

# UN-CIVIC NATIONALISM

Relevant for: Modern India | Topic: Important Persons during freedom struggle & their Approaches to achievement of freedom goals

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In the world's largest half-democracy, we have by now got used to a constant barrage of spin, half-truths and lies which has successfully hijacked the legacy of past leaders for its own cause — Gandhiji, Patel, Netaji Bose, Bhagat Singh, Vivekananda and even Ambedkar — although all of them were openly against the idea of Hindutva, as currently interpreted, and Hindu Rashtra. In the sphere of ideology, the idea of nationalism is in the process of being hijacked. Already for many in our country (including the hysterically cheer-leading sections of the media), nationalism is narrowly taken as majoritarianism in the service of a jingoistic state and focused on hating a neighbouring country (and, of course, “enemies within”). The British politician, Nye Bevan, after his first visit to Pakistan in its early days is reported to have thus described that country: “I have never been to a country so much in love with hate”. Unfortunately, we are fast reaching a situation where this description may fit our country as well.

Religion-based nationalism as propagated by Jinnah, and opposed by Gandhiji, was the basis of the formation of Pakistan. All over the world today, ethnic nationalism of one kind or another is making a comeback — Christian nationalism in Poland and Hungary, white nationalism among evangelical Christians in the US, Slavic and orthodox-church based nationalism in Russia, Islamic nationalism in Turkey and Indonesia and so on. About a hundred years back, the leaders of social thinking in India applied their mind to what should be the basis of nationalism in the diverse, extremely heterogeneous society of India. I have particularly in mind the thoughts of Gandhiji and Tagore on nationalism expressed in various forms (essays and lectures by both, and in the case of Tagore, also in literature with several poems and at least three novels — one of which later was the basis of a widely-known Satyajit Ray movie, *Ghare Baire*) in the first three decades of the 20th century.

They were, of course, both anti-imperialists, thus sharing in the popular movements of nationalism against colonial rulers, but they wanted to go beyond this to think about a more positive basis of nationalism. Both of them found the nation-state of European history, with a singular social homogenising principle and militarised borders and jingoistic mobilisation against supposed enemy states, unacceptable and unsuitable for India's diverse society. Instead, they both drew upon the long folk-syncretic tradition of Indian society (which grew out of the layers of sediments formed by successive waves of social reform and rebellion, called the bhakti movements, against the dominance of the rigid Hindu brahminical system, over many centuries in different parts of India), extolling inter-faith tolerance and pluralism, and wanted to make that the constructive basis of Indian nationalism.

Both Gandhiji and Tagore were deeply religious persons. But Gandhiji openly said, “Free India will not be a Hindu Raj; it will be an Indian Raj, based not on the majority of any religious sect or community”. Tagore was trenchant in his criticism of the western idea of the nation-state, “with all its paraphernalia of power and prosperity, its flags and pious hymns... its mock thunders of patriotic bragging”, and of how it stokes a national conceit that makes society lose its moral balance. Nehru, who was personally close to Gandhiji and ideologically close to Tagore, saw

more value in the modern state than they did in providing a unifying structure in a divided society and in unleashing the forces of planned economic development.

By the time the Indian Constitution was framed, both Gandhiji and Tagore were dead. Nehru (along with Ambedkar), in leading the way, drew upon the society-centric pluralistic idea of nationalism of Gandhiji and Tagore and gave it a legal-judicial form in the Indian Constitution. The Nehru-Ambedkar idea of nationalism, forged and refined through elaborate deliberations of the Constituent Assembly, gave India the basis of its civic nationalism that prevailed for many decades.

It is this inclusive idea of civic nationalism that is now being attempted to be dismantled by the Hindu nationalists. Even at the time of the framing of the Constitution, the RSS had opposed the Constitution as “western”, even though in their earlier history, many of their leaders used to admire the ethnic basis of nationalism in a western country, Germany — their revered leaders like Savarkar and Golwalkar had expressed open admiration for the efficient Nazi system of mobilising and organising the German nation. Earlier, Japanese nation-state had also been inspired by German history. It is not surprising that Tagore’s lectures in Japan as early as 1916 against the aggrandising nation-state did not make him popular with the Japanese.

In the West, the US is a case where the idea of civic nationalism was pursued (though not always successfully). In a 2009 speech, [Barack Obama](#) said: “One of the great strengths of the United States is... we do not consider ourselves a Christian nation, (but) a nation of citizens who are bound by ideals and a set of values”, presumably as enshrined in the Constitution. This is a major historical example of what the German philosopher Habermas calls “constitutional patriotism”, as opposed to patriotism based on “blood and soil” which used to have popular appeal in Germany, and which in history has been associated with a great deal of persecution, violence and devastation. It is this German history that Einstein may have had in mind when he said nationalism is “an infantile disease, the measles of mankind”.

This battle of alternative versions of nationalism is raging all over the world today. Our identities are necessarily multi-layered but ethnic nationalists privilege one of these layers, usually based on the narrow particularities of religion, language or culture that makes it easy to mobilise certain groups. In the name of national integration and fighting enemies, both outside and within, they undermine minority rights and procedures of democracy, they accuse liberals of appeasing the minorities (blacks and Hispanics in the US, immigrants in Europe, Kurds in Turkey, Muslims in India), and try to suppress dissent as “anti-national”. Civic nationalism, on the other hand, emphasises the procedural aspects of democracy, and through its stress on liberal constitutional values tries to use the pre-commitment of a foundational document to bind the hands of subsequent generations against majoritarian tendencies curbing basic civil rights. If we lose this ideological battle in India, the foundational values of our multi-cultural society that our earlier great social thinkers adored will be in serious danger.

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