



Nationalism as a Bourgeois Drug: A Critical Perspective

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Abstract

The word 'nation' came from the old French word 'nacion' meaning 'birth, place of origin'. Now the word 'nation' refers to a large body of people, associated with a particular territory, that is sufficiently conscious of its unity to seek or to possess a government peculiarly its own. And the word 'nationalism' defines the spirit of aspirations common to the whole of a nation. Nationalism holds that each nation should govern itself, free from outside interference. This notion gives birth to the transfer of power from the white colonialists to the pretended black nationalists. Before Independence in the colonised countries, some people traded the concept of nationalism as opium which made the colonised people intoxicated with the dreams for a better future. Like opium dealer who gets profit by destroying opium addict, the merchants of nationalism enriched their own condition through the blood of the addicted nationalist fighter. For instance, Pradyot Kumar Bhattacharya, who was hanged for killing Mr. Robert Douglas, wrote a letter to his mother. In this letter he said that if someone would come to ravish his mother, he would instantly attack that person instead of going to a court. In this sense, he had assassinated Mr. Douglas for saving Mother India. But after Independence his mother said that people, who were in political power, labeled her as the mother of a murderer. Our Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore did not miss to paint the scenario of the so called Nationalist Movement. The purpose of this article is to look at nationalism as a product manufactured by the bourgeois class.

Keywords

Nationalism, bourgeois, barbarism, Tagore, humanism, Hitler

Rabindranath's "The Home and the World" is a brilliant portrait of socio-political scenario of British India. At the wake of the early twentieth century, nationalistic movement in India reached at its peak. The patriotic waves touched almost each and every individual standing on its shore. Nationalistic leader captivated common people as the flame of a lamp does to insects. Even, it did not spare the typical Indian women. If Mother Sita were present there, she would jump into that fire. In "The Home and the World", Bimala who was a representative of the Classical Indian women could not but throw her body and soul into the oblation of patriotic fire. She was basically a mild hearted woman. She was very affectionate towards her husband Nikhil. She is almost like the worshipper of her husband. Taking the dust of Nikhil's feet was a sign of her utmost reverence towards her husband. She wanted to remain inside the encirclement of her home. It was her husband, Nikhil, who intended to drag her out of the circle. Who could imagine that this type of woman could be affected to the flattery of patriotism? Even at the beginning of the novel, we can see that she was very indifferent towards the rebellious Sandip. But at her first encounter in a rally, she was almost washed up by the fiery speech of Sandip. Then she transformed herself from Mother Sita into the goddess Kali through the help of the flattery of Sandip; "You are the Queen Bee of our hive, and we the workers shall rally around you. You shall be our centre, our inspiration" (Tagore 47).

Bimala was so addicted to the concept of nationalism that she became a puppet in the hands of Sandip. Like Delilah, she is persuaded to steal her husband's money. The different kinds of treatment which Bimala received from Nikhil and Sandip point out the distinction between their ideologies of nationalism. Nikhil assumed that nationalism should bring social reformation rather than political reformation. Nikhil's intention was to make Bimala bathed in the light of modernism but Sandip wanted to wake the sleeping thanatos within Bimala so that she would become Bellona. In Nikhil's view, Indians should be concerned about the progress of human races and not about nation. Universality was in the core of Indian tradition. India has been a safe haven for all

types of human races from the beginning till now. Though there are differences in colour and race, Indians should identify the other as a human being. On the other hand, if one accepts Sandip's philosophy, he would invite destruction because love for one's own country gives birth to hate for other's country. Nikhil is the mouthpiece of Tagore himself. According to him, social reformation will bring prosperity in the human world whereas Sandip views that political reformation is urgent which needs agitation. This agitation adds fire to human being like a piece of wood which not only burns other but also turns itself into ashes. According to Tagore, nation is "the aspect of a whole people as an organized power" (Tagore 4).

On the contrary, society is concerned with the individual progress and prosperity in cooperation with each other and this will bring the all-round development of human race. Rabindranath states that nationalism turns human into inhuman as when a country begins "to grow and brings in harvests of wealth, then it crosses its boundaries with amazing rapidity. For then it goads all its neighboring societies with greed of material prosperity, and consequent mutual jealousy, and by the fear of each other's growth into powerfulness" (Das 421).

Hence the very concept of nationalism brings selfishness and narrowness. As a result the bonds of society will be shattered and Satan will come to chase humanity. There will be "Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain; / And we are here as on a darkling plain / Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight, / Where ignorant armies clash by night" (Arnold 34-37).

This 'darkling' 'clash' of nationalism is very artistically painted by Tagore's sketch in "The Home and the World". Sandip encouraged people to boycott British goods. In Tagore's words, this idea of the nationalistic movement "uprooted students and tempted them away from their career before any real provision was made". This movement makes the rich Indian businessmen of that time richer whereas it makes poor Indians poorer. It was merely impossible for the downtrodden labour class people to bear the burden of expensive Indian goods instead of cheap British goods. On the other hand, the bourgeois class of that time started swelling at the cost of the sweat of the downtrodden people. Almost all the educational institutions were shut down in supporting non-cooperation movement. All these did not miss Tagore's attention. Tagore expressed his strong disapproval of this kind of agitation. This is clearly visible in his letter to a professor, named Charles Freer Andrews at Santiniketan, where he wrote; "What irony of fate is this, that I should be preaching cooperation of cultures between East and West on this side of the sea just at the moment when the doctrine of Non-Cooperation is preaching on the other side?" (Tagore 258).

Education is the backbone of humanity. If anyone wants to destroy a nation, he should simply demolish the education system of that nation. Attack against education is the most barbaric work. In Milton's words;

"Who kills a man kills a reasonable creature, God's image but he who destroys a good book, kills reason itself, kills the image of God, as it were in the eye. Many a man lives a burden to the earth, but a good book is the precious lifeblood of a master spirit, embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life" (Milton 7).

During that period, schools and institutions could not escape from the wildfires of nationalistic movement. This is also reflected in R. K. Narayan's Swami and Friends. Though these are fictions, yet the facts were true. Even after the independence, this type of attack can be traced without any hard labour. The teaching of English in West Bengal had been abolished since 1982 till 2006 by the shrewd Left Front government. It is an irony that the children, coming from the family of the Left Front Government, were used to send to English medium school. However, Rabindranath opposed nationalistic attack on education during that chaotic period. His purpose of establishing Visva Bharati was to make a harmonious unity of East and West. He stated to his son in a letter that this university would "be the connecting thread between India and the world...I want to make that place somewhere beyond the limits of nation and geography - the first flag of victorious universal humanism will be planted here. To rid the world of the suffocating coils of national pride will be the task of my remaining years" (Tagore 179). Even Rabindranath did not hesitate to struggle with the British government for getting permission to call on distinguished professors from Germany and other enemy countries to teach at Santiniketan.

Attention may now be turned to the violence of the nationalistic movement. There were three different layers of violence. On the first layer, there was barbarism of White Class animals, which were mostly done through black class animals. For instance, the massacre that took place on 13th April in 1919 was in reality done by the Sindh Sikh regiment, the black Indians under the order of Reginald Dyer, a White British man. Then on the second layer, there were violence, which were done by the freedom fighters. Interestingly, this type of violence, usually performed by the nationalistic fighters like Khudiram Bose, Prafulla Chaki, Benoy, Badal, Dinesh and others, was in fact instigated by some invisible pseudo nationalistic leaders who were directed by more invisible Indian bourgeois class of that time. In "The Home and the World", Rabindranath tried to unmask this type of invisible creature with a gentle touch. Amulya, whose true passion and love for country is unquestionable, is in fact directed by Sandip who cares nothing but his own personal goal. Sandip, who infuriated the innocent people for taking up arms against the White British men, stated; "I want Western military style to prevail, not the Indian."

During the nationalistic movement, the nationalistic leaders declared to boycott everything which belonged to the British. Being infatuated with the concept of nationalism, the martyrs had been shedding their young blood for a utopian society. Hence after

1947, the native Indians should have been started to live in heaven. And no pains and sufferings or no bloodshed and riots could reach this heaven. But after independence, most of the people cry out; "I fall upon the thorns of life! / I bleed!"

It is an irony of fate that after independence, the Indians have been walking through the British's trodden path. For instance, the name of the first Chief of Army Staff of independent India was General Sir Robert Lockhart, a white man, not a black Indian. The Indians are following the Europeans in almost every step of their life. Their eating and drinking, their dress, their trade and everything are regulated by the bourgeois class. For instance, people use to purchase those kinds of dresses which are used by actors or actresses in a film. One may wonder how such a large number of these dresses became available in the market immediately after the release of that film. Could not these be made before the photographing of that film? One may assume that these were manufactured earlier and that a sample was subsequently sent for the film shooting. Even this bourgeois class does not spare people's thinking. The thinking process is very much affected by the mass media which are controlled by the upper class society. There is no typical Indian way of thinking. In education, games, entertainment, business, politics, and religion, everywhere, Indians follow the West because they imagine themselves to be inferior to Westerns. There is a question hanging in the air as to whether this is the utopian society that the nationalistic leaders talked about. Where is nationalism? Why could Indians not preserve their age-old culture? Even after independence, they think that white people are real human beings. They want to identify themselves as human beings by following Western culture. Indians cannot break away from this Westernised tradition simply because they fear being looked down upon as inferior creatures. Rabindranath Tagore foresaw various kinds of fear which are clearly visible in "The Home and the World";

"Our country...has been brought to death's door through sheer fear-from fear of gods down to fear of the police; and if you set up, in the name of freedom, the fear of some other bogey...Fear is to regulate how people are to dress, where they shall trade, or what they must eat, then is man's freedom of will utterly ignored, and manhood destroyed at the root" (Tagore 76).

Finally, the most insidious and invisible form of violence appears on the third layer. In most cases, the family of a revolutionist has to suffer from this type of violence. For instance, the mental violence inflicted upon the family of Subhas Chandra Bose whenever a newspaper printed a cartoon depicting Bose as a puppy of Hideki Tojo illustrates this phenomenon. Even after independence, this type of violence continues. Recently, one of Bengal's pseudo-intellectuals labelled the Indian army as rapists. It may be wondered how much mental violence is endured by the families of dead soldiers who became martyrs while serving the nation whenever they hear such labeling. These are no longer exceptional cases but have now become a tradition.

It is easier to find other's hypocrisy than that one's own. Nationalistic addiction and the hypocrisy of the nationalistic merchant class become more clearly visible when the nationalistic boundary is observed from outside. In the case of Pakistan, a strong nationalistic sentiment persists despite their internal struggles and extreme poverty. Love for one's own nation often gives rise to hatred towards another nation. Nationalistic leaders in Pakistan frequently attempt to export terrorism to India under the guise of nationalism. The poor and downtrodden people of Pakistan often become forgetful of their own crisis. After any terrorist attack on India, they assume that their nation is progressing; however, in reality, they are exploited by their own leaders. As a result, their economic condition deteriorates day by day. There are also three layers of violence. On the first layer, economic violence is inflicted upon them by their nationalistic leaders. Some individuals join terrorism in order to escape this economic violence. On the second layer, there is the violence that they inflict upon India in the form of terror, being misguided by the nationalistic merchant class. On the third level, two sub-types of violence may be observed. The first sub-type is the violence encountered from the Indian army or from the Indian constitution. The second sub-type of violence is what their families have to endure after their death or punishment. Recently, Sri Lankan nationalism has also revealed these three layers of violence. On the first layer, there is economic violence inflicted upon the common people by nationalistic leaders who are directed by the Chinese bourgeoisie. On the second layer, there is the violence in the form of protests against economic exploitation. Again, such protests may be incited by certain invisible nationalist merchants who stand behind the curtain for their own personal interests. On the third level, there is violence inflicted upon the protesters by their national army. Everyone claims to love their country and to be nationalists. It is an irony of fate that these nationalists are fighting against each other 'on a darkling plain'. Only the Almighty knows who the nationalists are and who the anti-nationalists are. When the situation in Ukraine is examined, the effects of the addiction to nationalism can clearly be perceived. There are also three layers of violence. On the first layer, there is violence inflicted upon the Ukrainian people by the Russian army, which is driven by nationalist ideology and influenced by its nationalist merchant class. On the second layer, there is violence inflicted on the Russian army by Ukrainians who are also driven towards nationalism by their nationalist leaders, who are indirectly influenced by arms-manufacturing companies. It is an irony of fate that those who sponsor nationalism do not themselves encounter violence. One of the liberal promoters of nationalism has revealed this hypocrisy by stating: "I say to the Ukrainians in this moment of agony, we are with you. We are praying for you and your families and we are on your side" (Johnson 00:00:44-53).

On the third level, there is violence inflicted upon those who have lost their near and dear ones in this war and upon those who have been forced to leave their homes. Their pain reaches its peak when they discover the red-handed capture of the wife of a former Ukrainian M. P. Igor Kotvitsky, carrying millions of dollars and euros while crossing the Hungarian border. Even a brief reflection on the world wars reveals that nationalism has often brought massive destruction. After the First World War, Adolf

Hitler began to invoke nationalism in Germany. What an irony that the same Hitler later attacked Poland in the Second World War in order to destroy Polish nationalism. When nationalism is adopted as an ideology, it becomes difficult to determine whether to praise or condemn such actions. Hitler claimed to be acting for the benefit of his nation, while Poland defended itself for its own national interest. In such circumstances, the question arises: how can nationalism bring peace?

The existence of nationalism can be observed in all eras. It often emerges strongly when a nation seeks protection. England is frequently blamed for binding many countries in fetters. Ironically, their forefathers were themselves bound in shackles by various tribes of other nations. After knowing all the pains and sufferings of slavery, how could one nation impose slavery upon another? It is not merely a matter of nationhood but a matter of dominance, which originates in early childhood. Whenever a child starts to identify himself in front of a mirror, he thereby recognises the difference from the 'Other'. Then, he becomes jealous of his father for ruling over his mother. After that, he channels his jealousy towards his friend for attention. Next, he becomes envious of others for power. Finally, he becomes jealous of other nations for achieving absolute power to dominate the world. In this case, the only weapon is nationalism, which is instilled in innocent people who are highly susceptible to its influence. Thus, nationalism is promoted by the upper class to exploit the proletariat for their benefit. As Nobel laureate Tagore has rightly defined:

“Yes, this is the logic of the Nation. And it will never heed the voice of truth and goodness. It will go on in its ring-dance of moral corruption, linking steel unto steel, and machine unto machine; trampling under its tread all the sweet flowers of simple faith and the living ideals of man” (Tagore 15).

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