India – A Unity in Variety: Exploring Nation Building and Nationalism

Srinibas Pathi*

Abstract

India is a unity in variety. Our country stands for multiculturalism and plurality that have been wrongly (rather deliberately) depicted by many as symbolic of unity in diversity. While the term diversity has a perceptible negative connotation, variety stands for things positive, constructive and accommodative. The elements, factors, forces, actors, and ideas that stand for the traditional notion of nation or nationalism are very much present in India. But they go beyond their classical meaning and implications and they even defy many of the stereotypical interpretations. For instance, an ideal nation should have commonness in terms of language, religion, geographical compactness, economic uniqueness etc. When juxtaposed to the situation in India, critics often fail to justify the traditional notion of a nation vis-à-vis that in our country. But what many of them overlook is the uniqueness of India in terms of presence of myriad languages, dialects, religions, sects, geographical regions, custom, heritage, dress patterns, food habits, climatic zones etc that exhibit the pan-Indian features and a latent virtue called Indianness that binds all these factors and forces through a thread that is too subtle to perceive.

Key Words: Nation, Nation Building, Nationalism, Indianness, Multiculturalism

India's history, culture, tradition and heritage represent a continuum that binds the past, present and future. We cherish an intricate mosaic of multiple identities such as personal, individual, group, community, state specific, regional and national that go beyond our geographical boundary and merge with a universal and international way of life. Our nation not only stands for a peaceful and steady nation building process, but also an international order that proclaims peace and harmony for humankind and global ecology.

One of the most pertinent queries that is often raised in this context is whether India is a nation, a nation state, a multi-national state, a civilizational state, or just a convenient and practical geographical entity. A number of keen observers and critics describe large issues, problems, and challenges confronting India during the process of nation-building. Even some of the skeptics are of the view that the creation of the New Indian Nation as well as the aspirations

*Srinibas Pathi is Professor and Head, Department of Public Administration, Mizoram University, Aizawl-796004 email: srinibaspathi@gmail.com

and objectives of nation-building face challenges from various ethnic, religious, cultural, linguistic, caste, class, and regional groups. One of the major challenges before the Indian state is whether her democratic, secular and republican objectives would be able to build an inclusive and incorporated social and political system. It is also a matter of great concern that citizens belonging to different sections like religious and linguistic minorities, deprived castes, tribal groups and women still feel estranged and isolated from the so called mainstream and the majority groups. The major issue and challenge is the integration of all these groups into the national life.

The primary foundation of any nation lies on its unity and integrity. It is the national unity that acts as safeguard against the forces of domination, discrimination, and maltreatment. It also promises peace, prosperity and development. India is a country with the geographical expansion of a sub- continent. Many of the issues, factors, and problems need not affect the citizens as long as they abide by the prescribed norms and values and are devoted to broader identity of the nation. India is a nation in the making with the dynamics that are seldom found elsewhere in the world. Rajni Kothari was of the view that the problem of national integration in India is the fundamental problem of political development.

India continues to grapple with the idea, adventure and ramifications of communalism. A number of forces and groups in the country have been at work since the dawn of India's Independence to play with the idea and they have also become successful in implanting the seeds of distrust and deceit in the minds of a section of our countrymen. Occasionally we have witnessed the communal frenzy in different parts of the country. It continues to be one of the main stumbling blocks in achieving national integration. The spurious and mischievous policy of 'divide and rule' as practiced by the British to serve their colonial agenda, continues to be a part and parcel of the Indian psyche even as more and more Indians stand and raise their voice in support of religious tolerance and coexistence.

As India is a vast land with a large number of geographical regions and sub-regions, regionalism and sub-regionalism are the realities of our existence. For instance, we have the regional identities like east, west, north, south and north east. Again, we have plain areas, hills, forest covers, islands etc which make India one of the most complicated geographical and geological entities of the world. Such differences along with wide variations in climate, weather, flora and fauna etc have led to a number of regions and sub-regions in the country that in turn have contributed to different life styles, food habits, dress patterns, thinking processes and approaches to life and living. However, the processes of nation building, education, mass media, democratic system of administration and governance etc have

also added positive angles to make India a dynamic nation wherein a vast majority of the citizens believe in many common ideas and viewpoints that give a sense of uniqueness to our nation.

Most of the major political parties in India including national, regional, state level and minor ones practice the politics of populism that take advantage of the intrinsic structural variations of the Indian Society. These parties utilize religion, caste, region, gender etc as the contrivance to garner votes during the elections - be it national, state level or local. Again we all know that poverty, illiteracy and under development continue to be the major problems that have created deep divides in the country. The critics of our model of development believe that such gaps have led to the rise of extremism like ultra left activities in various parts of the country.

Tribal uprising in different states of India and the rise of naxalism and such other elements are the instances which are also related to lack of proper development in different parts of India which has led to regional imbalance which in turn has ignited the fire that has led to law and order problems. Some of the writers like Amartya Sen are of the view that development, welfare of the marginalized and democratic system have to go hand in hand. Coupled with this, we need to concentrate on a few other issues like curbing administrative corruption, apathy, circulation of black money in the economy, prioritizing developmental agenda in tune with the traditional and

cultural philosophy that is found in different parts of the country.

A number of thinkers including Mahatma Gandhi have emphasized on developing a discourse of civilization which is befitting to the Indian situation. Such a discourse revolves around the process of nation building. It also appeals to a civilizational unity which is a reality. The discourse of civilization has compelled the citizens of India to think about nationhood. Gandhi's ideas on civilization may be identified with an Indian way of thinking. He branded the western civilization with industrialization, competition, greed, and violence. He presented a construct encircling his ideas of non-violence, self-sufficiency and village republics. He valued Indian civilization while acknowledging that we have to open our windows so that we can get the ideas from all other cultures. But at the same time, he also emphasized on the view that our feet should be firmly rooted on the ground. Rabindra Nath Tagore was the pioneering thinker who developed the concept of society centric civilization rather than state centric.

Some of the major factors that have contributed to the emergence of Indian nationalism include political and administrative unity both during and after the British regime. The colonial administrators have brought about some semblance of unity while trying their level best to exploit the society, economy and resources of India. However, the leaders of free India including Sardar Patel

consolidated the Indian state by amalgamating a large number of former princely states into the Indian Union just at the dawn of Independence. The civil services that still bear the legacy of the colonial rule, with reforms, have contributed to administrative unification of the Indian state. However, the quasi-federal nature of the state, presence of the provinces, local self government institutions including rural and urban bodies within the parameters of the Constitution of India indicate the dynamic nature of our polity. In this context, the legacy of the freedom struggle and a number of the socio-religious and cultural movements that our country has witnessed during so many past centuries can hardly be ignored.

Western education was another significant factor that paved the way for liberal thinking and debate that contributed towards the growth of nationalism. But in this case also we had to receive the brunt of mistrust of everything Indian including our tradition, heritage, culture and indigenous knowledge and practices which can hardly be discarded or rejected out rightly. So, a number of thinkers and public opinion leaders of India propagated a system of basic education that could instill the spirit of nationalism in the minds of young Indians. Pandit Gopabandhu Das of Odisha was the pioneer in this field who started the first open school in colonial India called Satyavadi Vana Vidyalaya. Later on Tagore, Gandhiji, Thakkar and many others joined this movement. This

experiment reminds us of the traditional Gurukul Ashram. Same is the case of English language that is touted as the link language that binds us. But the fact remains that it is only one of the languages of India. It opened up the doors to western ideas and studies. It rather contributed negatively to the unity and integrity of our country wherein a few English speaking people display superiority complex over the vast majority of Indians who speak a large number of very rich languages and dialects which are in no way inferior to English.

Developmental initiatives in free India including growth of education, literacy, health care facilities, transport and communication, agriculture and industrial infrastructure, and expansion of science and technology etc have contributed a lot towards the growth of national spirit and oneness. But again this process is not without its flip side. While adopting modern and progressive ideas and institutions, we have also been subjected to some negative and retrograde notions like regionalism, parochialism and self-seeking behavior patterns that can be ascribed as the facts of life.

The emergence of mass media including the social media and internet based communication as well as a vibrant and vigilant civil society in India have been playing a significant role in consolidating and promoting national spirit, nationalism while contributing to the process of nation building. But here also it has to be viewed critically as some

of the forces both within and outside the country try to break the mosaic and secular fabric of India. Social media are misused by some forces to spread falsehood and misunderstanding. A section of the print and electronic media is also responsible for propagating trivial issues at the cost of genuine news and views. Another angle of digitization or digital media which needs a special mention here is that the vast treasure of our tradition, heritage, culture, dance, drama, music, traditional healing system etc is being documented and preserved that would have been impossible otherwise. It gives a new meaning to our nation and nationalism.

During the last few decades, it has been observed that there is a gradual shift of focus from government to governance in our country. This is the result of a global trend due to the advent of new world economic order, new public management, public choice theory, media revolution including phenomenal growth of information and communication technology and last but not least emphasis on good governance. The factors that are discussed in the context of good governance include, among others, rule of law, responsiveness, transparency, equity, economy, efficiency, effectiveness, accountability, participation and empowerment. The concept of e-Governance assumes significance in relation to good governance that also empowers the citizens and provides greater accessibility to them in the matters of governance. This process started with the notion of e-Government of structural

changes and use of ICT in governmental activities. Gradually, it has led to e-Governance which is the outcome of e-Government that ensures stakeholder participation, consultation, and engagement that ultimately results in good governance. This process has given rise to new opportunities to the citizens of India to participate in governance and nation building activities by contributing directly to the decision making as well as implementation of public policies and the evaluation thereof.

The discourse regarding what is more important between government and governance has dominated the academic debate for quite some time. While government is related to structures, processes, personnel, laws, rules, implementation and outputs; governance is equated with functions, objectives, performance, and outcomes. Some critics are of the view that government is all about procedures and governance is the substance. During the 1990s, in the wake of the new world economic order, new public management, public choice theory, information and communication technology, the notion of good governance gained momentum and wide acceptability throughout the world. It mainly focused on the elements of rule of law, responsiveness, transparency, equity, economy, efficiency, effectiveness, accountability, participation and empowerment. Next comes the issue of difference between e-Government and e-Governance. E-Government primarily refers to the use of ICT including internet

and intranet by the government. And e-Governance is the outcome of e-Government which ensures stakeholder participation, consultation and engagement that improves the quality of performance.

A United Nations Survey has suggested in the year 2008 that a Five-Stage Evolution model should be adopted by all the UN member states in relation to e-Governance. The first stage is emergence or the primary stage of creation of online database and official web sites etc by the government ministries, departments, and other agencies. The second stage is enhancement which means that governments may provide more information with links so that the citizens can access laws , reports , forms , and documents. The third stage is interaction which enables the citizens to have some interactions with the government like payment of taxes etc online. The fourth stage is transaction which ensures two-way interactions between the citizens and the government with the help of uninterrupted online portals and services. And the fifth and the final stage is connection which is managed by the government through integrated back office infrastructure that includes , among others, horizontal connections among government agencies; infrastructure connections; and multiple connections among various stakeholders including government agencies, citizens, civil society, private sector, mass media, academic and research institutions etc. This intricate process has a direct impact on the nature of citizen participation and the quality of nation building in India. Besides providing an opportunity to participate in the decision making process and the implementation of policies, now the pro-active citizens can point out the loop holes in the administrative system and unearth the corrupt practices and personnel. Such a participation adds meaning to the traditional notion of democratic duties and responsibilities.

India has emerged as one of the fastest growing economies of the world. It now plays a decisive role in the field of diplomacy in general and in the United Nations in particular. It is one of the pioneers of the developing nations across the globe. It is the champion of peace, prosperity and friendship among the countries far and near. But at the same time there are formidable internal as well as external challenges to our country which come in the form of poverty, illiteracy, under development, extremism, cross-border terrorism etc that have to be faced both by the powers that be and the citizens at large in the true spirit of nationalism and fellow feeling that is compatible with the international peace and sustainability.

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