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## Idea of Bharat/India as a Nation: Looking through the Lenses of Sri Aurobindo and Dr. Ambedkar

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### Abstract

By contrasting the viewpoints of Sri Aurobindo and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, this paper explores the philosophical and historical aspects of Indian nationhood. The country, according to Sri Aurobindo, is a “living group-unit of humanity”, a spiritual and cultural unity upheld by Swaraj and anchored in civilizational consciousness. The socio-political aspects of nationalism, on the other hand, are highlighted by Ambedkar, who highlights the need for caste eradication, social justice, and democratic inclusivity as necessary conditions for a genuine Indian country. *The Ideal of Human Unity* (1919) and *Pakistan or the Partition of India* (1946) are compared textually in this study, which places the authors’ claims within broader nationalist ideas. The study shows that while they both insisted on unity, their points of emphasis differed - Aurobindo placed more emphasis on cultural and spiritual integrity, whereas Ambedkar focused on socioeconomic equality and the representation of the underprivileged. By going over these foundational concepts again, the study emphasizes how relevant they are today in discussions about inclusive development, democratic sovereignty, and national identity. The study comes to the conclusion that discussions on Indian nationhood in the twenty-first century can be enhanced by a fair synthesis of Ambedkar’s pragmatism and Aurobindo’s vision.

**Keywords:** Nationhood, Nationalism, Sri Aurobindo, B.R. Ambedkar, Swaraj

### Introduction

The English word ‘nation’ came from the Latin ‘natio’ which represents the children

of the same birth and also a human group of same origin. *Black’s Law Dictionary* defines a nation as: “A large group of people having a

common origin, language, and tradition and constituting a political entity. When a nation is coincident with a state, the term *nation-state* is often used.... A community of people inhabiting a defined territory and organized under an independent government; a sovereign political state...." (Garner 1183) A nation has also been defined as a cultural-political community that has become conscious of its autonomy, unity and particular interests. (Smith 17)

Nations are socially and historically constructed, according to the majority opinion among academics. People have always felt a connection to their family, their traditions, their territorial rulers, and their country; but nationalism, the idea that the state and the nation should work together to form a nation state, did not emerge as a major doctrine until the end of the 18th century, as pointed out by Hans Kohn. (Kohn 2018) Most frequently, the concept of a nation-state was and continues to be linked with the rise of the modern system of states, also known as the "Westphalian system" after the Treaty of Westphalia (1648). A nation, according to Ernest Renan, is a group of people acting on their own free will to create a shared identity:

A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form. (Renan 1882)

Eric Hobsbawm defines nationalism as the ideology that the political and national units should coincide. He views the nation as a changing, evolving, modern construct that is brought into being by nationalism, and not the other way around. According to Ernest

Gellner, nationalism aims to create a single culture or ethnic group living under one "state" or common roof. This is according to Gellner the most crucial tenet of successful states. The worst scenario, according to him, is when a state's head of state is not a member of the ethnic majority that resides within the state's borders.

The nation-state was perhaps the most perplexing political entity of its time, particularly as it developed in Europe during the nineteenth century. It has had a significant influence on the contemporary world. Nationality is one of the fundamental factors influencing how we as individuals identify ourselves. The concept of nation is generally considered as having its genesis in western modes of thought. India, was indeed a politically fragmented realm from the Western perspective. However, the theories of nation and nationalism can be traced back to the Vedic era. The Vedic concept of 'rastra' may be considered as synonym to 'nation' to some extent, but different on several fronts. The primary difference between the two is that 'Rastra' is more of an ethnic-spiritual concept while 'Nation' is a cultural concept.

The present study is an attempt to understand the concept of nation and its corollary terms from varied perspectives. While Sri Aurobindo, in his *The Ideal of Human Unity* (1919), opines that a nation is considered to be a real unity instead of an empire which is a political unity and that unity is utterly destructible but not a nation or a real unity, Dr. Ambedkar in *Pakistan or the Partition of India* (1946) deals with the idea of India as a nation along with other corollary issues. Dr. Ambedkar's efforts to unite India by cutting the internal divisions are hotly contested and underappreciated because he is still only known as a 'liberating leader of the Dalits'. Ambedkar's ideas about a nation that is inclusive in nature have the potential to be connected with his views on caste annihilation, securing rights for the underprivileged class,

representing the oppressed in political affairs, egalitarian economic arrangements, women's rights, and thoughts on democracy.

#### **Sri Aurobindo's theory of Nation:**

Sri Aurobindo was a philosopher, poet, a yogi and one of the prominent Indian nationalist leaders who played a significant role in the Indian independence movement. He was the first political leader in India who openly put forward the idea of complete independence 'Swaraj' for India in his newspaper *Bande Mataram*.

According to Sri Aurobindo, a nation is considered to be a real unity instead of an empire which is a political unity. A political unity is that type of unity that can be destroyed by one or more sudden blows coming from outside, but a nation may be destroyed only when the inner parts of it refused to be united with each other anymore. A nation is utterly different from that of an empire. A nation is practically considered to be indestructible, until it destroys from within. Empire is political machinery, and hence in due course of time it has to be crushed. But because a nation is not a political unit, hence it seems to be immortal in nature. A nation is considered to be the 'living group-unit of humanity' from which we can emerge into internationalism.

In ancient India, the nation-state was comprised of seven-fold organs, i.e. *Saptanga tattva* (in *Manusamhita*) or *Sapta-prakriti* (in Kautilaya's *Arthashastra*). These seven-fold organs or *saptanga* of the nation-state were – *Swami* i.e. King/Sovereign ruler; *Amatya* i.e. Ministers; *Janapada* i.e. country or region or province and its residents; *Durga* i.e. secured fort or town or Capital; *Kosh* i.e. treasury; *Danda* i.e. punishment procedure given to the criminals; and *Mitra* i.e. group of different faithful nations and kings. These altogether are called as the Organic theory of the State. This theory provides description of state from the perspective of natural sciences as it emphasizes upon the union between body and

its organs. Just like without body no organ can exist, similarly no individual can exist without nation. Thus, Sri Aurobindo points out that Individuals are like organs of the body called nation-state and the relationship between state and individual is same as the relationship of different bodily organs with that the body. Nations are not possible without the existence of an individual within it. Aurobindo clearly advocated that without individuals no nation can exist and similarly no individual can unify with other individuals without the existence of a nation. Although he had accepted the two-way relationship that exists between nation and individuals but he never actually accepted that individuals were organs of nation rather he considered individuals as the core of the nation.

Aurobindo is of the opinion that the foreign invasions be it Middle-Eastern invasion or British invasion helps a lot to unify a diverse nation like India by evoking feelings of nationality and national oneness in the consciousness of every Indian inhabiting India's land. Aurobindo had firm believe that the destruction of ancient European empires, who were diverse in their culture, customs and religions of their people, were the result of their failure to unify. Ancient empires like Greece, Italy, China, Persia, Arabia, Israel, were diverse in cultural and geographical fields and thus their lack of unification made them perish. Sri Aurobindo opined that the feelings of nationality that leads to nation-state is nothing but a sign of domination and supremacy of the ruling class and he developed this perspective after witnessing various nations attempt to secure political power and economic hegemony through control over other nations at the time of World War I and II. Thus, according to Aurobindo, western domination over China, Egypt and Arab world via repression and Japan, Germany and Italy's declaration of war against Allied Force were pertinent example of it.

Sri Aurobindo believes that India is a nation-state and for the sake of its advancement and progress, 'Swaraj' must exist within it. Sri Aurobindo views 'Swaraj' as life and as a way of salvation as well as salvation itself. Just like without breathing none can exist similarly without 'Swaraj' no nation can exist and thus he believes the reason behind the downfall of the great Roman empire was lack of 'Swaraj'. Sri Aurobindo emphasized upon the necessity of 'Swaraj'. Thus, the British colonizers were never in favor of the demand of 'Swaraj' or complete independence in the Indian dominion, rather than dominion status as advocated by Anne Besant. The same believe was also shared initially by some congress leaders who demanded for colonial self-government under the head of the British constituency in the fear that India and Indians were not prepared for complete independence but such fear seemed completely useless for Sri Aurobindo as he believed 'Swaraj' was mandatory for India.

#### Dr. Ambedkar on Nation:

Dr. Bhim Rao Ramji Ambedkar is one of the most celebrated Indian leaders, thinkers, and social philosophers of the 20th century. Over the years his ideas have become stronger, more relevant and widespread, even though he mostly contributed in 20<sup>th</sup> century. At any specific point of time several narratives can co-exist along with the one grand narrative that shapes the discourse. While various other narrative did exist, the grand narrative before independence of India was freedom from British colonial rule and that was the dominating narrative of that period. Other prominent narrative, at that time, came from Dr. Ambedkar, who talked about freedom of India from various social evils like inequality, untouchability etc. Dr. Ambedkar believed that without upliftment of these people, Indian freedom struggle was incomplete. This struggle, in the very first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was not only for gaining political power from foreign rule but also for

establishing a modern society based on equality. Thus, the struggle was to gain freedom from external powers as well as from internal inequality, marginalization and oppression.

In *Pakistan or the Partition of India* (1946), Ambedkar expanded on the concepts of nationality and nationalism. He defines nationality as a "consciousness of kind, awareness of the existence of a tie of kinship" (Ambedkar 29) and nationalism as "the desire for a separate national existence for those who bounded by this tie of kinship". (Ambedkar 37) As per Ambedkar, there can be feeling of nationality without feeling of nationalism but there can't be nationalism without the existence of the feelings of nationality. According to Dr. Ambedkar two conditions must be met to lead the feelings of nationality to nationalism. First condition is that there must be will to live as a nation and second is that there must be a territory which can be occupied by the nationalism and converted into state. Dr. Ambedkar's *Pakistan or the Partition of India* primarily focused on the question whether both Hindu and Muslims are two different nations or not, along with analysis of contemporary social, political conditions and historical backdrop. Shanti Swaroop Baudh, the publisher of the book says about the book:

The work was distinguished for an objective review of the Muslim League's demand for the partition of India and of the social, economic, political and historical backdrop that triggered it. While vividly and elaborately describing the contemporary political developments and suggesting the problem to be settled through an international tribunal, the book claims as essential and inevitable the freedom and independence of India.



The book gives a through account of the socio-political scenario of India fighting for its independence. All the prominent political bodies of then political scenario eventually agreed on the demand of complete independence from the clutches of British Imperialism. Dr. Ambedkar says that there was not an agreement upon maintaining this freedom that India was striving to get from the yoke of British Imperialism. Dr. Ambedkar broadened the socio-economic foundation of Indian nationalism, which first aided in the attainment of freedom and afterwards served to steer the nation towards progress. Indian nationalism eventually assisted in the rise of new parallel sectarian socio-political currents. This sectarian nature of Indian nationalism persisted even after the nascent anti-imperialist national liberation movement. Ambedkar's ultimate goal was to unite the people of India as he believed that this is prerequisite for country's progress and evolution. When he talked about freedom of India from external forces, he did mean freedom from internal forces as well. He said:

There can be no two opinions on the question that the sole object of political power is the use to which it can be put in the cause of social and economic reform. The whole struggle for political power would be barren and bootless effort if it was not justified by the feeling that, because of the want of political power, urgent and crying social evils are eating into the vitals of society and are destroying it. (Ambedkar 268)

Ambedkar was undoubtedly opposed to unfair stratification in India, but it is incorrect to argue that he was against the nation. He vehemently opposed the ruling elite's practiced brand of nationalism which incorporated freedom of India from British hegemony but not from social evils. The Congress party ensured to evoke 'nationality' among the Indian masses as it would assure

the needed support for liberation struggle against British rule. The unwillingness of the national leadership to question and address long unresolved social contradiction prevalent in Indian society compelled leaders like Dr. Ambedkar to question Indian National Congress and the Muslim League's silence over social evils. The measures, which the Congress adopted significantly contributed to strengthen and broaden the social base of nationalism and it was actually the outcome of Dr. Ambedkar's efforts to annihilate caste discrimination and establish unity among the citizens.

Dr. Ambedkar was neither merely a leader of the schedule castes or opposed to the idea of nationalism. He was a national figure who recognized the issues facing the most oppressed people and worked to mainstream them. Ambedkar made a connection between the concepts of democracy and nationalism and the pervasive, unfair social inequalities. According to Ambedkar, nationalism is a dynamic process of social assimilation and therefore nationalism is to receive its perfect harmony in the realization of social brotherhood of men irrespective of caste, class, colour and creed. Nationalism is not opposed to humanism or individualism as one can enjoy complete individual freedom within a nationalist framework.

While speaking about achieving freedom for India, Ambedkar's ultimate aim was to bring the populace together as he firmly believed that this would ensure the continuity of development and a having a great future. Before Ambedkar, India had never seen such a concerted attempt to put society before politics and then link the two.

### **Conclusion**

It may be concluded that narratives regarding nation and its corollary terms are varied as nation is viewed differently by different thinkers. While Sri Aurobindo considers nation as the 'living group-unit of

humanity' from which we can emerge into internationalism, Dr. Ambedkar explored the conditions that leads to progress of the nation. Sri Aurobindo's theory of nation and nationalism deals with his views on it in his book *The ideal of Human Unity*. Sri Aurobindo calls nation a real unity as it can perish only when its members refused to be united. He even compares nation with political unity which can be destroyed from external forces. He even emphasized how crucial 'Swaraj' is for nation and also talked about the relationship between individuals and nation.

Dr. Ambedkar, in the similar manner, talked about nation and how a nation like India can attain its progress. He pointed out the flaws of Indian national movement that did not address the issue of prevalent social issues. He claimed that nation and nationalism is possible only when there is unity among the members of same nationality and thus evoked unity among the citizens irrespective of caste, creed and colour. Dr. Ambedkar, being the chairman of the drafting committee, became instrumental in achieving his goal of establishing unity among populace.

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