

# Nation Vs Rashtra: The Relevance Of This Emerging Discourse In Defining Indian Nationalism

Author

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## Abstract

The word 'nationalism' has been in the news a lot recently. Nationalism has been used to define a country's culture, language and often race. But today, the significance of Nationalism has disintegrated and it has become a mere tool for justifying the actions taken in its name. It is seen as an insular concept which promotes blind loyalty to one's country. This is because of the prevalent use of European reference of the term. Indian nationalism is very different. Therefore, there is a need to redefine nationalism from Indian perspective. The term 'Nation' and 'Rashtra' have been used synonymously overtime. But the terms have different connotations and to justify the difference, one school of thought has been quite vocal and articulated that nation is a mere English translation of the term 'Rashtra' and that the two are entirely different concepts with distinguishable contexts. The different proponents of this school are VD Savarkar, Keshav Baliram Hedgewar, MS Golwalkar, Dattopant Thengadi etc. Correlating with the main school of thought, Dattopant Thengadi gave the most profound distinction between the western concept of nation and the Indian idea of Rashtra. The ideology of Nationalism is not ancient but quite recent. The modern sense of Nationalism is no older than the 18th century. Today it has become the dominant ideology of the modern world. Nationalism is an ideology and movement that promotes the interests of a particular nation especially with the aim of gaining and maintaining the nation's sovereignty over its homeland. Nationalism holds that each nation should govern itself, free from outside interference, that a nation is a natural and ideal basis for a polity and that nation is the only rightful source of political power.<sup>1</sup>

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## I. Introduction

The terms "nation" and "rashtra" are often used interchangeably, but they have different connotations depending on the context and cultural background. The term nation is most commonly used in the western countries to refer to a large group of people sharing common characteristics, culture, language, history, within the specific geographical boundaries. On the other hand rashtra is a Sanskrit term used in Indian languages, to refer to a political entity or a country formed by a community with a shared identity, culture and history. While both terms express the idea of a community with shared characteristics and a sense of identity, nation is used universally, while rashtra is specific to the Indian context. Benedict Anderson<sup>2</sup> has characterized nation as an "imagined community" and Paul James<sup>3</sup> sees it as an "Abstract community". A nation is an imagined community in the sense that the material conditions exist for imagining extended and shared connections. It is an abstract community in the sense that it is objectively impersonal, even if each individual in the nation experiences him or herself as subjectively part of an embodied unity with others. The term 'Rashtra' has a Vedic origin. It is rooted in the Geo-cultural values of Indian life. It denotes the mindset of the people, their attitude towards life, relationship with nature and the universe, approach towards history and tradition. Rashtra is a spiritual entity and is based on memory. It is the will to live together, respect for one's past and a common goal in the present. Rashtra is a socio-cultural construct based on a rich heritage. French philosopher Ernest Renan<sup>4</sup> pointed out that people are a nation because they want to be a nation, which is "a soul, a spiritual principle". Speaking the same language or belonging to the same ethnic group does not constitute a nation, but having accomplished them again in future. James Bryce states that the feeling of nationality comes from people who are already aware of their moral and social unity and who wish to remain united under one government and gives the country a respectful name and status in the world.<sup>5</sup> The background of the writings of Renan and Bryce here is the Indian nation which is referred

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony Smith's Nationalism: Theory, ideology, history, 2010;

Paul James' Nation Formation: Towards a Theory of Abstract Community

<sup>2</sup> Benedict Anderson: Imagined Communities; verso publication

<sup>3</sup> Paul James: Nation Formation: Towards a Theory of Abstract Community; sage publication, London

<sup>4</sup> Ernest Renan: What is a nation? Columbia University press, New York

<sup>5</sup> James Bryce: Modern Democracies; Cosimo classics, New York

to as Rashtra. The India construct of 'Rashtra' which considers Sanskriti (culture) as the basis of nation, is more profound and inclusive than the European concept which has taken race, language, geographical limits as basis of their nation. Nation is material while Rashtra is Adhyatam (Spiritual). For example, we can quote the Atharva Veda here which says "Mata Bhumi Putroahm Prithviyah" meaning this holy land is my mother and I myself am the son of this land.

## **II. Defining Indian Nationalism:**

In the recent years, the ideology of nationalism has become the dominant political paradigm of the modern world. It is an ideology that promotes the interests of a particular nation with the aim of gaining and maintaining the nation's sovereignty. Nationalism promotes the concept of Nation which is a materialistic construct and considers race, language, geographical limits as the basis of Nation. There is an ideological difference between the Indian concept of 'Rashtra' and the European idea of 'Nation'. The Indian concept is more intense and inclusive. The notion of a nation and nationalism is no older than the 18th Century but 'Rashtra' has originated in the Vedas i.e. Atharva Veda. The parameters of a Nation have constantly changed-overtime but that of a Rashtra have withstood the test of time and still the base remains the same. Rashtra still signifies geo-cultural values of life and denotes the mindset of the people and their will to live together through thick and thin. The aim of this research paper is to identify the difference between western concept of Nation and Indian idea of Rashtra with special focus of Nationalism in India in contemporary times. It is to understand that Nationalism does not mean foreign nationalism as presumed by our intellectuals who believe everything western is standard and everything Hindu sub-standard.<sup>6</sup> According to Merriam Webster, Nationalism is defined as loyalty and devotion to a nation, especially a sense of national consciousness and exalting one nation above all others and placing primary emphasis or promotion of its culture and interests as opposed to those of other nations or supranational groups. Contemporary discourse of Nationalism in India has become a matter of controversy. The word has been used and misused both by left and right in today's political scenario. The one reason for this poor understanding of nationalism is that they use European reference points to define it. Indian nationalism is very different from European Nationalism. Our concept is linked with the idea of 'Rashtra' which has been in existence since times immemorial. India has always been a Rashtra but it is still a nation in the making. Rashtra is a samajik-sanskritik (socio-cultural) construct based on a rich heritage. It is the will to live together and have a common goal. The concept of Rashtra was Ekatma (integral) to how Indian culture taught Indians respect and love towards nature. Nation on the other hand, is a materialistic term which regards race, language, geographical limit as its basis. This study is to theorize and differentiate the concept of Rashtra and Nation which has been discussed as having a communal or colonial connotation in the past. Multifarious attempts have been made to define nations and nationalisms. Here, in this paper, some of the works are mentioned to define and reach to a conclusion about the same. G. Aloysius in his book, 'Nationalism without a Nation in India' provides a view of nationalism in India from a sociological perspective. He mentions two specific perspectives that Sociology brings to the study of nationalism: One, that a general theory of nationalism can be established and there is no need to consider every nationalism as a 'unique phenomenon'. Two, is that nationalism as an ideology, organization and movement of a particular region, be studied in the context of social structure and social changes of the region. Aloysius attempts to analyze the result of the interaction between rational Indian Society and Colonial rule. He elaborates on political awakening of the country with a defined idea of nation and nationalism and analyses anti-caste, anti-feudal struggles and further talks about the latter phase of the nationalist movement in India, known as the Gandhian era and provides a critical review of the Gandhian legacy. Similarly, Benedict Anderson in his book, 'Imagined Communities' raises the question: what makes people live and die for nations, as well as hate and kill in their name? He talks about how the study of nationalism has been transformed over time and space and elaborates on the 'Third World' Nationalism. The author mentions the works of different authors and how these works have linked the objects of fields of history, literature, anthropology, Sociology, Feminism and other studies to nationalism and nation. He states that the terms Nation, Nationality, Nationalism all have proved too difficult to define and analyze and yet, Anderson attempts to define Nation as an imagined political community- and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. He also defined Print Capitalism which refers to the role of print media in shaping the concept of nationalism and facilitating the emergence of nation states. E. J. Hobsbawm states, that the modern sense of the word 'Nationalism' is no older than the 18th century and has mainly concentrated on the 19th and early 20th centuries when the subject of Nationalism was centered in the 'developed regions'. He provides certain definitions but clearly states that neither objective nor subjective definitions are satisfactory and both are misleading. The author provides certain definitions but clearly states that neither objective nor subjective definitions are satisfactory and both are misleading. The author provides certain definitions but clearly states that neither objective nor subjective definitions are satisfactory and both are

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<sup>6</sup> Dattopant Thengadi : Modernization without Westernization

misleading<sup>7</sup> In the book, 'Nations and Nationalism', Ernest Gellner explains the causes and prerequisites to nationalism and how it is deeply connected to culture and education. He held that Nationalism was a response to modernity and postulates the ideas of modernity and education as central to the process of nationalization. Gellner elaborates on how the pre-industrial world was too stratified and the lives of people too insular to provide any ground for the growth of national identities. He argues that industrialization, increased urbanization and spread of information highlighted the need for a literate work force and this led to the spread of education amongst lower previously excluded classes. This was accomplished by unifying cultural and political entities and having the political entity i.e. state, provide the necessary education. Nationalism was a result of people identifying with their state. Hans Kohn in 'Nationalism: Its meaning and History' gives a detailed history of emergence of Nationalism in Europe and how nationalism changed shape in different countries over time and space. The author talks about how the movement that occurred on the basis of individual liberty and patriotic spirit transpired to embrace totalitarian philosophy and how industrialization paved the way where nationalism favored capitalism. The author then states that in later times nationalism inspired de-colonial struggles in third world nations. Nationalism here was based on the individual will and the constitution. Therefore, the need to abide by the constitution formed the integral aspect of nationalist fervor in these nations. MS Golwalkar has written widely on the concept of Rashtra explaining the truest sense of Indian Nationalism. In his book, 'Rashtra', Golwalkar, has attempted to define the concept of Rashtra which he considers to be a Spiritual entity. The foreword of the book is written by Dattopant Thengadi in the form of 'Punyavachan'. In the foreword itself, Thengadi ji elaborates on the different connotations of the western concept of 'Nation' and the Indian idea of 'Rashtra'. He explains this by stating the origin and evolution of different nations and how Indian context is entirely different. He gives the reference of various authors on Nationalism in this book. Thengadi defines 'Rashtra' as being Ekatma (integral) to national interest. It is a Samajik-Sanskritik (socio-cultural) construct based on the rich heritage of India. Thengadi further explains that the Sanskritik (cultural) base of Rashtra has played an important role in how it taught Indians respect and love towards nature. He emphasizes on the fact that one should be able to differentiate between nation and Rashtra and not understand these terms in general context. Thengadi says that the two are entirely different and that Nation is a mere English translation of Rashtra. The parameters of both are different. He gives many examples to justify his understanding. The title of the book is explanatory in itself. VD Savarkar defines Nationalism by three key parameters: Sanskriti (culture), Rashtra (state) and Jati (people) and not by ethno-religious basis<sup>8</sup>. When writing about Indian nationalism, one cannot ignore the significance of Hindu revivalism and call for Hindu Rashtra on the ongoing developments in Indian polity. Furthermore, in 'the saffron wave: Democracy and Hindu nationalism in modern India', Thomas Blom Hansenn talks about how newly democratic countries give rise to strong nationalists and religious movements and how the phenomenon is perceived by most western observers. Thomas Hansen here analyses how the world's largest democracy i.e. India has been receptive to the right wing Hindu nationalist party and its political wing, which claims that the ideal polity should be based on ancient Hindu culture. He points out that democratic transformation in India has led to political mobilization among the lower castes and protection for religious minorities which in turn has left the unclassified and large Indian middle class anxious. Against this backdrop, the Hindu nationalist movement has successfully given voice to the concerns of not only the privileged sections but also impoverished groups seeking recognition. This book offers refreshing insights into Indian politics and advances our understandings of democracies in the post-colonial world. Koenraad Elst illustrates the development of Hindu revivalism in his book 'Decolonizing the Hindu mind: development of Hindu revivalism'. He describes the various organizations and movements that emerged as a response to colonialism and rival religions. Elst compares different Hindu revivalist thinkers and ideologies of various organizations and challenges that the revivalist movements face in India as well as their shortcomings. Jim Masselos in his book, 'Indian nationalism: a history', points out the factors that led to the rise of Indian nationalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The book details on the individuals and political groups responsible for starting the first western style political organization and how the Indian national congress affected the struggle for independence. The book further talks about Gandhi, his emergence as a national leader, the non-violent methods he adopted and the attainment of independence. Partha Chatterjee explores the complexities of nationalism in his book, 'The Nation and its Fragments'. He discusses how western ideas of nationalism were adapted and transformed in the context of countries that were colonized. He introduces the concepts of "political society" and "civil society" to explain the dual nature of nationalist movements and their interaction with the state power. He critically examines the tensions and contradictions that arise in the process of constructing national identities and the challenges of reconciling diverse cultural, social, and political elements within the nation. In the same manner, Partha Chatterjee in his translation to a manuscript of mysterious origin offers insights into the challenges of nationalism as a political ideology. He titled it 'The truth and lies of Nationalism' and quaries into how colonial powers have influenced and defined the idea of the nation and how

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<sup>7</sup> Hobsbawm E.J. :Nations and Nationalism since 1780

<sup>8</sup> Savarkar V D: Hindutva - Who is a Hindu?

nationalist movements often adopt and eternalize certain aspects of colonial ideologies. He further examines how certain groups within a nation may not fully associate with the dominant nationalist narrative, leading to tensions and divisions. The background of this book is specific to the post-colonial developments in India and the subsequent consequences. S. Irfan Habib, traces the growth and development of nationalism in India from the late nineteenth century through its various stages; liberal, religion-centric, revolutionary, cosmopolitan, syncretic, eclectic, right-liberals. He tries to explain in his book, 'Indian Nationalism: The essential writings', what nationalism should mean and the kind of inclusive, free and humanistic nation we should aspire to build. He takes the views of various thinkers and leaders into consideration for clarifying his stand. He states that nationalism is a double edged sword, it can be a binding force or deeply decisive instrument used to cause strife amongst political, cultural, linguistic, or religious identities.

### **III. Conclusion**

Indian Nationalism has been shaped by history. It is open and accepts diversity as being integral to national interest. It is plural, democratic and tolerant. The people of each state are different and are recognized as different but equal and the people have precedence over the state. The people of various regions, with notably different history and culture, have come together to form Indian Rashtra, on the basis of equality and mutual respect for their distinct identities. In recent times, Nationalism has become a matter of controversy and disagreement. The word has been used and misused in today's political scenario to advance a specific ideology. But in its true sense it has nothing to do with ideology as such. The reason for this misunderstanding of the term is the use of European reference points. Therefore, there is an urgent need to rethink and redefine nationalism taking Indian view into consideration. There is a shortage of previous research on the concept of Rashtra and the concept of nationalism with special reference to the Indian construct of Rashtra has not been widely discussed and it is considered mainly Right wing propaganda to further their ideology. The need of the hour is to understand the difference between the Western concept of Nation and the Indian rashtra to provide an entirely new and refreshing perspective on Nationalism in India and find the Bharatiyata (Indianness) in the term. 'Nationalism is a recent phenomenon while' Rashtra' is ancient and the need is to be able to clearly differentiate between the two. This would help in establishing the fact that Rashtra makes one integral with the homeland.