

Emergence of Nationhood and Culture in South Asia: Unity despite Divergence

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Asia has for long been understood as the exoticized 'other' in Western discourses. From the Western standpoint of reference it is seen as divergent and essentially different. The idea of nationhood as it has emerged in South Asia, from the Western perspective, is diametrically opposed to their own concept of nation and nation-building as they adopt a Eurocentric referential index. However, as we undertake a closer scrutiny of the process of nation-building in Asia we see similarities, largely because of a common, historical colonial past and struggles for independence around an overlapping timeframe.

Through this paper, I would like to focus on studying the emergence of nationhood across South Asia by using culture as a tool of investigation - as object and subject both - to make apparent as Comparative study enriches us, in seeing nations within South Asia in relation with each other. These 'imagined communities'¹ within South Asia become sites of enquiry through the interface of culture, politics and economy with resonances of identity movements and nation-building that bind them, despite the ostensible multiplicity and plurality of race, region, religion and ethnicity within them. Comparative literature and analysis enables us to study nations

and their literature in relation with each other.

While the methodological tool used herein is comparison, the comparison holds % as is the case here % a mirror to societies and cultures that have emerged within their geographical terrains, over time, as markers of both difference and unity. While homogenizing them is not the intention here, the avowed aim is studying them as different from each other and yet similar in many aspects, as this paper proposes to make apparent.

This study would attempt to break stereotypes that have been created by Orientalism and post-colonial discourse since as Swarupa Gupta asserts "it is only in the so-called 'inner' arena of culture that nationalism's journey begins, and this nationalism is sharply delinked from public discourses of the outer sphere".² The objective then would be to move away from "Western post-Enlightenment discourses and colonial hegemonic forms of power-knowledge", to see not South Asia against itself but rather as being and emerging with its "vast, rich cultural heritage, resources, histories, memorializations, and actual people's movements"³ over time that begin to reveal sites of intersection, often similar, despite the multiplicity and plurality under which it is so often subsumed. The paradigm of 'Asian nationalisms' offers hope rather than stasis and these "contextual connections may form the foundation for imagining a reincarnated and contextually connected Asian spatiality"⁴ which enables us to experience movements and practices across the vast spectrum of South Asian nationalism(s).

The central argument here will be explicated with reference to two selected literary texts from South Asian countries. I would be considering the following literary texts (1) Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* and (2) Tahmima Anam's (Bangladeshi writer) *A Golden Age*, to enable this conceptual understanding of nation-building, identity formation and protest movements within the unit of the 'nation' through the study of literature. Hence, by using literature to understand certain crucial aspects here, we begin to see the manifestations of culture already, as offering modes of investigation and study, in understanding unity and divergence within nations that have experienced similar processes of nation-building.

The political upheavals that swept the Indian subcontinent with the creation of East Pakistan and West Pakistan in 1947 and subsequently the

creation of Bangladesh in 1971, can be taken as sites of enquiry for understanding the processes through which a nation is born. This includes within its ambit, the sacrifices and violence individuals face and the sequestration of identity along regional, religious lines to etch out those illusory 'shadow lines' that geographically mark out the terrains which define what is within as one's own and what lies outside as alien or different. We may begin to ask then, what is a nation? Does it follow a process of historical continuity with the past or is it something that is new, delinked from any prior existence in the past? Benedict Anderson states validly in his seminal text, *Imagined Communities* that:

The nation is imagined as *limited* because even the largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations. No nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind. [...], it is imagined as a *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings.⁵

Clearly then, this paradoxical concept of a nation iterates unity and difference both. It is imagined rather than real since the boundaries that mark a nation are forever illusory and in the process of being re-defined. But the principle that, it generally seeks to homogenize what lies within its borders and mark as different or excluded what lies outside those borders, then makes us wonder how the nation-state (which is by and large a Western construct, as understood in the modern world) came into existence. Did the nations that emerged in South Asia undergo a similar process of the politics of inclusion and exclusion? The nationalist movements that aimed, at first, in gaining liberation from the colonizer % which from the standpoint of this paper was Britain, since the discussion will be confined to India-Pakistan-Bangladesh i.e., the Indian subcontinent.

Also quite obviously, a reference to India and Pakistan's Independence in 1947, the Partition of India-Pakistan and the creation, hence, of East and West Pakistan, unsettle any closure of the category of nation, as it gets

redefined through resistance and protest movements and may be read as 'sub-nationalisms'. A term which is coined to define what goes on within the nation through identity and protest movements, working on the logic of defining 'us' and 'them', a divide which coterminously occurs across regional, religious, ethnic and often racial lines, even within a nation. The entity of the nation, by its very logic of being a home to people of multiple identities, faiths and beliefs, defies any seemingly essentialist definition that homogenizes it into one stable unit. It undergoes processes of resistance, exclusion, seclusion and an 'othering' by which its people perceive differences amongst each other.

This is a common thread that links most struggles within a nation to other nations, here in particular to struggles for independence in South Asia. The countries of South Asia "-- (especially the colonized parts), [...] -- still remain fragmented, fissured and fissioned. Such division within, and between countries in Asia seem to depict an Asia against itself. Contemporary post-colonial predicaments of fragmentation, separatism, and division are considered as legacies of colonialism".⁶

To understand the concept of Asian nationalisms, Swarupa Gupta points out that "cultural and political nationalisms, then, need to be seen as co-eval, sometimes parallel, and sometimes inextricably interlinked".⁷ Through the interface of culture and politics one may observe what constitutes a nation, its people and accord a level of subjectivity to people who belong to South Asian countries. One cannot expect to have here "any single uniform model of Asian nationalism", [...], because nationalism as a political, cultural, social or economic phenomenon does not have any universalist, single form".⁸ The idea is to be able to perceive Asian nationalism as different from the dominant, hegemonic European/ Western form and yet see clearly similar "forms and patterns of nationhood, developing in Asia along specific trajectories".⁹

Our purpose of study becomes twofold then, one, to see the European model of nation-state formation as hegemonic and, second, to see the similar processes of identity formation in South Asia. Clearly with respect to the European model, if we use cultural systems as the mode of understanding the rise of nation-states, "the two relevant cultural systems" were "the *religious*

community and the *dynastic realm*".¹⁰ The growth of print-culture in capitalist enterprises further contributed to the popularity of the concept of the nation.¹¹ Here Anderson notes that "the convergence of capitalism and print technology on the fatal diversity of human language created the possibility of a new form of imagined community, which in its basic morphology set the stage for the modern nation".¹²

Print technology, did contribute to a large extent even to later, emergent nation-states, and is not a feature intrinsic to only the Western world. But largely, the Western model of nationalism, nation-state can be seen as different from the Asian model of nationalism, where different histories of the two continents and political, economic, cultural situations reveal divergent forms of nationalism. However, within South Asia strictly speaking, we find that nationalist and identity movements are strikingly similar. Here we find cultural nationhood often "entwined with political nationalisms at levels", more so during "the mid/late colonial period".¹³ The colonial history that countries in South Asia share, make it possible to trace its trajectory on similar lines and offers hope in beginning to study the "new variants of nationalism from Asian experiences"¹⁴ as individual and with a history of their own -- no longer subsumed under the overarching Western discourses on nationalism and their role in the rise of nation-states.

The particular concern vis-a-vis South Asian nationalisms then being "the ontology of being and becoming a nation", where "the past, present, and in a sense -- possible futures, interlock to give expression to Asian nationhood and identity movements".¹⁵ If there are differences in this rich mosaic of Asian nationalisms, there are also points of commonalities and bonds, more so with regard to India-West Pakistan and East-West Pakistan where the point of rupture of a single nation came through Partition.

These experiences define the multiple practices of South Asian nationhood and offer a comparative study of the concept of nation across the looking glass. A metaphor used to define identity as created through a dual process of identification and othering. Only to remind oneself that what one sees across the borders was carved, at the time of Partition, out of one nation and yet there is the notion of difference implicit within it. Communities that had lived harmoniously till a point, at once were divided.

Geographical contours and borders became the legitimized means of articulating that difference and also of claiming a territory as one's own, through which the concept of nationhood in the Indian subcontinent emerged.

Nation-building is an arduous task, especially when what is to be excluded or included comes into question. Important questions surface here, like "what were the levels of interconnection between nationhood and identity in Asian nationalisms? Which identity was prioritized/legitimized over others in claims to nationhood? Which identities were forgotten or submerged? [...] Which identities were rescued from history and reconfigured so that ancient bonds could become modern unities?"¹⁶. These are some of the ways by which we can construe the identity politics of inclusion and exclusion, through which Asian nationalisms came into being. Obviously then, certain identities assumed hegemonic centrality while others remained in the periphery, or in other words, were marginalized. The comparative mode adopted here would be to see these nationalisms "through the prism of connected histories"¹⁷.

I now move on to specific literary texts to render this discussion in clearer terms. Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* is a novel that shows the force of nationalism, traversing periods from the Second World War to Partition, civil strife in post-partition Dhaka and simultaneously a riot in Calcutta, where the anonymous narrator lived as a child. The main concern of the novel as spelt out in the title is that what is across two nations, separating them, drawing them apart as two separate nations are nothing more than 'shadow lines' illusory and a result of political end-games that rift a nation apart % which forever keep the identities divided on regional, religious, linguistic, racial or ethnic grounds.

The narrator begins to see the world through the eyes of his mentor, uncle, Tridib. He says that he knew of places he hadn't even travelled to yet because his uncle "Tridib had given me (*him*)¹⁸ worlds to travel in and he had given me (*him*) eyes to see them with"¹⁹. In the backdrop of the novel we begin to see historical events unfolding, like the Second World War that had shaken the entire world, the period of Partition and riots that happened simultaneously in Calcutta and in civil strife stricken Dhaka, where his

uncle Tridib is killed by a violent mob. The events as they emerge through the narrative offer us an understanding of the darker moments of nation-building marked by violence, bloodshed and the spectre of inhumanity that haunts a nation, recognizing only difference and otherness. Cartography and through it the sense of alignment that is configured through the discipline of geography became the means of codifying space, marking areas beyond the boundaries as at once a threat and alien to one's own sense of culture and identity.

Memory, photographs, private and even public narratives-- by which I allude to the official records that the grown up narrator looks for at the Teen Murti House library in Delhi many years later in 1979 while attending a lecture there% become the mode of chronicling the process of nation formation through the categories of time and space.

The novel follows a non-linear pattern, offering to the reader, moments of introspection between the silences and gaps that intersperse the historical flow of events. The events of 1964, in which the narrator's uncle Tridib lost his life, are significant for him even if they do not find a recording in official history, where an event like a war gains significance, while local events are often subjected to erasure or insignificance. His friend Malik says "there are riots all the time"²⁰ but it is evident that to find a mention in the official, public chronicles of a nation its level of significance is not decided by the individual. As they browse through the newspaper section in the library, his friend Malik says:

Didn't you say the riots happened in Calcutta?

Yes, of course, I answered.

That's strange, he said, tapping the open newspaper. Because these riots here happened in Khulna, in East Pakistan, across the border from Calcutta.²¹

The report that his friend reads out from the newspaper confounds and perplexes him, as the ground beneath him slips away. Events beyond boundaries even when seen as existing in different spaces, do have a connection, as historical connections become established when the imaginary lines that divide two nations are effaced to see the other as not entirely

distinct from oneself. The riots in Khulna hold ground for the narrator in *The Shadow Lines*, for it was in them that his uncle Tridib was brutally killed by an incensed mob, while trying to rescue Tridib's grand-uncle, Jethamoshai from their old paternal home in Dhaka.

The narratives of a nation are often multi-layered and more nuanced readings of such narratives unearth some accounts, mostly the official ones that are privileged over the 'others', which are more private and survive either in memory or are narrated as in novels to give voice to these hidden narratives. The purpose of reading beneath the surface and seeing narratives other than merely the public chronicles is to sensitize oneself to these more individual accounts that survive through memories, testimonies, auto(biographies) or even photographs and to then comprehend the act of truth-telling as destabilized and often ruptured.

While in the official history only what is considered relevant from a certain ideological or political standpoint seems relevant, the narratives through literature *read as* individual or personal history, capture the defining moments of nation-making, which is a result of dismemberment, violence and trauma; mostly more horrifying than what the statistical records offer or even hide away. As Homi K. Bhabha rightly points out in the Introduction to *Nation and Narration*, "[...] nationalism has to be understood, by aligning it not with self-consciously held political ideologies, but with large cultural systems that preceded it, out of which -- as well as against which -- it came into being"²². This unsettles the notion of truth and knowledge as unified and complete.

Rather, through the representation of nation-making in literature, films, personal chronicles and as recounted through memory we begin to see the complex process of its coming into being, a moment of becoming and being, not a given but a construct, that continually seeks redefinition and further investigation.

These points are crucial paradigms by which we may see nation-formation and the concept of the nation-state as it arose in the South Asian region. Instead of reading nation-formation restrictively through the privileged "ideological apparatus of state power", we must seek to 'assign

new meanings and different directions to the process of historical change²³. Comparative study facilitates such a vision that encompasses more, within its ambit, by studying similar processes across two nations, albeit the divisive, boundary lines that seek to confine territories within limits.

In studying the 'other', across the boundary, similar historical processes that offered resistance to colonization and even similarities in lifestyle, culture, value-systems, beliefs -- which are at times conflicting and yet at other times binding people across nations -- gain relevance, by offering unity despite divergence. Perhaps the points of divergence begin through coercive, ideological state apparatuses or power structures that work through the logic of difference, but as sensitive individuals and as readers of literature we perceive the liberating potential of comparative literature as offering solutions and in blurring those otherwise illusory lines marked on terrains, confirming the concept of 'imagined communities'.

The idea of a nation goes beyond mere religious divides, ethnic clashes or racial othering. To conceptualize the nation, one must not forget its human aspect. As Bhabha states, "the nation, like the individual, is the culmination of a long past of endeavours, sacrifice, and devotion. [...] To have common glories in the past and to have a common will in the present; to have performed great deeds together, to wish to perform still more -- these are the essential conditions for being a people"²⁴.

I now move on Tahmima Anam's novel, *A Golden Age*, to trace similar trajectories in the process of nation-making. It is at once the making and unmaking of a nation. The story in this novel is set in Dhanmondi, in Bangladesh, erstwhile East Pakistan. The events as they unravel in the book, reveal the poignant moments in a mother's life -- Rehana, who is the protagonist of the novel -- as the events leading to the Partition of East and West Pakistan engulf her children Maya and Sohail in its grips. A nation is born out of the choices that people make, destinies are carved even out of these individual choices. Her children are imbued with nationalistic fervour and her house, 'Shona', becomes a haven for the guerrillas -- comprising of her son Sohail and his friends -- who offer resistance to West Pakistan's hegemonic control of East Pakistan.

The narrative develops in a historical continuum from the year 1959

and ends logically with the year 1971, the year of liberation for the people of East Pakistan and the creation of the nation, Bangladesh, with patriotic slogans of 'Joy Bangla' being sung by its people. Anam quotes these lines by Shamsur Rahman in her novel before the **Prologue** which capture the quintessential charm of being free and an independent nation and I quote them here:

Freedom, you are
 an arbour in the garden, the koel's song,
 glistening leaves on banyan trees,
 my notebook of poetry, to scribble as I please. (Shamsur Rahman,
Shadhinota Tumi as quoted in Anam)

During military conflict, there is unity between people who stand united against the oppressors and seek liberation for their country. It is, as said before, attained at a huge price, with violence in its most heinous forms and innocent lives sacrificed for the cause of something bigger than the individual. The altar to which this selfless devotion is made holds significance as it is also the means by which identity formation begins through protest movements and resistance, instead of succumbing to hegemonic structures that oppress and contain it within limits.

Rehana chooses to stay in East Pakistan, while her sisters live in Karachi. She makes a choice to stay committed to her home and even converts the house into a shelter for resistance movements against West Pakistan's leadership and control over East Pakistan. Initially, when her son tells her that, "the Bengali regiments have mutinied. [...] They need volunteers. Aref and Joy and Partho are going too. [...] I really struggled, Ammoo, but I realized I don't have a choice"²⁵. Rehana responds back by saying that "Of course you have a choice. You always have a choice"²⁶. Her initial stance will change as she begins to see the larger reality, her children's selfless devotion to a cause, makes her their supporter and confidante. These inhibitions and fears slip away and she becomes as much a participant in their nationalist activities. Even when Maya goes into hiding in Calcutta, Rehana visits her as much to escape the air of suspicion that shrouds her house 'Shona' as she

identifies with what her children believe in. She dedicates some of her time in Calcutta, with her daughter Maya, at the refugee camps, looking after the ailing patients at the hospital ward there.

Nationalism entails the complicity of the individual with the cause. It seeks to homogenize all within that territorial space as 'one', and all beyond the territorial lines as the 'other'. Often in this process of homogenization, as in *The Shadow Lines*, we fail to recognize the heterogeneous nature of a nation's composition. Multiple identities are put together as one, for the project of constituting a nation on the logic of sameness. Almost simultaneously, there is a constant defining of oneself against the other. The illusoriness of 'one' and the 'other' hits the anonymous narrator in *The Shadow Lines* when he understands how at one single point of time in history similar events occur across geographical spaces, reducing those etched out boundaries on maps to nothing more than notional, imaginary lines that reveal sameness even across borders. Something which Rehana too, sees in the war-zone of East-West Pakistan, where similarities, in situations that surround people, and human bonds can be seen amongst people despite religious or regional divides. At this point it is crucial to define a nation, which works on the principle of both unity and divergence.

The modern nation as it comes into being can be defined in valid terms, even in South Asian countries as "a named human population sharing a historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members. [...] Modern nations are 'mass nations', appealing to and equating the nation with the whole people as citizens, something that only very rarely occurred before the onset of modernity.²⁷ Nationalism too has its positive and negative aspects. If on the one hand it "represents the attempt to actualize in political terms the universal urge for liberty and progress", on the other "it could also give rise to mindless chauvinism and xenophobia and serve as the justification for organized violence and tyranny".²⁸

Thus, by seeing the ends it serves, we can clearly see the extreme forms that nationalism can take, with the former kind of nationalism being the one that offers a more free, democratic space for cultivating the ideals of liberty and progress. The process by which a nation comes into existence

is one that offers its individuals choices, works through resistance and organized revolt or protest. However, the nation-state as it finally emerges is one that must recognize, at the core, the human principle, for that is the one that unites, while identities that are avowed in more zealous terms on religious, regional, ethnic or racial lines only seek to pull people apart and create boundaries, even within the mind.

These are no more than 'shadow lines', the lines that seek to define are constantly redefined, erasing some identities while privileging others. The project of Comparative studies enables our understanding of nations in South Asia as mirroring each other in many a ways, through similar historical events that swept through them, organized resistance and identity movements and the final emergence of these nations as revealing unity despite divergence.

References

- 1 The phrase 'imagined communities' was coined by Benedict Anderson. It is a concept coined by Anderson, in his study and analysis of *nationalism*. According to him, "a *nation* is a socially constructed community, imagined by the people who perceive themselves as part of that group" (Taken from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imagined_community). See the book by Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* for more on this subject.
- 2 See Gupta, *Nationhood and Identity Movements in Asia: Colonial and Post-colonial Times*, p. 1.
- 3 *Ibid.* p. 2.
- 4 *Ibid.* p. 7.
- 5 See Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, p. 7.
- 6 See Gupta, *Nationhood and Identity Movements in Asia: Colonial and Post-colonial Times*, p. 2.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 *Ibid.* p. 3.
- 9 *Ibid.*

- 10 See Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, p.12.
- 11 Anderson points out that, "the coalition between Protestantism and print-capitalism, exploiting cheap popular editions, quickly created large new reading publics % not least among merchants and women, who typically knew little or no Latin % and simultaneously mobilized them for politico-religious purposes. Inevitably, it was not merely the Church that was shaken to its core." See Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, p. 40.
- 12 Ibid. p. 46.
- 13 See Gupta, *Nationhood and Identity Movements in Asia: Colonial and Post-colonial Times*, p. 4.
- 14 Ibid. p. 5.
- 15 Ibid. p. 6.
- 16 Ibid. p. 8.
- 17 Ibid. p. 9.
- 18 Italicized one, my own.
- 19 See Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, p. 20.
- 20 Ibid. p. 221.
- 21 Ibid. p. 223.
- 22 See Bhabha, *Nation and Narration*, p. 1.
- 23 Ibid. p. 3.
- 24 Ibid. p. 19.
- 25 See Anam, *A Golden Age*, p. 91.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 From Greenfeld as cited in Guibernau & Hutchinson. See Guibernau & Hutchinson, *Understanding Nationalism*, p. 19.
28. See Chatterjee, "Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A derivative Discourse?" From *The Partha Chatterjee Omnibus* , p.2.