth. As they were created from the mouth, therefore they were superior to all others.

He created god Indra. . . (and) Rajanya among men and sheep among brutes from his chest and arms. Therefore they are strong because they have been created from strength (strong arms).

He created Vishvadevas among the gods. . . (and) Vaishya among men and cows among brutes from the belly. As they have been created from the storehouse of the food (belly), so they are the food (or intended to be enjoyed by others). Therefore they are more numerous than others (among men) because many gods were created.

He created Shudra among men and horse among brutes from his feet. Therefore the Shudra and the horse are dependent on others. As no god was created from his feet, so the Shudra is not competent to perform sacrifice. As the Shudra and the horse were created from the feet, so they live by exerting their feet" (cited *ibid*, p. 46).

In Vedic vocabulary 'Dasa' is 'slave', 'Dasyu' is 'barbarian' and 'Shudra' is the 'depressed class' (from shu = sorrow or depression and dra = overcome i.e. the 'one overcome by sorrow', the 'depressed one').

'Depressed class', 'scheduled caste', 'Bahishkrit samaj', 'Antyaja' and 'Dalit Samaj' are used by Dalits themselves, 'Harijan' is believed to be a Gandhian coinage while 'Bahujan samaj' forms part to the Kanshi Ram-Mayavati Political vocabulary. If a linguistic choice is made, 'Depressed Classes' or 'Dalit Samaj' or 'Dalits' seems to be the most appropriate term in the context of traditional Hindu sociology.

Most educated Indians believe that Dalits came into the political limelight because of the Gandhian Congress. The view taken in this paper is that the Dalit identity came into political existence for the first time in this century not because of the Congress but in spite of the Congress and due to the relentless tenacity of the Dalits themselves as organized and led by Babasahab Bhimrao Ambedkar. The following brief account should explain this point of view.

The Indian National Congress did not consider the problems of the depressed classes till 1917 on the ground that it was a political party and not a social organization. Dadabhai Naroji had said in his presidential address in 1885 that the Congress could not discuss social reforms because it was a political party. In 1895 Surendranath Banerji took the same stand in his presidential address saying "ours is a political and not a social movement; and it cannot be a matter

of complaint against us that we are not a social organization" (cited in Sarhadi 1974: 40).

The first conference of the depressed classes held in Bombay in 1917 under the presidentship of Sir Narain Ganesh Chandavakar passed a resolution to request the Congress to take a stand against the continuing discrimination against them. In response to this request the Congress in its Calcutta session in 1917 urged the people of the higher castes to stop the oppression of the depressed classes. But in spite of this resolution, the Congress allocated only Rs 28,000 (Rupees Twenty Eight Thousand) out of a total collection of one crore and thirty lakhs in the Tilak Fund for the uplift of the depressed classes in 1920. The depressed classes formed an organization under the caption 'Bahishkrit Hitkarini Sabha' on 20 July 1924. Ramaswami Naiker, a prominent non-Brahmana leader of the then Travancore State, launched a movement for allowing the depressed classes to use certain public roads. It was in March 1927 that Dr. Ambedkar led a huge procession of the depressed classes to the Chowdar tank in Maharashtra and used its water. The untouchables were attacked by an upper caste Hindu crowd. But Dr. Ambedkar suddenly became the tallest leader of the depressed classes throughout India. He started a full-fledged movement for the uplift of the untouchables in different dimensions. His followers organized a conference at Mahad in Maharashtra and made a bonfire of the Manu Smriti to convey their rebellion against the caste Hindu traditional discrimination against them. At a conference at Jalgaon in May 1929 they issued a warning to the caste Hindus that they would seek mass conversions if they continued to be humiliated and harassed by the latter.

When the Simon commission came to India, Dr. Ambedkar submitted a memorandum on behalf of the Bahishkrit Hitkarini Sabha demanding reservation of seats to the Bombay Legislative Council in proportion to the population of the depressed classes. He attended the First Round Table Conference as the sole representative of depressed classes and pleaded for adequate representation in legislatures and services. He represented the depressed classes and Gandhi represented the Congress at the Second Round Table Conference. Gandhi opposed the separate representation of the depressed classes. But Ambedkar succeeded in securing what is

known as the 'Minorities Pact' which provided for separate representation for the depressed classes as well as for Muslims, Christians, Europeans and Anglo-Indians. The recognition given to the depressed classes as a political entity separate from Hindus outraged Gandhi and he opposed this provision with all his might. The Minority Sub-Committee was adjourned several times but no agreement could be arrived at. Ultimately Gandhi entrusted the British Prime Minister to give an award on the issue.

The award, known as the 'Communal Award', came. It provided for separate electorates for the depressed classes. Gandhi undertook a fast unto death against this award. A conference of all sections of Hindus was organized at Poona. A truce was achieved which provided for joint electorates with seats reserved for the depressed classes. According to the Poona Pact (1932) the depressed classes remained part of the Hindu community, even though now they had increased weightage. Gandhi's fast did create a better atmosphere for the untouchables. Many temples and public wells and tanks were opened to them. But it is significant to note in this connection that before the Poona Pact Gandhi himself had opposed the entry of Harijans into Hindu temples saying: "How is it possible that the Antyajas (untouchables) should have the right to enter all the existing temples? As long as the law of castes and ashrams has a chief place in Hindu religion, to say that every Hindu can enter every temple is a thing that is not possible today" (cited in Sarhadi 1974: 46). It was reminiscent of what Tilak had done in 1918. The Maharaja of Baroda presided at a conference of the untouchables in 1918. It was attended, among others, by such prominent men as Vithalbhai Patel, M.R. Jayakar, B.C. Paul and B.G. Tilak. At the end of the conference a touching anti-untouchability manifesto was drafted and signed by the leaders, pledging that they would not henceforth practise untouchability in their day-to-day life. Tilak refused to sign it (cf. *ibid*, p. 39). After the Poona Pact Gandhi became the most eloquent advocate of the Harijans. A little later, an Untouchability Abolition Bill was moved in the Central Legislative Assembly by C.S. Ranga Iyer. But before it could be discussed, Iyer withdrew the bill with the explanation that he was obliged to withdraw the bill because the lieutenants of Gandhi, including C. Rajagopalachari refused to support it. Ambedkar had this to say: "Mr. Gandhi begins as an

opponent of temple entry. When untouchables put forth the demands for political rights, he changes his position and becomes a supporter of temple entry. When the Hindus threaten to defeat the Congress in the election, if it pursues the matter to a conclusion, Mr. Gandhi in order to preserve the political power in the hands of the Congress, gives up temple entry. Is this sincerity? Does this show conviction?" (cited *ibid*, p. 47).

Ambedkar made a personal announcement at the Yeola Conference of the untouchables in 1935: "I will not die a Hindu". At the Mahar Conference in Bombay on 30 May 1936, he charged Gandhi with the lack of courage and conviction to take up the cudgels on behalf of the depressed classes and that is why he lost faith in the honesty of Hindu social reformers. Commenting on the benefits of proselytization, he told a questioner: "Just as Swaraj is necessary for India, so also the change of religion is necessary for the untouchables" (*ibid*, p. 48). He advised his followers to refrain from worshipping Hindu deities and visiting Hindu pilgrimages. He became a member of the Viceroy's Executive Council in 1941. An All-India Depressed Classes Conference was held at Nagpur in July 1942 and the All-India Scheduled Caste Federation was constituted. At a Conference of the Scheduled Caste Federation in Bombay in May 1945 he declared that the majority Hindu rule was untenable in theory and unjustifiable in practice and that the minorities, including the 60 million depressed people, had to have sufficient safeguards against caste Hindu tyranny. The Viceroy's Executive Council was dissolved on 3rd June 1946 and a care-taker government came into existence. The Congress did not take Ambedkar into the cabinet. It took instead its own nominee, Jagjivan Ram, into the cabinet on 26 August 1946. The Muslim League had boycotted the sessions of the Constituent Assembly of which Ambedkar was a member. Nehru moved a resolution that India's objective was the establishment of an independent sovereign republic. M.R. Jayakar moved an amendment to postpone the discussion till the League and the representatives of the Native States had joined the Assembly. In spite of having been isolated from the care-taker cabinet, Ambedkar supported the Congress view in maintaining the unity and integrity of India. He held the view that partition would ultimately harm Indian Muslims. As a result, a

rapprochement was forged between the Congress and the Scheduled Caste Federation. Ambedkar was invited to join the Congress government. A little later, he was made the Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Constituent Assembly. The Indian National Congress and the Scheduled Caste Federation worked together to frame the Constitution of India. Thus, it was due to the stewardship, vision and sagacity of Ambedkar that the Dalits were finally accorded a respectable political identity by the makers of the Constitution of free India.

However, Ambedkar opted out of the Union Cabinet on 27 September 1951. But he kept on fighting for the Dalits till the last day of his life. He always reminded his followers of the maxim that political power was the key to progress. The Untouchability Offences Act of 1955 came as a milestone in Dalit history. There are atrocities against Dalits committed even today but they are no longer handicapped by the laws of the land. Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism in May 1956 along with three lakh Dalits was a final warning to Hindu obscurantists to change their attitude to co-religionists or to face disintegration. Pointing to them, Ambedkar says: "They must remember that there is a majority and there are minorities; and they simply cannot ignore the minorities by saying: "Oh no, to recognize you is to harm democracy" (ibid, p. 54).

V

Abdul Halim Siddiqi carried out a massive research in 1971 on the question of whether there was unity in India as a nation and the statistics collected by him clearly pointed to a negative answer from a vast majority of Hindus, Muslims, Christians and Sikhs (cf. Sarhadi 1974: 114). If another research were to be carried out today, the answer is very likely to be the same. Now, the question is: if majority of Indians do not believe in national unity, where does the question of unity arise from? A simple answer to this question would be: from politicians, who survive by talking about unity which is just a cliché or a slogan. National unity is, honestly speaking, a political phrase and has political utility. As a matter of fact, it is much easier to be a nationalist in India than it is elsewhere. The National Integration Council was constituted in 1961.

Declining to attend its meeting at Srinagar, Jaya Prakash Narayan wrote to Jawaharlal Nehru: "The present composition of the Council, which is made up mostly of ministers and parliamentarians, is likely to give an impression that the task of national integration is largely, if not wholly, to be accomplished by the State. This, as you know, is far from being the case. Indeed, more has to be done at the people's level in this regard than by the State" (ibid, p. 144). India belongs to the Indian people and only the Indian people can decide what India will be. Integration does not and should not mean Aryanization, suppression, Hindi-Hinduization (cf. Datta 1990). Assimilation into the so-called national 'mainstream' with a holier-than-thou attitude is both self-deceiving and self-defeating. Indian nationalism has to be Indian egalitarianism in order to ensure that every region of the country and every segment of its population make just claims for equal treatment.

National integration is a very complex and sensitive issue. It is "a holding together of constituent part where each constituent part contributes to the whole" (Sharma 1987). In a country where there is so much diversity in language, culture, race, religion, history and tradition, it is indispensable to evolve a form of pluralistic nationalism which satisfies every demand of regional patriotism. India cannot become a nation by a wave of the hand, by an independence day address or by a republic day speech. Nation-building is a very delicate process, a process that requires a huge amount of mutual acceptance and understanding between constituents. If any segment of the heterogeneous conglomeration, that is India, feels isolated, neglected, suppressed or threatened (cf. ibid), pan-Indian nationalism becomes a farce and there comes into being a real threat of secessionism. The constitution of India does not authorize any Indian individual or group to 'nationalize' another individual or group. Indian nationalism must develop the Indian Union into a complex of nationalisms having an economic structure that meets diverse regional needs and a view of patriotism that accommodates the variegated culture-patterns of various nationalities. To become a nation in the true sense of the word, India has got to be a free, voluntary, and cooperative union of nationalities that constitute it so that it maintains its unity and cohesion on the basis of "a voluntary recognition of the basic common interest and bond by those

nationalities" (Desai 1973: 67). India can never become an entity different from what Indians make it.

Recognition of actual regional diversity and threats of regional imbalance acquire special significance when Indian nationalism is examined with reference to the north-east. Advocates of pan-Indian nationalism cannot support regional nationalism today and suppress it tomorrow. Nehru's 'farewell' to Assam in the wake of the Chinese aggression in 1962 and his followers' support (overt or covert) to the creation of new states in this region revive memories which are not always romantic. There is a clear feeling of resentment in the entire north-east against the Delhi version of Indian nationalism. The north-east as a whole has seldom been in the centre-stage position in the history of Indian civilization (Datta). It is therefore politically expedient and morally indispensable that the people of the north-east are persuaded to see that India is as much theirs as anyone else's. What is needed today is not rhetoric or sloganeering; it is political will and moral sincerity on the part of those who preach pan-Indian nationalism. As of today, it deserves to be noted that ethnic formations, as part of a historical process, continue unabated in several parts of the north-east in spite of the mainstream strategies of integration, assimilation, coercion or suppression (cf. Pakem 1990). Three stages of such ethnic formation are apparently evident: (i) dormant ethnicity, (ii) calmed or suppressed but resentful ethnicity and (iii) active and militant ethnicity which verges on or merges into militant sub-nationalism or uncompromising secessionism (ibid). These formations call for urgent reviews of Indian nationalism in order that it soon becomes sufficiently flexible and adequately firm to be able to distinguish between thus-far and no-farther varieties of the definition of state. That the north-east has special needs for financial support from the Union is quite obvious to most people who matter in this regard. What is not so often taken note of is the problem of how to avoid the erosion of the socio-cultural and linguistic identity of the various nationalities in the region. Millions of refugees/infiltrators have already moved into the region. That is bad enough but what is worse is that no effective measures have so far been taken to make immigration/infiltration into the region impossible. Unless fool-proof steps are taken to stop infiltration, the various nationalities may be swamped by immi-

grants in a matter of decades (cf. Misra 1987). Indian nationalism is therefore obliged to re-adjust its wavelength so as to appreciate what leaders of public opinion and academics mean when they talk about threats to the identity of various nationalities in the north-east and why ethnic formations have been going on in this region despite the government of India strategies of misinformation and coercion.

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