

WHAT IS IT TO BE 'NATIONAL'? : EXAMINING NATIONAL (IN)SECURITY, NATIONAL IDENTITY, AND ALTERNATE IMAGINATIONS IN INDIA

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Abstract: Strong overarching states have always characterised South Asia. A post-colonial democratic India has been no different. Other than that, of a top-down 'nationalist' idea which is an inherently exclusive project, it seems to securitise and consider any other collective sensibility as a threat. It does so because of its insecurities and lingering cartographic anxiety. The paper argues that alternate imaginations can and do co-exist with national imaginations, but the Indian 'nation-state' has had problems with such imaginations. The paper seeks to locate and critically analyse such nationalist insecurities and the multiplicity of alternate imaginations of Pan-South Asianism, sub-nationalisms, other such regionalisms and cosmopolitanisms and their complex interactions in every day India. The paper employing critical discourse analysis explores how popular alternate imaginations co-exist with, contest, resist, or negotiate with the 'national' identity. Without assuming people to be readily more cosmopolitan, it looks at how people respond to the overarching state and its articulation in the everyday - whether they readily accept the 'manufactured' picture or go beyond. It also explores the question of whether such articulations have a differential impact in certain sites and spatialities, especially in the socio-political and geographical margins. Essentially, it asks whether alternate imaginations have to always come at the cost of the loss of nationalist imagination or does it have more to do with how that nationalist imagination gets articulated. The question begs whether popular imaginations have to be necessarily constrained within the 'container' of the 'national'. The paper concludes that top-down national integration that constructs other sensibilities readily as threats *en route* a more homogenised national identity creates more problems than what it is purported to solve.

Keywords: Nationalism; National Security; Identity Politics; South Asia; India; Regionalism; Rising Powers; Democracy.

Introduction

WHAT IS IT LIKE BEING INDIA? IT IS NOT EASY, FOR ONE. MOREOVER, being one of the biggest countries in the world, and that too a democracy at that, is most definitely not easy. As the seventh largest country in terms of area

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and set to become the most populous, India is arguably the most diverse country in the world – not just in terms of landscapes but, more importantly, the people that inhabit it. India is more populous and diverse than the United States, Canada, Mexico, Central America, South America, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom combined, and to be a democracy at that, however flawed, being India is nothing short of an exception. However, as the world’s largest democracy and a vibrant secular, pluralist democracy at that, which manages such a big and diverse society is what really sets it apart, something Perkovich (2003) calls a “world historical challenge”.

Given such features and being a representative democracy, the very “idea of India” comes across as fascinating and no less a wonder for “no state* in history has been as populous, diverse, stratified, poor and at the same time democratic as India” (*Ibid.*). As such, India is poised for extraordinary things on a global scale and at the same is the biggest challenge. Therefore, given the potential of it, it is a great thing to be a democratic India. Historically, India has always been relevant in the global community. In more recent times, it has also been classified as a ‘rising’ state owing more to its increased relative material capabilities in terms of military power and economic prowess. As Perkovich noted, a decade and a half back that “achieving socio-economic development and internal peace through democratic means” for a hugely diverse India would be a “great global triumph” (*Ibid.*). Therefore, the challenge of an ascendant India is “getting India ‘right’” which would manifest “great global power; failing to meet the aspirations of Indian citizenry would consign India to the world’s middle ranks”. To democratically uplift the quality of life of a society as big, diverse, and dynamic as India, while ensuring basic freedoms, to which this power is a means and not an end in itself. Indeed, India would have achieved “perhaps the greatest success in human history” (*Ibid.*).

Therefore, it is this democratic upliftment, preserving and celebrating its huge diversity sans any compromise on its core values and freedoms that would be the ultimate touchstone to determine whether India has truly lived up to its potential. This paper seeks to analyse such questions in the light of India’s ‘nation-building’; national identity; conduct as a vibrant, secular democracy; and the tendencies and the trajectory of answering the question and the “world historical challenge” of being India.

* Here, ‘state’ means the republic of India or alternatively republics in South Asia and ‘States’ with a block letter S mean the constituent states of the Indian Union.

The nation-state and the challenge of Hindu Nationalism

The nature of the 'nation-state' has been in a flux for quite a while. Yet, the nation-state has been the most dominant historical 'container' which has sought to contain, regulate, and discipline societies across centuries. South Asia has been no stranger to the ubiquity of the nation-state. 'Nation-building' has been an arduous task. The questions of identity, nationalism and nation-building have resulted in troubled waters particularly for the younger post-colonial states in South Asia, resulting in a distinct security predicament as compared to the European experience which took its own long time grappling with these challenges (Ayoub, 2002). A post-colonial democratic India too has been an overarching state wherein top-down nation-building process has been followed. Nation-building can often be an inherently exclusivist project. In the case of the Indian state, it has not been any different and given its huge diversity, it has been problematic when a top-down nation-state project has been often unilaterally imposed. While there has been some respect for diversity coupled with the constraints of realpolitik, for example the formation of States of India along linguistic lines yet securitizing any other collective sensibility than that of the nation-state has been conspicuous all along, especially noticeable with lasting conflicts along the lines of multiple identities and aspirations.

India is not a 'nation-state' per se. It is a 'multi-nation' state. Given its diversity, it always has been so. Therefore, it has needed to accommodate and be flexible with these different sensibilities, and these have not always been at odds with the 'nationalist' idea although these have largely been 'seen' and 'made to be seen' in only that light. The idea of India as a vibrant and diverse democratic state has always needed to be more accommodative of differences. As such, diversity has needed to be institutionalised and not to be swallowed under a 'grand idea' of a singular top-down nationalist idea of a 'coherent' nation-state that disregards inherent differences and refuses to accommodate diversity which is quite obviously its greatest strength but has also alternatively been problematic because of such a rigid approach.

As a vibrant pluralist democracy, India has needed to accommodate various cultural, ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversities and its minorities. To its credit, the Indian constitution has recognised such diversity and ensured its respect as such and in the process laid the foundations of a vibrant 'multi-cultural' democracy via special rights, cultural and political, and institutions that allow for and protect and promote it as such. However, this rich and diverse social fabric

of India has for long been under strain and of late, it has only grown such that the very idea of India has been a terrain of contestation. The divides become evident in terms of class, caste, religion, ideology, region, and whatnot. As such, the definition of a clearly and well-accepted common good remains elusive. The challenges of uplifting India's historically marginalised *Dalits* (literally oppressed, former 'untouchables'), the tribals, communal violence, corruption and so on remain and one can say have only exacerbated. The biggest challenge that has emerged, however, to the secular, constitutional democratic state of India and the very idea of India is an aggressive Hindu nationalism or Hindutva.

The coming to power of the Hindu nationalist Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) in 2014 (although it got only 31% of the vote as Macdonald and Moussavi cited in [Miller and de Estrade, 2017](#) show) raised fears owing to its and its allies' vehement commitment to Hindutva. The alarming trend of a Hindu hyper-nationalism, growing intolerance and hate, lynchings by cow-vigilantes of minority Muslims and violence against *Dalits* has risen and the government has over the years been rather tight-lipped allowing for accusations of complicity. In some cases, there has been an open show of support by members of the ruling party towards such extremist elements accused of hate crimes. The BJP, led by populist figure Narendra Modi won in a more decisive 'landslide' victory in 2019 earning Modi his second term as Prime Minister. This happened mostly on the back of belligerent rhetoric against Pakistan. What can now be safely said is that the Hindu extremism that has for most of India's 73 years of independence been on the fringes of the socio-political scene is no longer there. In fact, it is the secular voices that have been marginalised. The fringe is now the mainstream and the mainstreaming of the Hindu right-wing extremism, even while it has gone more extreme, is now complete. Hindu nationalism as the one and only idea of India has indeed gained more and more traction. The idea of a Hindu *rashttra* or Hindu nation is now more entrenched than any other time in the history of India.

India could always show the way forward for a vibrant multicultural democracy but in recent times, it has only gone backwards and undone a lot of richness of its social fabric. In what he calls "India's reactionary modernism", Pratap Bhanu Mehta (2018) argued that the trend has gone so far that a "total inversion of values" has become possible and how India is in a "full-blown reactionary moment" but one wearing the garb of democratic legitimacy. Further, a monolithic cultural nationalism of Hindutva is contrary to the secular democratic essence of the idea of India which is its biggest strength. As Perkovich (2003) noted that the most successful course of a rising India would be one that "strengthens the cohesion and allegiance of the greatest number of India's diverse citizens and groups". Ganguly (2015) had argued how disturbing domestic developments could jeopardise India's foreign policy initiatives. Looking back from 2023, with a sweeping electoral victory of the BJP in 2019 and the free

flexing of the Hindu extremist muscle on the marginalised, we very well know which way the tide has swung. In its second run, the BJP buoyed by the vast electoral mandate has arguably gone more berserk with its policies.

The one policy that stands out in the post-2019 India is that of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) combined with the National Register of Citizens (NRC) that was widely criticized as being an assault on the constitutional basis of Indian nationhood as well as its citizenship and, also, as being particularly discriminatory against the largest minority of India that is the Muslims. The first step to this is creating a National Population Register (NPR) which includes all the Indian population following which government bureaucracy will mark 'doubtful citizens' who will subsequently be asked to produce documents to prove their citizenship to then decide who qualifies for citizenship. This is being asked mostly of a rural, extremely poor, uneducated people who can hardly be expected to fulfil the complex bureaucratic criteria around which there is plenty of obscurity. Then will come the NRC with the list of filtered out Indian citizens and those who fail to make it, for whatever reasons, will end up in detention centres. The NRC experience in Assam in the Northeast of India has been nothing short of disaster, a humanitarian crisis, with family members separated and ending up in detention centres as some members miss out on the list.

The worst affected by the NPR+NRC combination as the Assam experience has shown will be women (two-third out of Assam NRC), the poor and uneducated, the Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST) and Other Backward Castes (OBCs), the nomads and *adivasis* (indigenous tribes), orphans, LGBTQ communities, the elderly, or people without birth certificates (42% or 515 million people of India's population), migrant labourers and their families, illiterate people, disabled or abandoned people or even people with different spellings in different documents or anyone with a slight bureaucratic lapse, and of course, the Muslims for whom the combination of CAA and NRC would be nothing short of catastrophe. (CJP Team, 2020)

CAA allows for Indian citizenship to illegal migrants who are basically non-Muslims - Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis and Christians - from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh who reached India before 2015 in the name of them being "persecuted minorities" in these three countries, thereby ignoring persecuted minorities from say Tibet (the Tibetan refugees run a government-in-exile in India headed by the Dalai Lama), Sri Lanka and Myanmar as well as persecuted Muslim sects in Pakistan. This act uses religion as a criterion for Indian citizenship and therefore violates the Constitutional secular principles and is a violation of Articles 13, 14, 15, 16 and 21 which "guarantee the right to equality, equality before the law and non-discriminatory treatment by the Indian State" (*Ibid.*). This would leave a Muslim who is declared an 'illegal migrant' in the NRC no way to get citizenship in India. While the non-Muslim Indians could

perhaps lie and claim citizenship as illegal migrants from Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan, this could be tricky and, in many places, say in South India, impossible. There have also been concerns from the SC, ST, OBC groups about CAA+NRC which could disempower these marginalised groups by taking away reservations in case of a loss of citizenship. The CAA has been challenged in the Indian Supreme Court but the hearings have been put off during the pandemic. Apart from several other concerns, the financial burden of such an exercise runs into billions of dollars in a largely poor country with huge economic disparities which could leave it on the brink of economic collapse. This leaves the doors open for disenfranchisement, extreme poverty, riots, and terrorism to which India is no stranger, even genocide à la the Holocaust, or a civil war and the Nazis inspiring the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) of which the BJP is the political wing and PM Modi a proud member, is no secret. And what is all this humongous disaster being justified in the name of? Precisely the bugbear that can justify everything a state does – national security!

What has become amply clear in the six years of the Hindu nationalist BJP's rule is that Hindu nationalism has emerged as the main challenger to India's composite nationalism, its federal structure, its secular democracy and indeed the very idea of India. Given BJP's mantra of big money and media, hyper-masculine toxic nationalism, communalism and anti-Muslim politics, foreign policy attuned to domestic electoral gains (Balakot strikes for instance); the mainstreaming of Hindu nationalism is embedded more and more. The construction of the Ram Mandir (temple dedicated to Hindu deity Ram) over the land where the Babri Mosque stood which was demolished by Hindu extremists in 1992 is as symbolic as it is a manifestation of the New India, which is overtly becoming a Hindu nationalist India. This is not to say that the Congress rule in India was devoid of communalism. In fact, the worst of communal riots happened under their watch. They opened the gates of Babri Masjid to the Hindu worshippers who claimed it as the birthplace of Ram in 1986 and subsequent events led to its demolition. But, what has changed distinctly now is that the very socio-political narrative which once used to be centrist and secular has now become unapologetically rightist and the "battlelines have been drawn within the 'Hindutva' terrain" as Mukopadhyay (2018) had argued. This has been further cemented and Hindutva is now the dominant narrative. This is also evident in how from time to time; the supposedly more secular Congress party – India's main opposition party – has tried to portray itself as a better champion of Hindu nationalism as compared to the BJP. The celebrations over the foundation laying of the Ram Mandir on the 5th of August by the Congress party members are a case in point. Further, that the foundation laying was kept deliberately on the first anniversary of the Hindu nationalist central government's undemocratic assault on, and subsequent siege of, Jammu and Kashmir – when its special status was

revoked unilaterally – was symbolic of the muscle flexing of the Hindu nationalist project wherein the forceful 'nationalist integration' of a Muslim majority J&K State into Hindu 'nation' was billed as the flagship of the Hindu nationalist state.

Nationalism and National Identity

Even a cursory look at nation-building in India brings to the fore many conflicts and contestations in this terrain. One can argue that India, as mentioned before, is not a 'nation-state' in the classical sense but has many nations within its state and therefore the biggest challenge becomes to articulate a larger accommodative identity of an Indian 'nation' which diverse people can willingly subscribe to or can be integrated into. Nation-building thus involves "elimination" and "management" of differences (O'Leary cited in [Mishra, 2014](#)). It is never easy and can often be a violent process (not just overtly so) and it goes without saying that India has had a fair share if its problems and violence along the course and arguably India has been a very violent state right from the start.

There are challenges by geographical, ethnic, and religious nationalities to the idea of an 'Indian nationality'. The weakness of such an articulation of identity by the Indian state is shown by demands of regional autonomy, even secession, by "linguistically organised States, ethnically composed north-eastern States and not to mention the religious Sikh nationalism" that has challenged the "political sovereignty and national unity of India". Northeast India alone is home to 36 major or minor ethnic nationalist movements (*Ibid.*). The growing intensity of such "ethno-nationalist" conflicts exhibits lack of an accommodative ability on the part of the Indian nation-state. This is where nationalist insecurities, the bug of particular understanding of national integrity at any cost, cartographic anxieties have come into play providing a hurdle to India's proactive management of these differences via greater decentralisation, federalism and so on. This has ensured a suffocation of India's geographical and socio-political margins whereby the conflicts have only intensified.

The Northeast region of India is quite unique with its own fair share of diversity even while it is often presented as a monolith in the mainstream Indian imagination. It has been home to ethnic conflicts, insurgent violence, a breakdown of state machinery and of late a preventable citizenship crisis. It is unique in that the factors of caste, class or religion which are prevalent everywhere else in India remain largely insignificant as ethnicity and sub-nationalisms drive politics. It is herein where the challenges for India's nation-building exercise lie. And it has left a lot to be desired in terms of accommodating or even managing these differences.

While the state has tried to allow for tribal autonomy and institutions of self-government in these States as part of a federal structure that distributes power to accommodate local diversity, but these structures have not transformed the scene in practice. The primary strategy of the state has been that of control rather than accommodation, mitigation, or management of differences. The management of these differences or assertions of ethno-nationalities have been overtly constructed as existential threats to national integrity and therefore territorial control has received primacy. The primary response as such has been that of excessive militarism coupled, more so of late, with developmentalism in the region and beyond. Thereby, the decentralisation process and various distributive measures such as special economic privileges, reservations, grass-roots democratic process and increased political representation in a bid to accommodate differences in the larger national identity have taken a hit.

The idea of a distinctly Indian style of federalism has been much celebrated. While a semblance of its inclusive federal nature has always lingered, an inherent unitary tendency has only increased with time. Interestingly, this federal structure would ensure India sustaining itself as the vibrant secular pluralist democracy that it was conceived to be and would also embed and nourish the characteristic of 'unity in diversity' as the bedrock of its internal security. But what has actually transpired has been an ever tightening noose from the centre which has ensured that sometimes even the modest tag of 'quasi-federal' becomes a bit too far-fetched. The Indian state rather ironically has been plagued by a national insecurity which while not unfamiliar to post-colonial states has been the starkest in India, more so because of its great potential of 'rising' as a pluralist democracy with a federal structure that takes all its diverse peoples along – a great but far from fulfilled potential. India's federalism was always going to be an India-sized challenge, yet increasingly, the failures and the imaginations of 'what could have been' become starker. India's federalism is hardly very inclusive, but with an ever-strengthening centre on a rampage undermining State autonomy and decentralization of power, the exclusionary nature has become more manifest. All this inevitably prompts the question of whether the emancipatory agenda of its constitution has been fulfilled and whether at all it has ever been inclusive enough, great proclamations notwithstanding, and that is where the margins, be it the Northeast or Jammu and Kashmir and so on, speak for themselves.

The Union government led by the BJP has been on a rampage to undermine State autonomy and decentralization of power in India's States. The legislations have come under tremendous scrutiny and criticism for undermining and abrogating the existing Constitutional norms of providing States' autonomy. This is a story of the popular imagination being manufactured to cater to the government advocacy for uniformity in the garb of bringing 'national integration', but

severely undermining India's pluralist democracy. These trends of the slide towards authoritarianism have been defended in the name of national security. The withdrawal of special status, by reading down Article 370 and abrogating Article 35A, from Jammu and Kashmir and declaring them as Union Territories in 2019 puts up a new flavour in redefining India as a more centralised government. This could well be replicated in the Northeast as well thereby scrapping the special provisions there. The very discourse of federalism has shifted and if it can be shown as a hurdle to national integration, it might as well be completely done away with more. Already, it has been severely eroded in its own interpretations by the government. In its quest of an ambitious project of national integration, it has tried to further delineate and continued to circumvent in defining India as either an 'asymmetric' or a 'quasi' federal state; and thereby is trapped within the boundaries of these two narrow and repressive narratives.

The Indian government's approach to Jammu and Kashmir – the conflict-torn long standing disputed region in its north and the central pivot of its enduring rivalry with Pakistan which is a party to the dispute – has been abysmal and a disastrous to say the least. The long-standing Kashmiri demand has been that of a plebiscite under the auspices of and according to the resolutions of the United Nations Security Council in order to fulfil their right to self-determination. The conditional accession with India eventually provided for autonomy and a special status to the State of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) under Article 370 of the Indian Constitution. It is another matter that the Indian rule over J&K over decades has resulted in the erosion of this autonomy to the point of it being rather hollow as it was always seen as a threat to India's national integrity. This, or whatever semblance of autonomy remained was, on August 5, 2019, unilaterally annulled by the BJP government in the most undemocratic manner with the local populace under siege in the name of 'integrating' J&K with the Indian Union. This step requires the concurrence of the erstwhile Constituent Assembly of J&K which was dissolved in 1956, thereby arguably making the article permanent in the Indian Constitution. Even at present, one could argue that the annulment would require the concurrence of the J&K Legislative Assembly. But the Indian government put the State under President's rule and went ahead with the annulment, thereby taking the President's assent as a substitute for the Assembly and the local populace. This would be a joke in a democracy but there is no joke anymore for which realisation is not possible, especially if it can be argued to strengthen India's national integrity. It goes without saying that it has, and will, continue to damage India's case in Kashmir but for the Indian government and its electoral base, that is beside the point. This was followed by one of the most inhuman communication blackouts in history with phones, mobile networks and the internet blocked for months, along with rampant incarcerations turning the State into an open-air prison. Four years on, high speed internet continues to be

snapped intermittently even when it was restored after an alarming length of 555 days, even as the pandemic raged on. All along, the Indian government had gone ahead with policies like the new domicile law (Ashraf and Karthik, K. R., 2020) that could fundamentally alter the demographics of the State and annihilate the local identities of peoples of J&K. Now well into 2023, the Indian government ruling J&K directly as a Union Territory since 2019 has gone on a rampage against whatever was left of the distinct identity of J&K with sweeping laws being hastily put into place or older ones significantly diluted which give unchecked vast powers to the state at the cost of even the slightest local aspirations and seem clearly designed to significantly alter its demography. Buttressed by an overwhelmingly large and omnipresent military apparatus in J&K, the Hindu nationalist umbrella of parties or the *Sangh Parivar*, of which the ruling BJP is part, in their bid for making India a Hindu *rashtra*, have left no stone unturned in quickly forcing upon J&K what comes across as more of an at-any-cost, dehumanising, disenfranchising, unabashed “settler colonial project”; in the final march of turning India into a Hindu supremacist state. Jaleel (2021) provides a rather detailed account of such unilateral changes, imposed on J&K which serve as the final nail in the coffin of any kind of quasi-federal arrangement or a more or less superficial autonomy that it had within the Indian state.

Nation, Region and Regional Identities

Regional identities, in this case, are understood as supra-national sensibilities as compared to regions within India which can be categorized variedly. The region tends to be loosely defined and can be used as a “classificatory device” (Agnew 2013) across disciplines. Therefore, it is important to underline what we mean by it here. Regional identities or regionalisations and regionalisms have hardly taken root in South Asia or with South Asian states within other such configurations, taking South Asia to be *the* region; fluid and constructed, modified, and reshaped continually as it is. India occupies the predominant position and has an immediately tangible relationship with all these states, without them having much amongst themselves. This also becomes a basis for seeing the region as an ‘Indian peripheral region’ or an Indian ‘backyard’. As the “least integrated region in the world” (Sally cited in Buzan 2011), regionalism has never really taken off in South Asia. The problems of ethno-nationalisms, religion, and caste spill over across borders in South Asia fragmenting in the process not just India’s domestic scenario but also relations with its neighbours. Further, in a largely unintegrated space, India has not led the way nor set agendas in the regional organizations. India’s ‘enduring rivalry’ with Pakistan has been at the heart of the region. Even regionalism has been argued to be its captive (Hussain 2014).

It has also been argued that India has been increasingly disengaged from South Asia, or it has shown a propensity for seeking status, outside the region than within it (Buzan 2011). This also then leads to an interesting question of what India sees as and how it sees its 'own' region or maybe does not see one at all. The successes of other regional and sub-regional arrangements like have been modest at best. Given various "aporias", as Mohammad-Arif (2014) would argue, of South Asia, envisioning a common space, a regional identity may seem a bridge too far. South Asia has a persistent "low intelligibility" among the people whom it is supposed to provide a sense of belonging.

Fluctuating boundaries, the problems of SAARC regionalism have not done it any favours. However, the picture is much brighter once we look at the active constructions of South Asia 'from below'. The argument (*Ibid.*) is one of everyday constructions and flows and certain 'deliberate' engagements by people's movements and social struggles (e.g., People's SAARC) that imagine to (re)construct the region for want of peace and socio-political and economic prosperity. There are important socio-cultural and historical continuities that underpin the imagination of a shared space of South Asia. These continuities are especially evident in the border areas where populations tend to be divided by the delimitations of the states. And the crossing of these borders as an important 'everyday construction' of South Asia is particularly pertinent. Their crossing and the flows of people, ideas and so on that take place therein, at once challenges and disrupts the delimitations set by the states. The disruption is especially done by the people who are separated by such uncrossable boundaries that they take recourse to poetry and art.

Such 'disruptive writing' critiques and goes beyond the exclusive and violent logic of territoriality and transcends the boundarying practices of the states as it makes explicit the use of language as enabling certain meanings and constraining others. People who are separated by uncrossable boundaries employ this to firstly preserve the memory which is threatened by the state which employs "strategic forgetting", "premised on guarding against lapses of official memory" (Rajaram 2004). Secondly, such writing articulates the "possibility of other, transnational forms of identification, existence, and memory". This capacity as Ahmed (2013) argues "allows us to connect not only the past" but also the "many implicated presents" by showing "what *is* is only one possible future among many". These commonalities, argues Mohammad-Arif (2014) not only contribute "to the notion of a South Asian cultural space" but "are also related to practices that generate everyday constructions of South Asia" while at the same time providing the "material and symbolic resources" to the actors that seek to (re)construct South Asia from below.

Further, the 'Indo-centrism' has been a source of discomfort for the other states in South Asia and it has also been argued that the drive to regionalism

from these states is more of a “classic balancing” (Dash 2008) act against India. South Asian regionalism can be argued to be a hostage of the India-Pakistan rivalry. Pakistan, being the traditionally weaker party, has benefitted by involving external players in the region, which India has resisted seeking what it calls ‘regional autonomy’ in South Asia. India has also been irked when the two are coupled together. All this has meant that India has had to deal with and manage its insecurity vis-à-vis Pakistan. In a rather diffuse power structure of Pakistan, the dominance of the army, ISI and the “Jihadists” as Perkovich (2003) argues will not lessen as long as “Hindu militants continue to rise in India”. This, he argued will “only tighten the hyphen connecting Pakistan and India”. Therefore, it is “pluralist liberalism” and not “cultural nationalism” that provides the “path for growing India’s power not only by improving India’s internal stability and cohesion but by negating the Pakistani argument that Hindu-majority India” is unilaterally spiteful and hostile to Muslims. This argument has well and truly come home looking back from 2020. Indeed, the two feed off and are used as rhetoric against each other. The pursuit of Hindutva, which has now almost completely dominated the scene in India, uses aggressive rhetoric against Pakistan for primarily electoral gains. However, as the Balakot strikes just before the elections in 2019 have shown, this could lead to greater escalations as what the charged-up Indian public consumes of the war rhetoric against Pakistan is only going to get more intense and demand for more (Staniland, 2019). Domestically, it is not difficult to see Pakistan being blamed for virtually anything that could go wrong (the same is true for Pakistan viz-a-viz India) and as a popular distraction for the electorate. Nothing seems like a bigger certificate of nationalism in today’s India than extreme hatred for Pakistan. Pakistan as the external enemy is the yardstick as well as the fuel for India’s narrow nationalism. So much so that a commonly heard phrase, which has now been turned into a joke is being ‘anti-national’ in India, that is if one does not follow the Hindu nationalist idea of India, or the ruling party’s dictums on nationalism which in essence draw on the antipathy of Pakistan and the minorities within especially the Muslims which in the Hindu nationalist imagination have to be, euphemistically speaking, ‘set in line’ to clear any hurdles to the creation of Hindu *Rashtra* (nation) or a Hindu India. Tellingly then, the slur ‘go to Pakistan’ has been freely used against Muslims or any dissenters against the Hindu nationalist government.

Othering, Enemy Creation and the Idea of India

The catchy idea of a ‘rising India’ aside, the very idea of India is different along the diverse sites and peoples. The idea of India along the socio-political and geographical margins is not necessarily the same as that of the core clusters. It

does not have to be and these sites cannot be coerced to be brought under a uniform idea in the name of 'unity in diversity'. Yet, that is what is expected of them and if the scenario is to the contrary, they become blameworthy for being 'anti-national' to be then 'integrated' fully into the union. So, for instance, people in remote areas or border areas sometimes have no idea of India at all. Further, for some, say, people along the Line of Control (LoC) bearing the brunt of cross-LoC firing, their idea of India is a very different one from a person sitting in Delhi, as they are constantly under the barrel of a gun for which they are the 'other'. Similarly, a conflict zone like parts of the North East which have been faced with a violent face of the state, their idea of India is very different. Jammu and Kashmir which has borne the brunt of extreme state repression sees it very differently. Also, what needs no pointing out is the plight of the marginalized groups like the *Dalits*, the tribals and the minorities who have been reeling under discrimination and violence, structural and overt; increasing alarmingly of late and whose socioeconomic condition has barely improved, if not worsened — what about their idea of India? And one needs to remember that it is this diversity that is supposed to enrich the 'idea of India' and a 'rising India' is so not despite that — despite the huge numbers and diversity but more importantly, it is also because of that.

As much as the pluralistic composite nationalism has weakened and a narrower cultural hyper-nationalism has taken hold, the toxicities of such nationalism have come into their own and are poised to wretch whatever remnants of a pluralist secular democratic India that survive. There is a continuous othering and enemy creation which is on-going in the everyday, true to the tastes of such nationalism that requires both internal and external enemies to survive and thrive. It can and often does lead to constructing the two types of 'enemies' as having similar traits or being two sides of the same coin for making it easy to sell and to be consumed. One does not need to look further than the coupling of Indian Muslims-Pakistan being the tailor-made example of such enemy creation. It, however, does not and will not stop there. Such categorizations and labels or similar ones are reserved for any entity that speaks a different language or refuses to consume such toxic nationalism. And once the labelling is done, silencing to use a euphemistic word becomes easy. This is line with the saying of 'killing a mad dog', for only when the dog can be labelled mad or mad enough can it be eliminated without accountability. Such exercises have become a lot easier in India today with the far from unexpected obliquity of the Indian media, especially the TRP-driven TV media, which has left no stone unturned to prostrate before the whims and diktats of those in power. Hyper-nationalism, war-mongering, hate of many a 'other' is sold like hot cakes day in day out. It is becoming more and more commonplace to draw parallels between the TV media and the infamous Rwandan hate radio which ultimately resulted in genocide.

For the ‘average’ Indian who is not from the margins, their idea of the geographical and political margins of India is nothing much except what the state and an increasingly statist-mouthpiece media especially TV media tells them of it. Therefore, the idea of Kashmir or of the Northeast of India is one of ‘beautiful landscapes full of exotic people some of whom resort to “terrorism” against India’, thereby conveniently obfuscating, broad brushing and strategically making forget ground realities and genuine aspirations of these peoples which are diverse in their own right – from national to sub-national aspirations, from protest against state-abuse to autonomy to greater representation, and so on. But, for the self-proclaimed foot soldiers of India’s national integrity – those who exert considerable power to label – therefore do the groundwork for muffling, obfuscating, and for violent suppression of anyone who dares to have a different idea of India.

What the state requires to ultimately legitimize its violence and to justify its need against such people is that a significant share of the electorate is rendered oblivious of, and/or is silent, and thereby enables, or even cheers such violence as the ultimate altar set is that of national security and national unity. The manufacturing of ‘threat’ to national integrity therefore is sweeping to the point of leaving very little outside the gamut of what or who could be a national security threat. The othering and enemy creation continue unhindered aided and abetted by the media. It is becoming increasingly difficult to be sure of what or who can be considered ‘safe’ and not a ‘threat’ to national security. This has resulted in widespread self-censorship or ‘falling in line’ with the dominant narrative which owing to its grip on power duly rewards allegiance. Therefore, violent crackdown is rampant on any sort of dissent by civil society activists, students, academics, artists; especially by the current government which rather freely invokes the national security act or that draconian law which reeks of a colonial hangover, the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act or the UAPA, on flimsy grounds and is the making of a pervasive, authoritarian state which keeps constringing the scope of what is acceptable and thereby setting dangerous precedents.

The margins in being silenced speak loud and clear. The case of Northeast India or a Kashmir easily highlights the failures of an accommodative larger political nationalism, one that would not be about imposing ‘homogeneity’ and repression on India’s ‘own people’. That is where Kashmir, from an Indian perspective represents a massive failure. What has been one of the reasons why India has held ‘dearly’ to Jammu and Kashmir is that a Muslim-majority State (the only one) can prove to be a marker of the success of India’s secular democracy. What actually has happened leaves a world lot to be desired as far as the success of both ‘secular’ and ‘democracy’ are concerned? For India, the Kashmir that could

otherwise represent the hallmark of a secular Indian nation vis-a-vis neighbouring 'Islamic' Pakistan has been rendered as the darkest chapter of it.

Further, in a politico-cultural sense, the idea of India has unfortunately been shrunk more to the Hindi language dominated States of the so-called 'cow-belt' whereby other Indians are rendered as 'not Indian' or 'not Indian enough' with Hindi being accorded the status of almost the 'essence' of India. The imposition of Hindi has been a contentious issue for long. The fact remains that Hindi speakers feel no need to learn any other Indian language but it is expected of non-Hindi speakers to learn Hindi. There have also been concerns about the imposition of Sanskrit which is an ancient language with an insignificant number of speakers. The New Education Policy (NEP-2020) does very little to assuage these concerns. Clearly, national integration in a linguistically highly diverse country like India cannot happen by way of cultural homogenization via 'imposition' of a single language even if it is spoken by a majority (43.63 % in Hindi's case as per census 2011) or culture. (Vombatkere 2020).

The way hate, intolerance, discrimination, racism has taken root has been alarming for a long time. To speak of national integration while these problems rage on is to fool oneself. Then to vouch for national integration by coercion and homogenization is an assault on the diversity and indeed the very idea of India. These divisive forces have become normalized and are being celebrated in 'New India'. Lynching of minority communities, especially of Muslims at the mere excuse of carrying beef is the new norm. Violence and racism are at an all-time high. Social media has added a different dimension to the intensity and mainstreaming of hate. Casual racism is 'fun and banter'. Experiences of the peoples from the Northeast are harrowing to say the least. From being called Chinese to Nepali, *chinky* and all kinds of slurs spans across streets, professional organizations, university campuses and so on. Even in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, appallingly some have been called "corona" and spat at (Krishnankutty 2020). These peoples have suffered the worst kind of racist abuse almost everywhere for looking 'different' than what has been constructed as the 'typical Indian'. South Indians have had their fair share of discrimination too. The *dalits* have historically seen the most brutal face of majoritarian violence and that knows no respite but has only intensified. Muslims could be on course to be rendered more or less 'second class citizens' in their own country. India, after all, even managed to communalize the spread of COVID-19 (Thapar 2020) by blaming that one group which has the potential of being blameworthy for more or less everything – the Muslims. The widespread Islamophobia in the Indian media may hardly have a parallel. All this has a direct co-relation with the increased incidents of hate-crimes against the minorities. Before the pandemic, there was a full-fledged pogrom (Kamdar 2020) unleashed by Hindu nationalists in North-east Delhi against the Muslims (Clarion India 2020) in late February, 2020. This

is a major statement by Hindu nationalists emboldened by Modi's re-election in 2019 that they intend to leave no stone unturned and destroy everything in their path to turn the secular republic of India into a Hindu *rashtra*. Ultimately, alongside the spilt blood of the minorities, the marginalized and anyone who stands against the Hindu supremacist project will flow the blood of whatever remains of the secular, democratic republic of India.

Conclusion

A top-down national integration that constructs other sensibilities readily as threats and is bent on annihilating them at the altar of a constraining national identity *en route* to a more homogenised national identity is highly problematic. In a diverse secular democratic country like India, such a project is a disaster unlike any other. National, sub-national and post-national sensibilities engage, co-exist with or contest, resist or negotiate with each other. To constrain every other sensibility within the exclusivist 'container' of the national creates more problems than what it is purported to solve. In India's case, therefore, the problems of a constraining unaccommodating national identity are a fundamental challenge to the diversity and the potential of a secular democratic India. Nationalist insecurities and othering feed into each other and are eventually a 'self-goal' in both the long and short run. Federalism in India has taken a major hit. The biggest challenge, however, to the secular, democratic republic of India and an oft celebrated 'idea of India' remains the onslaught of the forces of Hindu nationalism. With Hindu nationalism being the mainstream now and enjoying power, the battle for India is poised to be a decisive one.

The story of India's plunge into hyper-nationalism and Hindutva has been one of constringing the national identity of India and unleashing the toxicities of narrow nationalism, thereby sowing the seeds of the destruction of the very idea of India. Violence, hate, intolerance, discrimination, racism have already sprouted and are running havoc, and these are only early days. Things are set to get worse as the quest for Hindu *rashtra* has intensified. From an international perspective, India has it all to lose. In such a scenario then, if the fundamental source of India's power were to be the "power of India's own example" (Khilnani et. al. 2012), this has suffered a big blow as India has thus far failed to live up to that potential and the trends are anything but encouraging. The perverse impact on security and foreign policy when such decisions are made with an eye on the appeasement of majoritarian domestic aspirations and electoral gains cannot be understated. A look at India's souring relations in its neighbourhood is a case in point. The commonplace Euro-American view of India may well be almost a romanticization of it – its diversity and its colours, the land of spirituality, a vibrant

secular democracy and so on. But the reality of India has been a story of unfulfilled potential, even while its material capabilities or its GDP have increased, of a lack of an accommodative national identity and a story of relentless violence – often directed at its 'own peoples'.

That national integration has always been about articulation of a 'larger identity' in which other identities would either wilfully come into or are able to be coerced into coming under is no panacea. More problematic is the coercion and homogenization of diverse peoples into an ever-constraining national identity. In India today, this national identity is becoming more and more exclusivist. A Hindu India is the most exclusionary and violent project that requires purging of any entity that does not fall in line and this idea has gained more and more traction. That the diverse secular, democratic republic of India is standing on its last legs and battling for its life goes without saying.

One wonders whose India it is anymore. While that plays out, what is becoming increasingly clear is whose India it is not anymore. The questions of alienation and problems inherent in exclusivist violent nationalisms will ravage India's well-being. The list of categories that can be termed 'safe' or relatively so, in 'New India', is fast vanishing. For now, perhaps one can point out one majoritarian combination – Hindu, upper caste, male. The advent and dominance of Hindu nationalism further nails the argument against the increasing problems of India's unaccommodating nationalism and national identity. Whether that is the final nail...time will tell.

However, to respond to Perkovich's (2003) call – has India been gotten 'right' after all? Forget material capabilities, GDP and so on. Most importantly, far from getting India 'right' as a vibrant pluralistic democracy, it has plunged worryingly '*right*' into a narrow nationalism contrary to its very essence. A Hindu nationalist India or a Hindu *rashtra* to a lot of commentators is going to be no India at all, even while we excuse some ahistoricity of the claim of a golden post-colonial India at some point. What is understood is that it is only so near a slide into authoritarianism as it is far from a 'free fall' into an all-encompassing authoritarianism that reeks of fascism. In any case, it is set to be an India-sized tragedy and an annihilation of whatever potential India had as a diverse and pluralist secular democracy.

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