

Comment on
“The Indian State, Nehruvian (Anti-)Nationalism, and the
Question of Belonging”

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Benjamin Zachariah flags several important points in his paper on the constitution of state and nation and the ideologies surrounding them in his stimulating discussion. Let us begin where he, in fact, begins: the problematic conflation of nation and state in everyday and liberal political thinking. The particular problem with this bit of sleight of hand is that while it seeks at various levels of ideology to harness the imaginings of the nation and the national to the service of state-building (as Zachariah points out in the context of India since the 1930s repeatedly and rhetorically expressed as nation-building) it needs a more or less articulated idea of both. These imaginings usually turn out to both contested and exclusionary in whatever contextual manner, while in most contexts the idea of the state in rhetorical and deeply ideological terms seeks to be unproblematically inclusive – that is, seeks to articulate a demographic unity over a given territorial sprawl. In other words, the liberal state and the political theories or assumptions refuse to assign or impose cultural boundaries (within and without) as a condition for citizenship. Juridical citizenship is then to be seen as being empty of cultural value and constituted by universalistic ideas of equality before law and other such constitutional principles. How this is, in fact, deeply problematic is something we shall go on to examine in a bit.

This idea of citizenship, which is at the heart of what Zachariah calls civic nationalism, entailing no exclusionary manoeuvres has, however, a problem embedded within it. The construction of a fictional narrative of a nationalism embraced completely by the sphere of the state and empty of any defining cultural value makes its inclusionary project so fraught as to be utterly improbable. That is to say, if there is no exclusion by way of boundaries and definitions then there is no way of defining what it is that is being included – thus, in fact, of reifying the national ‘community’ and the nation, which is supposed through the conflation referred to above to give the state its jurisdiction over, in fact, a ‘people’ as opposed to other peoples. As Zachariah points out, there is a circularity in the argument: since there is a state, there must be a people. The only way out of this conundrum is to identify both the state and its jurisdiction and the existence of a ‘people’ and a national community is by recourse to a principle of territoriality. We shall revisit this point in our specific discussion of India and its territorial borders – that is to say the Indian state and its territorial jurisdiction – but it would not be out of place to mention by way of a global perspective how deeply inadequate, not to mention problematic, this principle has proved in wide swathes of the planet: especially, the Balkans during its various national constitutions and reconstitutions, since at least World War I and West Asia, since at least World War II, by hegemonic powers in West Europe and North America.

To come, then, to the discussion of the Nehruvian project of building a nation-state, attempting to first elide the nation itself, it is more than evident from Zachariah’s

discussion that the apparent success in the post-colonial era of the secular and inclusive nation-state hid deep inconsistencies. First, of course, we must begin with the resolve of the Nehruvian left of resisting, in the aftermath of the partition, the attempts of what we may call the Hindu right, within and outside the Congress party. The denial of any space to create a confessional state founded on the argument that the logical outcome of the two-nation theory was the creation of Hindu state also meant a denial of any claim that the Indian 'nation' was indeed essentially Hindu – that is, the cultural values that gave it content and marked it out as distinct was the unity conferred upon it by its Hindu history and tradition.

There were two problems with this project. First, like it or not, despite the claim that primordial identities would dissolve with material progress and nationalism itself was an idea the time for which had passed, there had to be some appeal to uniqueness that, Nehru especially, found in history itself, if nothing else to bind its claims territorial integrity. This, of course, was justified in the claim, not unique to Nehru and his contemporaries but ours as well that India was a palimpsest of cultures – what latter-day explicators of nation, nationhood and nationality would call 'composite culture'. But this justification itself marked out the boundaries and the differences, which found expression especially, as Zachariah argues, in social reform legislation that was central to the pedagogy of the nation-state and its broad development project. Social reform of the legislative kind, however, was aimed mainly at Hindu society, while the minority – read Muslim – community was allowed its traditions and practices, simply because they were embattled. However necessary at that point in time, this marked out the Hindu as the normal citizen, just as the attempt to make special affirmative programmes for the Dalit population reified precisely that which was meant to be swept away – the primordial system of caste. The spectacular failure of the pedagogic state is something we are now witness to – the decision, all but taken, to return to caste-based census enumeration after 70 years.

The answer to the problem of filling civic nationalism in the service of the state was a rhetoric (or ideology) of development, which suggested that material progress was the objective the nation-state and what gave it meaning and content. It was putatively a programme in which the entire people participated through the agency of the state. Unfortunately, even the 'positive' content of this developmental ideology created its specific exclusions, which was sectarian in its own way and can be privileged only from an arbitrarily chosen vantage. First, as we just heard, development was cast in a deeply paternalistic mode – an elite that knew what was best for the country would lay out the objectives and trajectories of material progress through state programmes in which the people would willy-nilly participate. Second, though the ultimate goal of this programme was supposedly socialist, intended to ultimately achieve the goal of equity and social justice – that goal was located in an indeterminate future. For the present, stretching in fact to an unbound future, development meant state-sheltered capitalist growth in which all the sacrifices for building the 'nation' were to be undertaken by the non-elites – the labouring poor. The exclusion was embedded in an enduring, stratified and deeply unequal society.

Finally, to wind up my comments, even the principle of territoriality, fundamental, in the absence of any fixed markers, to the delineation of the contours of the nation that allegedly legitimized the state, was itself something of a sham in that the geographical boundaries of the nation followed no logic, other than the supposedly self-evident one that they were so. This was, in a curious reflex, bound to be so,

because in the absence of any other content, the territory could not in any demonstrable way define a people, except in a crude self-referential manner. Thus, as Zachariah points to historically, was the case with all of the northeast, which was annexed to the nation because the colonial state had thus annexed it. Where the case had not been fully settled, the post-colonial state acted on its own volition, as with Sikkim. And that is why there is perhaps no facile way in which the successors of the Nehruvian state-builders can claim self-evidently that they are in the right with respect to Kashmir and parts of the northeast in their disputes with secessionists or Arunachal Pradesh in their disputes with China, even if the lattermost may not have any automatic or obvious claim.

Thus, the state-building project, still ongoing, is yet to find an uncontested legitimation in the imagining of the nation. And this must ever be so as long as we accept that the idea of states being jurisdictions rather than entities and that states should not make distinctions between their citizens and that of others is entirely utopian.