

## **Nationalism and Power Politics: Disruptive Media Narratives in India**

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### **Abstract**

*The political rhetoric all over the world has assumed the slant of verbal violence, threatening everyone and everything around of destruction. In international power politics, nationalistic jingoism has dominated over any rational peace pronouncement. Drawn asunder by economic ambiguities and ambitions coupled with geo-racial expansionist designs, the politico-geographical entities have been the staple news feeds of corporatized media the world over. The media narratives vis-à-vis power politics hinged on socialism vs. free enterprise system. They were personality-centric, willing to attack but unwilling to wound the powers that be. The present media narratives of nationalism all the more pre-suppose a vigorous media literacy campaign in the country.*

**Key words:** Nationalism, Socialism, Gandhian Nationalism and Media narratives

The political rhetoric all over the world has assumed the slant of verbal violence, threatening everyone and everything around of destruction. In international power politics, nationalistic jingoism has dominated over any rational peace pronouncement. Drawn asunder by economic ambiguities and ambitions coupled with geo-racial expansionist designs, the politico-geographical entities have been the staple news feeds of corporatized media the world over. Since the ideo-ideal nationalism has many vicissitudes as pantomimic dynamism becomes its core value, often using religion, language, race, social denominations and categories besides politico-economic variables.

Post-Independence India was impregnated with fertile politico-economic hybridization, taking cues from international power polarities, shorn between American capitalism and the Soviet socialism. However, though tilted towards left his political ideology, Pandit Nehru advocated neutrality that was supposed to be the basis of non-aligned movement. In consonance, the Indian mass media had a confused categorical existence till the end of the twentieth century. Till then, the print medium was mostly controlled by industrialist proprietors ably supported by ideology-driven eminent editors while the electronic media, mainly the radio was the propagandist mouthpiece of the

government, i.e. the political party in power. The political emphasis was on socialistic and secular public order.

The media narratives vis-à-vis power politics hinged on socialism vs. free enterprise system. They were personality-centric, willing to attack but unwilling to wound the powers that be. Nationalism was equated with Nehruvian policies, and the change came with the defeat during the Sino-Indian war of 1962. The nation was jolted out of its complacency and patriotic nationalism could not digest the blow given by the so-called friendly neighbor. The Nehruvian nationalism passed away with him. The contours of Indian nationalism changed with the personalities occupying political hot-seats. The regime of Indira Gandhi made the notion of nationalism acquire a new dimension. The slogan 'Indira is India, India is Indira' made her iconic symbol of nationalism.

The Indian media, known for paradoxical postures, joined the political bandwagon. However, Indira Gandhi always complained of the Indian press being anti-establishment and described it as monopoly press and even advocated decentralization of newspaper ownership. Indira's nationalism was challenged by veteran Socialist leader Jaya Prakash Narayan that resulted in the imposition of internal emergency in 1975. The post-Independence trend is to define nationalism in terms of power equations is not a surprise development. The Indian society is still feudal and hierarchical. It

is an anti-thesis to imitate and measure the governance in terms of western prescriptions.

The power politics of India does not have much democratic tradition. Drawn from the monarchical and feudal background, the Indian power equations promote personality cult. Iconic symbols could be seen from the days of the first prime minister. From Jawahar Lal Nehru, Indira Gandhi, till this day hegemonic iconisation can be seen in Indian politics. The major problem in India is that iconisation and celebrity-deification move beyond politics. Persons of less intellectual caliber use personality syndrome of the populace to grab power. The personality worship in India has reached obscene proportions converting Indian democracy into an entertainment industry of sly sycophants.

Alvin Toffler's prediction that the future breed of politicians would be rudderless leaders has almost come true. The world over one can feel the absence of statesmen-like leaders. Nationalism is used to whip up popular anger, racism, hatred and violence. Democracy, in particular, has been reduced to a street comedy in India. The dramas enacted in Tamilnadu post-Jayalalitha's demise convolute any sense of decency in democracy. The melodrama coupled with the cheap imitation of the deceased is to play to the gallery of the gullible and emotional. All corruption and mismanagement can be cloaked under symbolism and pretension.

Religion and power politics are two faces of the same coin. Religion has become synonymous with nationalism. It is a potent weapon and a symbol of aggressive nationalism. When nationalism becomes aggressive, arrogating religious overtones, violence pervades the society. Lynching by marauding mobs will become the norm. India has witnessed the conflict of concepts, pseudo-secularism vs. pseudo nationalism, a kind of copy book confrontation from accusations of minority appeasement to majoritarian tyranny. Ipso facto, the truth lies somewhere between the two. In India, religion is overtaken by or colluded with caste, making it complex and confounding.

Language is another variable of nationalism, equally hegemonic as religion. In South Asia, we have seen how nations were torn over resentment towards the imposition of another language. The very birth of Bangladesh, the conflict in Sri Lanka as an offshoot of Tamil nationalism against Sinhalese, and postures of protest over the imposition of Hindi in South India are instances of language nationalism. Combining language paranoia with aggressive religious can be lethal for any democratic polity. Theological plus linguistic nationalism will make the state subservient for routinized jingoism.

The place of subaltern sections of the society vis-à-vis nationalism is to be street smart without either understanding the concept or its implications. The top-down

communication of nationalism in the political ladder is to opiate the masses, push them to the street and fight the identified opponent, preferably with unmitigated violence. The media narratives promptly exacerbate insane identification of opponents to crush them over and over. The doctrinaire is to recreate the ephemeral historical glory, deviously sanctified by media tilt and slant. Infinite illusions of national glory, truncated by manipulative jargon and synthetic representation, are piped into the young minds non-stop. The consequence is the wiping out any rationalist's voice, often physically.

Mediated jingoism is fatal, but media silence on nationalist crimes is more fatal. The mass media, as conscience keepers of the nation, are supposed to instill sanity, secular ideals and plurality. Gandhian nationalism was based moral precepts, which had largely influence the followers during the days of freedom struggle. "Bound together, swaraj, swadeshi and sarvodaya operate through non-violence-the core belief given the name 'satyagraha' by Gandhi himself." According to some scholars, Gandhi advocated 'enlightened anarchy.' In the words of Simone Panter-Brick: "Hence, 'enlightened anarchy' is the purposeful insight in which each person will become his own ruler. He will conduct himself in such a way that his behavior will not hamper the well-being of his neighbours..... In an ideal state, there will be no political institution and therefore no political power." Many scholars agree that the concept of

nationalism is substantively religious. It is true that Gandhian nationalism was in a way religio-moralistic. The Mahatma used his newspapers like the *Navjeevan* and the *Young India* to debate his concepts.

Irfan Habib points out that Gandhiji's nationalism never favored parliamentary democracy. "Gandhiji rejected in toto leading Indian nationalists' admiration for constitutional evolution and the development of India into an industrialized, as opposed to Nehru's socialist order (Habib, 2017).

Media dramatization of synthetic political convulsions is one of the greatest features of mediated nationalism. The media lynching of certain characters has reached epidemic proportions. Blunt and blatant propaganda masquerade as patriotic nationalism to impact the gullible masses. Production of hatred has become a national/international avocation. It ranges from North America to India to trump up support for constructing restrictive borders to protect their own ways of life. Well-known author and scholar Ashish Nandy sums up his feelings thus: "Hatred defines our enemies. And that definition is always sharper than that of our allies. That is why all nationalism if they are state-centric, tend to be hate based. The only exceptions are those nationalisms that defy the conventional meaning of nationalism and use it as a synonym of patriotism, a much older word that refers to natural sentiment called territoriality".

Nandy's observation that nationalism is an ideology, especially in present-day circumstances appears true.

Ashish Nandy continues:"..... Statist nationalism seeks a one-to-one relationship with the individual citizens. It suspects all communities and has an instrumental view of all religions, sects, castes as well as other non-state actors-trade unions, NGOs, students' unions, citizen's movements and professional bodies – that can become an alternative means of mobilization and alternative source of power" (Nandi, 2017).

Poet-laureate Rabindranath Tagore never subscribed to the concept of nationalism, Gandhian or otherwise. He called it self-love of nations and pleaded for international cosmopolitanism. This is not the first time that the Indian media has acquiesced to the powers that be.

Today, in the Indian context, the debate is between pseudo-secularism vs. pseudo-nationalism. The whole issue is the legacy of colonial rule and religio-political strategy. Secularism as we understand is a borrowed concept, basically from the west. In many nation-states, it is the religion that decides the method of governance. In India, the movement for Punjabi Suba was lingo-religious in character. According to Carlton Hayes: "Nationalism has its gods- 'the patron or personification of (the) fatherhood, its speculative theology or mythology,' describing the 'eternal post.... And everlasting future' of the nation....."

**Rita Manchanda quotes Aravind Rajgopal in her essay:**

“In his *Politics after Television*, Rajgopal argues that the broadcast of the Ramayan serial on national television provided for the first time a single field of social connectivity across the nation and brought into salience the differences in India’s split publics. However, it was the linguistically divided print media that provided the context in which the contradiction was worked out. That is, the terms of translation between the two split publics- one inhabited by the English language, state-centric, pseudo-secular and alienated press, the other by the vernacular, local and Hindi language press-created a structured set of misunderstandings which the Hindu nationalists exploited” (Manchanda, 2002).

Nationalism is invariably violence-prone. It was only Gandhiji who gave it the character of non-violence. Nationalism is also a tool of hegemony. In power politics, it is used to diffuse the dominant discourse of ideology. History is witness to such events. Any nationalistic discourse need not be rational. Rather it is emotional. The World War II is a fine example of how nationalism was used a play on the emotions of the masses to militarise the nations. Both allied and axis nations made an effective use of nationalistic sentiments through mass media. They had their well-oiled propaganda units working non-stop. The cold war era was no different, as mass media had become the ideological apparatuses of the state (Althusser, 1971).

The social media platforms are the new vehicles to promote nationalistic ideas. Instead of becoming an arena of decent democratic debates, these platforms have become tools of abuse as the language used has no moral framework. Some of the people are trolled so much that they have left these fora in disgust. Beyond a point, the nationalistic discourses become abusive narratives. Added to this is the blatant advocacy of the ruling dispensation’s nationalistic discourse by certain television channels. The panel discussions are one-sided, browbeating the discussants into remorseful silence by the moderator and his aides. The days of objective journalism are replaced by strong and prejudicial advocacy. The corporate ownership of the media, an avid advocate of capitalism and quarterly super profits, is partially responsible for jingoistic nationalism.

Dissent is the bedrock of democracy. Unfortunately, the high priests of nationalism cannot withstand any divergent opinion. Of course, it is not limited to India only. A strong leadership might contribute authoritarian tendencies, sidelining the saner democratic narratives. At the same time, let us not forget that these phenomena are transient as the public opinion itself is not stable. Mass media are supposed to be the guardian angels of democratic values, but when they become the custodians of synthetic values and champions of disruptive narratives, the society as whole declines. The fourth estate should not transform itself into a fifth estate. The mass media

in India should guard against irrational and emotional advocacy of nationalism, for, a subtle difference between nationalism and patriotism exists. Promoters of nationalism mostly prefer war and conflicts to achieve their objects, in contrast to the nationalism of Gandhi that was loaded with peace. That is what makes the difference between Gandhi and other proponents of nationalism in India.

Not much distinction could be seen between capitalism and socialism when it comes to politics of power. Both use media for their vested interests. While capitalism addresses marketplace intelligence of the media consumers, socialism uses rhetorical devices to shame

down the opponents. As media text has become a market product, its manufacturing and packaging have assumed more importance than the societal good. Gandhi identified the role of media to educate the masses as to their defects, a difficult task in times of mass hysteria of nationalism. The Mahatma's nationalism was perhaps the only one of its kind because he understood the importance of socio-political liberation of the country like India, denuded of its wealth, both intellectual and economic. The present media narratives of nationalism all the more pre-suppose a vigorous media literacy campaign in the country.

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