# The Imaginary Institution of India*

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India, the objective reality of today's history, whose objectivity is tangible enough for people to try to preserve, to destroy, to uphold, to construct and dismember, the reality taken for granted in all attempts in favour and against, is not an object of discovery but of invention. It was historically instituted by the nationalist imagination of the nineteenth century. The exact form this reality took was one among many historical possibilities in that situation, though the fact that only this line of possibility came to be realised is so overwhelming that it is now difficult even to conceive of some of the others. To say this is merely to assert that it is an historical object, and it is essential to speak about the contingency of its origins against the enormous and weighty mythology that has accumulated on its name.

To understand nationalism as an historical reality it is essential to step outside the history that nationalism gives to itself. Undoubtedly, this historical description is not entirely homogeneous, and its axis shifts according to the political demands and exigencies of different periods. Still, there is a clearly identifiable narrative which, despite all its internal variations, can be called the nationalist history of nationalism. This essay does not deal with the complex history of this narrative structure, but only with a brief, comparatively early, stage. This is a stage in which some decisions were taken that turned out to be crucial for the later development of Indian nationalism. Its analysis might reveal some interesting features in the formation of nationalist discourse and its strategies of self-presentation.

## Discovery of a national community

Ideologies seem to have a close connection with the narrative function; and this in turn relates to historiography. Indian nationalism is not merely an object of historical enquiry, but a political object - a

* This paper is based on a chapter of a forthcoming work on Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and the formation of nationalist discourse. I have benefited from comments made on an earlier draft by David Arnold, Partha Chatterjee, and particularly, Gyan Pandey.

movement, a force, a party, an establishment, a cultural interest,[1] an ideology and, finally, a state. And it is the nature of all political ideologies to try to coerce enquiry about itself into an agenda constructed by it.[2]

The intractable modernity of the new identity of a nation, especially a nation mobilised to act for itself, constantly troubles the thinking of early nationalists. They have not yet named a community which would take the responsibility of opposition to colonialism. Curiously, far from there being a united India, an immanent nation which is repressed, the processes of conciousness themselves show to what extent nationalism is an historical product of colonialism, how, inspite of their fundamental difference, colonialism was an historical precondition for any modern nationalist consciousness. Thus the responsibility, the role, the character of nationalism emerges earlier in history than the community which will perform this responsibility; the responsibility is born before its agent. And contrary to what is said in the common hagiography of the Indian nation, what this community will be is a matter of some confusion and occasionally of dispute. It is possible for early writers to speculate about a Hindu or a Muslim community filling this role, as much as a territorial identity of a radically new order.

Since these writers have still not chosen their nation, it is more appropriate to call the political consciousness of this phase by some other term, for instance anti-colonialism. But it is an error to think that until nationalism in the latterday sense arrives, there is no political consciousness. To equate the political and the nationalist is once more a powerful instrument of nationalist ideological accounts. It disallows any opposition to colonialism other than itself, any dissent organised on other lines the title to oppositional glory. Yet any involvement with the structure of colonial power - the whole range of political things in the colonial world from its political economy to its world of significations to its politics of language, the battle between the high language of colonialists and the vernacular - must be seen as political. No doubt the language of politics often tends to be subtle and symbolic. Politics often becomes a contest over the use of language, a matter of defiance of linguistic and symbolic norms. Indeed the whole world of colonialism seemed perfectly suited to a theatre of a typically Austinian defiance.

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[1] This can be derived from the common Marxist concept of ideology, though there are not many detailed arguments on this point or this part of the ideological process of creating and reinforcing similitudes. A longer version will be forthcoming in G. Pandey (ed.), *Subaltern Studies*, vol. 7, Delhi 1992.

[2] I take the point Marx makes in the *German Ideology* about the French Revolution to be true of all successful ideological movements.

Due to the overwhelming nature of colonial control, intellectuals of that early generation had to know extremely well how to do things with words: indeed, words were the terrain on which most politics were done. Despite their symbolic and subliminal character, the political nature of such linguistic performances should not be ignored. Politics in colonial society is a world of performatives. Of course, these are not performatives in the strong sense in which Austin writes about them, where there is a constitutive relation between the word and the act, i.e. to utter the word is to enact the act which goes in that name.[3] But, it seems, in the world of politics there is a context-related way of doing things with words. The more things are proscribed and excluded, and deprivations attached to acts, the more, it appears, uttering a word can become a performance of defiance. It is in this sense that such utterances are political, although no overt, external political acts follow immediately from them. And that it is idle to expect matching acts to issue forth from the words is signalled by the style, manner and quality of enunciation of the words themselves. Paradoxically, this is expressed both in the surreptitiousness with which they are uttered, in the frequent play of humour, and also a certain daring in eventually deciding in favour of the utterance, not the ultimate subterfuge of silence.

In this early phase, then, we find a form of consciousness/discourse which is genetically related to mature nationalism, but is distinctly different from it. If it was fashionable to take structuralism so seriously now, one could have said this is a difference between genetic and structural relations between two discourses. It also shows the proleptic temptations in thinking about such contiguous and genetically connected periods.[4]

Though not nationalist in a strict sense, this consciousness is anti-colonial, because there is hardly any doubt about its dark and anguished opposition to colonial domination, and the destiny it had imposed on Indian society. In fact, their opposition to colonialism is cast in the same pessimistic mould as Rousseau's rejection of civilisation,[5] one reason perhaps why so many of this generation found Rousseau more to their liking than rationalist enlightenment thin-

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[3] The kind Austin called 'constatives' in his detailed typology. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1975), p. 3.

[4] For a detailed account of such proleptic temptations, see Skinner, 'Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas', in James Tully (ed.), *Meaning and Center* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1988)

[5] On the view that Rousseau rejected a bourgeois civilisation, although he saw its historical ascendancy as ineviyable.

kers.[6] Colonialism is so pervasive and ineluctable an experience for them - they are so convinced of its being evil and so convinced that it could not possibly be defeated, that for those who remained unreconciled to its positive value, it wrapped their whole world in a shadow of melancholy. Still, this is not, strictly speaking, nationalism. The rejection it represents is more intuitive and visceral, a feeling of historical pessimism and anguish without any clear ideas about recourse, let alone programme. It feels almost blindly, believes, hopes colonialism would have to be opposed; but it is hardly clear about how and by whom, following what strategic conception.

In this phase of anti-colonialism, or whatever more elegant name is given to this structure of consciousness, the writers are expressing a primarily negative idea. There is, however, an interesting side to it which we must explore. Even paleolithic nationalism requires some collective subject; the ignominy of colonialism must be seen as a suffering that is collective, of a collective subject which is larger than, and which envelops, the author. For this is a thought-form which is by definition collective, its syllables can be uttered only by a collective subject or on its behalf, to use the Foucaultian trope of *enonciation*.[7] But the remarkable thing is that the collective subject is not related to developed nationalism by a relation of standard ontogeny. It is not a smaller, weaker, thinner, earlier form of the same subject that will be called the nation. The nation, in India as much as in Italy, is a thing without a past. It is radically modern. It can only look for subterfuges of antiquity. It fears to face and admit its own terrible modernity, because to admit modernity is to make itself vulnerable. As a proposal for modern living, on a scale quite unprecedented (both in terms of sheer spread and the sheer power of good and evil it can do to itself by establishing a modern state), in a society still knowing only one legitimising criterion - tradition - it must seek to find past disguises for these wholly modern proposals.[8]

Narratives are always related, explicitly or otherwise, to some sense of self. Narratives can never be rational in at least one sense of this universally admired but elusive criterion. A rational view is, to use Thomas Nagel's elegant phrase, 'the view from nowhere'.[9] A rational case is one that is made on nobody's special behalf. Narratives are always told from someone's point of view,

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[6] Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, for example, shows great admiration for Rousseau, calling him the third great *samyavatara*, an incarnation standing equal with the Buddha and Christ.

[7] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London: Tavistock, 1972), chapter 4.

[8] Gramsci, p. 235.

[9] Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (New York: Basic Books, 1985)

to take control of the frightening diversity and formlessness of the world; they literally produce a world in which the self finds a home. Or, it would perhaps describe the process better if we say that around a particular home they try to paint a picture of some kind of an ordered, intelligible, humane and habitable world. Since here we are talking about collective narratives, this anchor is in the identification of a *collective* self.

Anti-colonialism is originally pronounced by traditional collective selves, communities which were given in terms of earlier, more segmented social definitions. At this stage, the community which performs this *enonciation*, or hopefully will in the near future, remains curiously indeterminate. It is a rather unclear 'we' which is invited to do this. Indeed, it seems that late-nineteenth-century writers were curiously uninterested in spelling it out, in turning their attention towards an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of this group, and suggesting a political theory, for forming it into an ideal strength adequate to its enormous task. The intellectual process is not directed towards a self-enumeration of the collective subject, still left hazy, immediate, primordial. Arguments are typically concerned about undermining the ideological claims of the colonial administration and its collaborators, that strident claim which particularly irritates Indians that the British were civilising a savage people. These are concerned with the acceptability of the modernity - truncated, opportunistically edited and abbreviated - offered historically through colonialism. Often it discusses the comparative principles of organisation of the two social orders.[10]

Later this 'we' becomes coterminous with Indians; but the process through which this happens is instructive to analyse. Indianness, along with other attributes and entities of the social world, is also an historical construct. Actually, this India was new, but it required the delusion of an eternal existence. And interestingly, it was European writers writing on India as part of a counter-Enlightenment movement who constructed this India and presented it to Indians looking for an identity.

This is no small irony; and it indicates a web of intellectual complexity which has to be unravelled with sensitivity to discrete individual trends. The 'picture' of India or 'the Orient' that emerged in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and which came to fatefully affect Indian social discourse and the self images lying at

[10] To do this was fairly common though systematic comparisons were rare. In Bengal two eminent examples of such comparative sociology are the works of Bankim and Bhudev Mukhopadhyaya. Bhudev is more concise and systematic; cf. Raychaudhuri.

their base, was not a simple image produced by a single, unproblematically homogeneous movement.[11]

Besides, although the general outline of this picture was repugnantly orientalist, much of the actual detail was produced by a tendency which, though perhaps romantic, was not 'orientalist' from that point of view, but rather sought to create a picture of the Orient which would provide a foil to the west, point out its inadequacies, or in some cases a standing rejection of the monopolistic claims advanced by dominant forms of rationalism.

Whatever its source in western scholarship or Indian publicistic material, this pretence of Indian antiquity was entirely necessary and at the same time largely false. Accordingly, it is impossible to assume innocently the mythology of nationalism that this India was suppressed (i.e. it must exist in order to be suppressed), and gradually won the strength, the cohesion, a god-gifted political organisation and leadership, to rise to consciousness and freedom. In fact, this historical process was a less linear and far more tentative affair.

If Indians thought as Bengalis did earlier in all respects, there would have been no Indian nationalism. The 'we' of the Bengali intellectual, even when exhorted to fight against British injustice, was initially a very limited and rather parochial thing. Intellectuals specialise in sensing injustice and discrimination and are regarded by rulers as quite generally an ungrateful tribe. They can become disaffected in strangely diverse ways, apart from having their applications for furtherance turned down, or melancholy residence for eighteen years at the same rung of the bureaucratic ladder - the principal reason Anil Seal identified for the great novelist, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, turning to writing.[12]

Disaffected intellectuals initially complained only about specific and concrete cases of injustice, and thought that those who would appreciate their sense of ignominy were people like themselves - educated, middle class, comfortable beneficiaries of the colonial order. Politically, the prospects for such an organisation made of affronted Bengali babus, as some of them realised, could not be very bright. A trade union of disgruntled civil servants could hardly take on the British empire. Generally, babus, though conscious of the political ignominy of subjection, considered its material benefits adequate compensation for such abstract injury. Consequently, they bent their energies first towards self-promo-

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[11] Edward Said's *Orientalism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), tends at times to produce such an impression. My criticism is not that such impression is entirely false; but that it is correct in specified and limited logical circumstances.

[12] Anil Seal, *The Emergence of Indian Nationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), p. 118.

tion, and what was left of them towards social reform. To become practical at all, the programme of opposition required a sense of injustice that was abstract and general, which could be shared by a larger group whose social joys and sorrows were differently produced from those of the Calcutta babus.

In Bengal, the first step towards this was taken when colonialism was seen as the cross to be borne by not just the babus trained at Presidency College, but by that abstract, as yet entirely unself-conscious, collectivity called the Bengali community as a whole - *bāngāli jāti*. In the earlier stage it was assumed that the more numerous and hazier part of this 'nation', its non-babu segment, must march in mute obedience under the generalship of the garrulous urban commanders. But in Bankim's later works we can already detect a suggestion of unease, and anticipations of a romantic reversal of this relationship - of an elite following a people in movement, a people whom they must follow, as Disraeli said, because they are their leaders.

As a nation, however, the Bengalis turn out to be a great disappointment. The historical and contemporary resources of the Bengalis appear woefully inadequate for a task as daunting as taking on the British empire. If the past was any indication of what the future would be, their history did not promise much martial defiance. Driven by such considerations, anti-colonial intellectuals do something historically fateful: they break down the boundaries of their 'natural' 'we', and begin to extend their 'we-ness' in different directions in a desperate experiment in coalition-making. Many of them, including Bankim, thought seriously of deploying the 'we' of the Hindus with different degrees of perplexity, guilt and defensiveness. That appeared as an immemorially old 'we', already available for use, though a politically unified Hinduism looked suspiciously artificial. Later, this 'we' came to be coterminous with what is generally known as India, though traces of earlier unreconstructed identities still clung to this new one. The Rajputs, the Marathas, the Sikhs gradually came to secure a place in this process of widening the collective self. And this extraordinary inclusion is achieved by opening out the narrative contract, Bengalis entering into narrative contract with communities who had nothing really to do with them in the past, constantly gerrymandering the boundaries of their national collective self.

Interestingly, the British could write 'histories of India' much more unproblematically than their Indian imitators, for they wrote of an India that was externally defined, a territory contingently unified by political expansion. To define the boundaries of British India was a simple operation; this merely required looking at the latest map of British annexations. By contrast, the India that Nehru

so painstakingly discovered was an India more difficult to define, for the nationalists he represented sought to demarcate its boundaries by a more elusive internal principle.

To give itself a history is the most fundamental act of self-identification of a community. The naming of the Indian nation, I wish to suggest, happens in part through a narrative contract. To write a history of India beginning with the civilisation of the Indus valley is marked by an impropriety. An India internally defined, an India of a national community, simply did not exist before the nineteenth century; there is, therefore, an inevitable element of 'fraudulence', in Gellner's sense, in all such constructions. 'The history of India' is a massively self-evident thing to write about and this powerful transformation of something that is fundamentally insecure into something aggressively self-evident is precisely the mark of an ideological construct. It is ideological because there seems to be no other reasonable way of writing the history of these historical objects.

In this case, the fraudulent and the imaginary are merely re-descriptions of each other. If we leave it at Gellner's model, we leave our analysis of nationalism peculiarly incomplete. It is rather pointless to call it fraudulent if there is no hope of a proper, true, entirely objective history. Fraudulence presupposes the possibility of an in-principle undistorted account. Of course nationalist ideologies often effect major distortions of history, and surely such untruths have to be shown and rejected. But there seems to be involved in this process a different problem which, for want of a better term, we may, after Gadamer, call 'the principle of effective history'.[13]

## Construction of the past as history

In treating history as the memory of a people, as a discourse in which a people retells to itself its own past, we seem at first to come up against the sort of impropriety that Gellner has criticised so forcefully. The lore of the Celts, to make the point with brutal simplicity, was nothing more than the Celts' lore, not the early history of the British people. For the United Kingdom is a much later construct; and there is something quite false in saying that object X's history can cover a period in which there was no object X. The only possible defence of such accounts could be that we treat them as histories of spaces rather than of peoples. But the histories that nationalists write are paradigmatically peoples' histories. By the same

[13] Gadamer, pp. 267-74.

token, accounts of the exploits of the Satavahanas or the Tughluqs were the accounts of those dynasties, and of a doubtfully charitable view of the people they ruled. Clearly, therefore, there is a logic of illegitimate appropriation in the standard way of writing the history of India, starting with the civilisation of the Indus Valley, which is seen with some justice by our neighbours as the early history of Pakistan. Of course, the Mohenjodaro story being the early history of Pakistan is no less absurd or plausible than some others being the early history of India. It is remarkable how evenhandedly the British could divide between querulous subjects of their empire things as intangible as antiquity. As we go on, however, the Gellner thesis runs into some difficulties.

The first oddity is that if Gellner's view is taken with complete seriousness, no history of India can be written before the nineteenth century even on the most optimistic view of the matter. Some would wonder if it can be legitimately written of the period before 1947. The trouble is that this way of thinking would make the writing of history entirely coincident with the existence of cultural self-images.

This dilemma has been present at the heart of nationalist social reflection: this is reflected in the difficulty nationalists have in choosing between two accounts of what happened in the national movement. One view is that it is in some sense a pre-existing immanent nation which rises to consciousness and eventual freedom; and the task after independence is to defend a nation whose conceptual and emotional existence is in fact historically unproblematic. At the same time, nationalists cannot quite give up a second view, which implies that an indeterminately defined people came to acquire a state, and the nation is to be built afterwards by this state and those of its leaders whom we particularly admire.

It is true no doubt that by appropriating the history of the Satavahanas we are acting undemocratically, without consulting them as to whether they would have liked to be included in our history. Surely this is a discursive disenfranchisement of the Satavahanas; from being Satavahanas, which they most unambiguously were, we turn them into ancient Indians, begging the question if something that was born in the nineteenth century could have a biography leading back a millennium. But there are two further difficulties. First, we can do little more than remain conscious of this retrospective structure of historical accounts, and take care that it does not lure us into subtle empirical falsification. It is unlikely that we can do more. For, secondly, if we take the Gellner view to its extreme point, it would issue in the rather inconvenient principle that only Satavahanas can write histories of Satavahanas with any undistorted historical view; and since no Satavahanas are

around now, given this theory of authenticity they must, in the interest of truth, be condemned to historically nullity.

Indeed, the history of the past would become impossible in a radical way. The condition of writing a correct, objective (as opposed to fraudulent) history would be that historical identities must not be transformed or gerrymandered. It has been shown with great persuasiveness that the historic destiny of events is to live through their effects, which confer on them an ironic ineradicability. It is impossible to disentangle the history of occurrences from the history of their effects; we therefore always live within 'effective history'. To use a more analytic style of reasoning employed by Danto,[14] the adding of every single significant line to earlier historical drama or narrative rearranges the structure of the narrative itself.

The birth of a male child to Motilal Nehru, barrister, successful lawyer in the Allahabad high court, nationalist, has to be reconceptualised a hundred years later as the birth of the first prime minister of India. The event still 'happens' in 1889 but its conditions of significant description get irrevocably altered in 1947. If this is the given structure of 'historical being' and consequently the only adequate form of historical description, there is hardly anything we can do to rescue the Satavahanas from the clutches of modern historians. The modern historian must know that they are, very narratively indeed, early Indians, the historian cannot maintain that this is more than narratively so, because then he would pretend that he does not recognise the conditions under which he is thinking.[15]

Such perplexities of narrative descripton about history were well known to Bankim's generation; for they were responsible for many of the narrative forms in which Indians today habitually mould their history. Bankim is an excellent example of how effectively and with what consistent opportunism this narrative principle can be invoked and forgotten. Some writers - Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and Rabindranath Tagore foremost among them - are wholly clear about the double nature of the imagined community. It is not merely others in the present, previously unrepresented in the ambit of a collective self, who are included now; this holds true of peoples of the past. Bankim uses this with a delightful deceitfulness in his arguments, denying that Bengalis were ever conquered, because there were no Bengalis at the time, i.e. the temporal boundary of what he considered to be his 'we' did not stretch back into that period of disgrace. This does not stop him from claiming undoubted descent from the more ancient Aryans who, on

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[14] Danto, *Narration and Knowledge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983)

[15] Cf. Gadamer's critique of Diltheyan objectivism; Gadamer, pp. 192 - 214.

standard evidence of territory of race or culture, must stand in very doubtful kinship indeed to the modern Bengali. This is possible of course because we are dealing with imaginary history, not an academic one.[16]

## Fuzzy and enumerated communities

Imagined communities can place their boundaries in time and space anywhere they like. It is not always reasonable to look for objective criteria for these things. Another way of saying this would be that the objectivity they often display is an historical form of objectivity. It is impossible to justify the objectivity of the entire, but easy to see the difficult objectivity of its consequences. But there is another point to be made about imagined communities. Whether imaginary or real, this way of conceiving a community is a very modern and unprecedented theoretical device. Acquaintance with European history since the Renaissance surely helped intellectuals to use this idea and devise an appropriate form of this for themselves. To understand its implications let us first try to set out clearly what is involved in this claim. Imaginary or real, these arguments describe and conceive its community in ways that are quite different from earlier, more genuinely communitarian, ways of conceiving one.[17]

Let us call the earlier conceptions of community *fuzzy*. As this is bound to be a contested idea, let me try to be clear about what exactly fuzzy means in this context. Any idea of community is based on an idea of identity, which is predicated in turn on some conception of difference. People who lived in pre-modern social forms had of course a strong sense of community, usually more intense than those of modern societies. They handled their daily experience of social complexity through some system of rules by which people could be classified as similar or different and dealt with accordingly. As contacts with people of other groups were relatively infrequent, it did not require an elaborately developed theory of otherness.

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16 This could raise interesting questions about the nature of time in these different types of accounts. History in the academic sense assumes what is some times called a linear, internally homogeneous, calibrated time. Given this temporal structure, distances cannot be reduced by any imaginative conceptual technique. The present time is equally calendrically distanced from past times. Its impersonal distances cannot be abbreviated or otherwise infringed by affection. The time of myths does not have this 'calibrated' quality. Present times can feel closer to *ramarajya* or whatever other stretch of the past appeals to the imagination. Remembering and forgetting imposes a very different sort of order on mythical and imaginary narratives; and its partisans would be able to provide a clear enough rationale for this order.

17 Using these terms in the sense given to them in social theory by the work of Ferdinand Tönnies, cf. Tönnies, *On Sociology: Pure, Applied and Empirical*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1971).

Groups in which people lived had the quality of what sociologists like Tönnies would have called primary groups, i.e. groups to which one does not have to make an interest-actuated decision to belong. This undoubtedly reinforced the quality of self-evidence of the relations they were made up of. Crucially for my argument, these were communities (*Gemeinschaften*) in Tönnies' sense. Living inside them fostered a feeling of intense solidarity and belongingness, but the most important principle of communityness is that the solidarity is not based upon a convergence of interest, which distinguishes *Gesellschaften*.[18]

There is an interestingly paradoxical connection between the theories of *Gemeinschaft/Gesellschaft* and the processes of nation formation. The theory derived from Tönnies places great emphasis on an interconnected set of dichotomies: between modern and traditional social forms, solidarities based on interests and on community, the unlimited possibility of extension of *Gesellschaft* associations and the 'naturally' limited contours of *Gemeinschaften*, the contractual dissolubility of 'societies' and the indissoluble primordial nature of community belonging. This, in turn, can be shown to have some connection with Weber's distinction between the constant perfectability of rational actions, and the repetitiveness of traditional acts - for that is what keeps the boundaries of the communities more or less constant.[19]

Despite the considerable resources of this distinction, there appears to exist a more complex dialectic between community and nationalist modernity which tends to be underplayed in the use of such a strongly dichotomous model. To understand this historical relation we have to produce a mix of the different and in some ways clashing insights that Gellner's and Anderson's separate arguments provide. Modern nationalism commonly arises out of an aspiration to control the forces of modernity, and is therefore affiliated to the rise and growth of *Gesellschaft* organisations. If modern nationalism is seen to be affiliated to these processes of transformation of social forms, this produces a paradox. Historically, these organisations tend to erode - either explicitly or by subtler, undeclared processes - the earlier types of smaller, tighter, closer organisational patterns. Yet, in a sense, nationalism tries to steal, to use Marx's phrase, the poetry of primordiality from them, to try to argue about and justify itself through a wholly illegitimate discourse of immemorial aspirations and indissoluble community.

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[18] Ibid.

[19] Weber, deriving it from Tönnies, provides a similar distinction in *Theory of Social and Economic Organisation*, (New York: Free Press 1947). He simply mentions nationalism as a solidarity relationship without discussing the embarrassment this can cause this theory, pp. 136-7.

Nationalist movements usually try to show the nation, actually a product of a conjuncture of modernity, to be a community which was lost - to be regained. Quite often this regaining requires large-scale political sacrifices which ordinary people are unlikely to accept if they calculate their political actions in purely rationalistic accounting of individual cost and benefit. The language of monadic individuals and their purely calculating contractual interests does not suit the rhetoric of passion - blood, sacrifice, remembrance - that nationalism as a movement requires.[20] So although a modern phenomenon, nationalism must speak a traditional language of communities.

Let us now turn to another question: the relation between the nation and those identities which historically precede it, and with which it must be partly at least in competition. In the argument influenced by the modern/traditional opposition, sometimes the relation is seen in excessively dichotomous terms. These arguments ascribe to pre-existing community identities a certain inexplicated 'pre-givenness'. Communities (which, it must be seen, refers to a principle of organisation, rather than one form of groups) are called primordial, and the way that term is used amounts to an effective denial of history.

Ostensibly, primordiality indicates an organisation which is so resistant to change as not to be transformed across historical time. In fact, however, much that is declared primordial and history-less turns out to be historical on closer inspection.[21] Occasionally, these may actually be recent constructions which, like fake antiques, are bestowed an artifically-produced look of decay. In pre-modern societies, antiquity is given such high value that constructed things might include in their principle of construction itself a mechanism that seems to erase their historical age. Recently founded dynasties are in particular need of showing their ancestry from the descendants of mythological heroes.

Sociological arguments about Indian nationalism often impose the dichotomous model rather mechanically, to affiliate nationalism with all forces that are modern and 'forward-looking'. Often the place of communities in this general model is taken in the Indian case by the region defined around a distinct language, and the quality of being natural, pre-given, primordial, is conceptually

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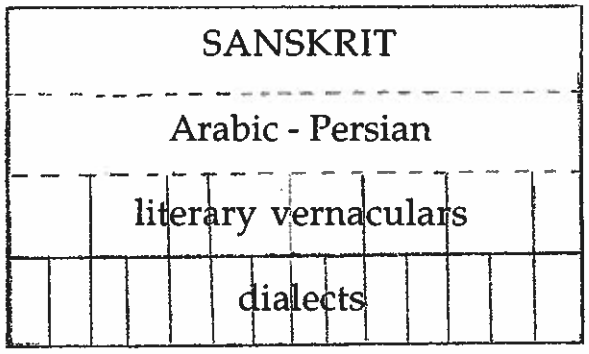
[20] Literature, poetry and especially patriotic songs are good examples of this. In Bengali, a particularly telling illustration is the poetry of D. L. Roy, and his poem of ultimate excess: *dhanadhānye puspe bharā āmāder ei basundharā / tāhār mājhe āche deś ek sakal deśer serā / se je swapna die tairī se deś, smrti die gherā.*

[21] The power of this idea is illustrated by Marx's hypothesis about an Asiatic mode. Even Marx, whose thinking is so scrupulously historical, was willing to believe in unchanging village communities. Marxist historians have found this hypothesis unhelpful.

conferred on it.[22] This way the dichotomy between the region and the nation doubles the paradigmatic oppositions between tradition and modernity, *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. Ironically, if we look at the evidence, it appears that the question - which is prior, the nation or the region? - turns out to be false, or at least not a very helpful one. Actually, the region, though culturally more homogeneous, is as much an historical construction as the nation is. More startlingly, in some cases, the formation of a linguistic region is not of much greater antiquity than the coming of an anti-colonial consciousness, for the rise of a distinct regional language was related to some developments linked to colonialism. This is particularly clear in the case of the Bengali language.




Even Bengal, a most culturally self-conscious region, has difficulties in fitting a model of a long pre-existing language and a sense of 'Indian' nationhood that is relatively recent. In defining regions, language is usually the most significant criterion. But this language - which confers on the region its unity and its name - is not a given.[23] Before the British came, the linguistic map of 'Bengal' would have been quite confused and unfamiliar. The use of language was stratified in several ways. For some purposes, traditionally, Sanskrit served as an inaccessible elite language; for others, Arabic and Persian. The inaccessibility of these languages to ordinary people was complemented on the other side by their universality among the elite. Thus the structure, in linguistic terms, would generally replicate the structure of agrarian socities that Gellner outlines in his *Nations and Nationalism*.[24]

Let us return now to some aspects of what we had earlier called the fuzzy community. In several ways, the communities in

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[22] The political implication of this is obvious: it can damn any mobilisation around linguistic identities as primitivist, anti-modern, etc.

[23] Elsewhere I have tried to critically analyse the standard narrative constructions of 'the history of Bengali literature', which seeks to confer this antiquity on the regional identity of Bengal. 'Writing, speaking, being: language and historical identity in South Asia', Keynote Paper for the section on 'Identity in History: South and Southeast Asia', German Historical Congress, Bochum, 27-29 September 1990, to be published by the South Asia Institute, University of Heidelberg.

[24] Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983).

which people saw themselves as living were fuzzy compared to the community or the nation that is now proposed. This does not imply that earlier individuals did not know how to handle social complexity in the form of the presence of others in their own life experience. They would meet other individuals routinely inside their villages, or sometimes in non-standard ways, as on pilgrimages. On all such occasions, they would have at their disposal fairly elaborate sets of rules for differentiation by which their responses to others would be determined. If the other person belonged to one level of his community - say, his endogenous caste group - he would know exactly what to do with him. However, such precision did not extend to other aspects of a person's identity or community: it was directed to only certain types of activities and practices.

Apparently, it might never occur to members of these communities to ask how many of them there were - of the same caste, of *vaiṣṇavas*, or *śaivas* - in the world. A different form of this fuzziness would be a relative lack of clarity of where one's community, or even one's region, ended and another began. On being asked to name his community (samāj),[25] such a person could take, depending on the context, the name of his village, neighbourhood, his caste, his religious denomination - but hardly ever his linguistic group, not to speak of a nation.

Thus, earlier communities tend to be fuzzy in two ways in which no nation can afford to be. First, they have fuzzy boundaries, because some collective identities are not territorially based. Religion, caste and endogamous groups are all based on principles that are not primarily territorial. Indeed, there would be a sense that the 'region', the world that is near, is set within a world that is large, far away, vast and limitless, but both the nearness and the vastness would be fuzzy in the same sense. People would be hard put and indeed could not be bothered to tell where the near ended and the far began.

Secondly, part of this fuzziness of social mapping would arise because traditional communities, unlike modern ones, are not enumerated. The most significant implication of this is the following: they did not see historical processes as things which could be bent to their collective will if people acted concertedly on a large-enough scale. Since they did not ask how many of them there were in the world, they could not consider what they could wreak upon the world for their collective benefit - through collective action. They were thus incapable of a type of large action, with great potential

[25] It is interesting to note that originally the term *samāj* meant something indeterminate, like the common meaning of the English word 'community'. Bengali did not have a term to designate the abstract concept of a society; later the word samaj is given this meaning by convention.

for doing harm as well as good, which is a feature of the modern condition. Living in an unmapped and unenumerated world may have allowed them to live ordinarily in non-aggressive proximity (though one should not underestimate the ability of older societies to do surprisingly large-scale collective harm). Their sense of community being multiple and layered and fuzzy, no single community could make demands of pre-emptive belonging as comprehensive as that made by the modern nation state.[26]

The boundaries of nation states cannot be fuzzy in the same way. Indeed, the territorial attachment of modern states is sometimes so intense as to be rationally incomprehensible, as evident from the cheerful intensity with which modern nations fight wars for control of uninhabitable land. Second, a parallel principle, the national community, must be enumerated; nations must know how numerous they are. It is not surprising that in the discourse of Indian nationalism the question of numbers figures so prominently.

Obviously, Indians did not become patriotic for the first time in the nineteenth century, but they invented a new way of being patriotic, a new object to be patriotic for. Gellner is right in pointing out that nationalism arises with and within a larger movement and intellectual configuration of modernity in which one of the major regulative ideas is the possibility of pursuit by newcomer peoples of the life, liberty and ironical happinesses of industrial modernism. Most theories see and abstractly recognise the typical configuration called modernity - industrial technology, capitalist production, a territorial soverign state, a regime of rationalist cognition and rational-technical epistemics about the social world but actual sociological enquiry has given disproportionate attention to one prominent hypothesis about these interconnections. Both Marxist and anti-Marxist theory has put much greater effort into the proof or disproof of capitalism accompanying nationalist aspirations, to the exclusion of its other connections.

In Europe at least there was a clear connection between the nationalist doctrine's urgency of enumeration and the rationalist theoretical view, its attempt to live in a world that is wholly, unsurpassably, classified, enumerated - a world securely distributed into tables. Clearly, this is part of a programme of bringing the world under control by precise cognition, turning every little piece of information into social technology. Nationalism, once it came into its own, through its massive and obedient instrument of the national state, continues to press on with this relentless project of

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[26] Indeed, one of the principal controversies in modern Indian politics has centred around a satisfactory arrangement of identities. Are other identities compatible with the identity of the nation?

enumeration - the endless counting of its citizens, territories, resources, majorities, minorities, institutions, activities, import, export, incomes, projects, births, deaths, diseases. It counts, it appears, every conceivable quantifiable thing. No doubt this is helped in most cases by the bourgeois character of this nationalism - the easy, intuitive transfer of a language of *possession* from individuals to the more problematic individuality of the nation. But while it happens, it seems self-evidently true that nations possess territories and citizens in the same way as individuals possess their goods.

But this also shows us a paradox in the discourse that this configuration sets in motion. The nation-state is conceived often as part of a modern configuration, as an apparatus that the people need to bring the forces of modernity under control. The language of this kind of society is one which is a deeply individualistic language, which speaks of atomistic individuals who enter into relations with each other on the basis of a purely rational calculation of advantages. The most rational of such actors is of course the free rider. It is possible to work out an easy form of Olson's paradox of collective action to indicate the impossibility of national movements.[27]

On the other hand, the nation is also, invariably, conceived of as a community. This is the point of paradox. National groups, although they are *Gesellschaften*, must at least in the romantic period of their rise against foreign control, present themselves to themselves (because usually they are their own primary audience) as a *Gemeinschaft*. It is at one level a coalition of group interests which wishes to merge into an overwhelming combination against the ruling power; but apparently it must pretend, because of the newness and unprecedentedness of this sort of collective action, that it is an immemorially ancient community. Actually, it must be a bond of secular interests, but in ideology it must be represented as a mystic unity of sentiments.

Is the nation, then, it will be objected, unreal; is it not something 'objective'? The view I put forward does not deny the objectivity of the nation, but displaces its meaning, and asks for a softening of the concept of objectivity. Things that exist in the history are often objective only in this way, and only to this extent: perhaps to grimly scientific minds an objectivity of a very vulnerable, unsatis-

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[27] Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1971), chapter IV. In his well-known argument, Olson shows that if the good for which a group is mounting a collective action is indivisible, it is rational strategy for each single individual not to work for the collective good. In this way they would avoid punishment or costs, while they cannot be, in the nature of the case, excluded from the benefits. Thus, individuals can reason that they will not actively work for independence, but since they cannot be excluded from independence when it comes, they would enjoy its benefits anyway.

factory kind. Since a primary means of communities reproducing themselves is to tell stories about themselves, it is not surprising that narrative structures predominate in nationalist discourse. But there are limits beyond which a narrative way of thinking cannot extend.

Alasdair MacIntyre has recently shown how narratives can help in negotiation of the world's complexities and contribute to the existence of a whole, unfractured, communal existence.[28] It is only when a society has a general consensus about its objectives and the moral order of the universe that narratives can do this job. This, when seen in the perspective of nationalist history, yields an interesting point. Common opposition to colonial dominance often imparts to the 'community' of the national movement a genuine moral consensus of this kind.

It is remarkable, but hardly surprising, that the narratives of nationalism speak about some things in social destiny and not others. These narratives are explicit and detailed about freedom, sacrifice, glory and such things, and usually very vague about the more concrete and contestable questions of distribution, equality, power, the actual unequal ordering of the past society or of the future one. Narratives here are above all practical things, interpretations of the world and its history which issue in a call to change it. Its pragmatic objectives are incompatible with such fractious stories of production and distribution. After the achievement of independence, these narratives have done their work; if pressed into the service of providing an order to the nation and its state, they begin to falter. Such productive and distributive arrangements can be justified or questioned by a new type of discourse - a discourse of social theory. The new period, to misuse Marx's phrase, 'cannot draw its poetry from the past.'

How important this storytelling form is, for political conviction, is shown by its persistence. Even in people in whom it is least expected, it tends to reappear. Among the political leaders of Indian nationalism one of the most clearsighted and convinced about a theoretical orientation was Nehru. Indeed, in his *Autobiography* he laments that Indian nationalism lacks a theoretical view of politics.[29] Yet, when Nehru writes he provides a complex design of three interconnected narratives - of the world, of the nation and of the self. Thus the narrative form was impossible to get away from, not because of any intellectual lack in the writers but because col-

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[28] Alasdair MacIntyre *After Virtue* (London: Duckworth, 1981), chapter 15.

[29] Jawaharlal Nehru, *An Autobiography* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1964; originally published 1936).

lective existence as much as collective actions create their ideological support by great narratives.

## On narrative contract

The telling of a story brings into immediate play some strong conventions invoking a narrative community. Ordinarily these are coincident in terms of their frontiers with social communities of some form: societies, particular groups, sometimes movements aspiring to give themselves a more demarcated and stabler social form. To some extent all such communities, from the stable to the emergent, use narrative as a technique of staying together, redrawing their boundaries or reinforcing them. Participating in a movement quite clearly involves accepting something like contractual obligations, and, I suspect, some of this affiliation of individuals to movements counteracting a monadic individualism is accomplished by narrative contracts.

Narrative does not therefore aspire to be a universal form of discourse. It draws lines, it distributes people, unlike rational theoretical discourse which attempts to unite them in an abstract universe of ideal consensus. Narratives are not for all to hear, for all to participate in to an equal degree. It has self in which it originates, a self which tells the story. But that self obviously is not soliloquising or telling the story to itself. It implies an audience, a larger self towards which it is directed, and we can extend the idea to say that the transaction of a narrative creates a kind of narrative contract. For the recipient of narrative cannot be just anybody: it is only some people belonging to particular categories who are privileged by the narration. As P. Acharya has shown, Muslim children could not come easily under the narrative contracts held out by Abanindranath Tagore's wonderfully coloured folktales; there are very real frontiers of indifference and contempt which would keep them out. The nationalist storyteller confers the bounty of the story on the elect, those who are rendered eligible by the conventions of the story. Nationalism clearly uses the contractual character of the narrative to extend its ideological message. Across segments of society, across generations, across all political divides it creates a vast, constantly open and constantly renewed political contract.

Historically, the great enterprise called the Enlightenment had met three historical frontiers, separated from each other in terms of space and time. It had an internal frontier on the underside of bourgeois society, between the elities and the productive classes within capitalism. A second frontier was between its victorious, conquering colonial power and the peoples it subjugated and redu-

ced to political ineffectuality and cultural silence. A final frontier is reached today when that civilisation itself feels exhausted and has produced an interesting and complex internal critique.

Capitalism, Marx said, was the first universal social form, at least the first form capable of a possible universality. It imposed, on most people with whom it came in touch, certain peculiar forms of suffering. These several sufferings at the various frontiers of capitalism gave rise to critiques in which those who suffered at its hands tried to make sense of their history. In a sense, each critique analysed and held up for criticism aspects of suffering related to capitalism which were opaque, unperceived and unreported to the others. But as critiques they are potentially connectable; they, as it were, waited to meet each other. It is only now, in the writing of history, that such a meeting is possible. In this, the critique of an aggressive, uncritical, all-conquering rationalist colonialism by the early nationalists is a necessary part. And it is only when these critiques are stitched together that a true map of the unhappy consciousness of humanity, when capitalism reigned, can be put together.

At least three different types of theoretical problems emerge from a study of anti-colonial thought in the nineteenth century. Intellectual responses to colonial rationalism did of course vary widely across the great expanse of the world of European colonies. Every civilisation, from tribal societies endowed with tight, highly economical sets of symbolic resources, to ancient cultures reduced to an unaccustomed subalternity, was forced to think of its present as history, and make some sense of what colonial rule did to its society. Bengali intellectuals of that early generation thought in ways specific to themselves and to the resources they had at their command. Similar moves must have been tried all over the world. Until an intellectual history of anti-colonialism is compiled, the history of colonialism will remain unfinished.

Not surprisingly, the history of this third critique is largely unwritten. This is partly due to an absence of the constitution of its object; this third discourse must be first constituted as an historical object before it can be seen to deserve a history. Of course the materials for this history are distributed over several discrete disciplines - the history of nationalism produced by historians, political thought systematised by political scientists, rituals and folk customs reported by anthropologists, myths collected by ethnographers. To have the materials is not to have a history; this is because history is preceded by a theoretical question, it must philosophically constitute and defend the object which it will write the history of.[30]

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[30] This theoretical constitution of the object of historical enquiry is often done by other disciplines, or by the general intellectual culture.

Unless the people who are subjected to colonialism are seen to engage in such an enterprise which - despite evident internal differences between periods, between high and folk culture, between the great tradition and the small, between the anti-colonialists and the nationalists, between the radicals and the conservatives - is still seen as one - as a single, whole, historical enterprise - its history cannot be written.

The first general point that emerges is to recognise the seriousness of this enterprise, and to respect its authenticity. Serious historical reflection can exist in non-theoretical and non-historical works. What I wish to emphasise is the originality and distinctness of this intellectual enterprise; what was going on inside these intellectual performances was not just an attempt to counter or criticise western theories of social organisation by the use of concepts and argumentative structures taken from the western theoretical discourse. Its originality lay in the fact that this critique was attempted from outside this orbit or circle of discourse; this originality is essentially an acknowledgement of the distinctness of Indian discourse, the assertion of the abstract possibility of other universes of theoretical reflection.

In modern social theory the point is quite often made that different societies could be said to have different internal standards of rationality.[31] It is also fairly common to speculate about what indigenous traditions, silenced by European colonial power, might have said had they commanded resources of argumentation comparable to European social theory. Sometimes this is artificially arranged by making tribal witchcraft speak the language of modern analytic philosophy in a pretended dialogue with the ideas of modern science. Yet these discussions remain abstract and historically insubstantial; for these depict what discourses could have happened, not what was really said by real people in real historical situations. The discourse of Indian nationalism in its early stages shows that we do not always need such ahistorical constructs in seeking a view of an 'other'. In colonial times there existed not only colonised cultures which spoke limited hermetic languages and which had narrow and undifferentiated horizons of thinking; there were also other cultures with considerable internal resources of historical self-reflection, which do not require such generosity of external construction of what they may have had to say about colonialism and the imposition of western modernity. Colonial cultures like India carried on much real as opposed to hypothetical reflection

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31 This is done most notably in the work of Peter Winch; cf. his *Idea of a Social Science and its Relation with Philosophy.*

about their history, comparative rationality, and the validity of the claims of a universal reason.

If this is so, why does mainstream social theory carry on as if these societies, after their moments of colonisation, were entirely divested of discourse? As if, even when there were undeniable episodes of defiance, these were in some sense violently material, unprefaced, unaccompanied by any discursive negotiation of their world of subalternity?[32] Certainly, in recent years this indifference in western social theoretical discourse has been modified to some extent. Relativists in anthropological theory and criticisms of orientalism, particularly Edward Said's influential work,[33] have made some amends for this absence, this erasure of one side from the intellectual history of the colonial world. But these critiques, it must be emphasised, are part of the discourse of western social theory, attempting to restore some balance in its view of the world: they do not provide the necessary representation of the other discourse. These do not write the history of the discourse of the colonised, but point to its existence, and indicate the space where it must be entered in historical record.

In historical fact, the Orient is never reduced to silence: indeed, it constantly gives vent to its resentment against colonialism through an enormous range of expressions from insults, dishonesty, graft, opportunism, gossip, to social reform, political programmes, mass mobilisations, movements, but also serious historical reflection. This is often done in languages, styles and concepts which would be unrecognisable in terms of western social theory, and are consequently treated as being equivalent to historical silence. Probably, this is not due only to difficulties of language, but to a theoretical difficulty as well. Discourses constitute planes or orbits in which ideas and arguments are made, heard and contested. But the most significant thing is that there is no single unruptured plane on which all such circles of discourse coexist and can be heard by each other. More often, these are like circles which exist on different geometric planes. Arguments like the anthropologists' or Said's critique of Orientalism are oppositional ones within western discourse; however much they abstractly advocate the cause of native rationality, they do not represent or read these discourses.

In writing the history of the discourses of the colonised we must guard against the mistake of misrecognition, translating its

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[32] Historians have along with other mainstream social scientists, traditionally neglected discourse, in their immersion of the narratives of the economic and political events. Anthropologists were, by contrast, more attentive to these questions. Consequently, it is not surprising that new forms of history writing, for instance *Subaltern Studies*, but also some others, use a great number of the anthropologist's tools.

[33] See Said, *Orientalism*.

concepts into its nearest European equivalents, like romanticism, socialism, bourgeois theory, etc. It has proved persistently difficult in any case to use evaluative characterisations like 'conservative' and 'radical' when discussing these ideas. They are often articulating positions for which in a strict sense there are no names in western social theory.