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# UNIT 1 NATION AND NATIONALISM\*

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## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

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This is the first Unit of the course. It attempts to familiarize you with the concept of nationalism and how it has been understood by historians and other social scientists.

Indian Nationalist Movement, as you are aware, was a grand and prolonged struggle launched against British imperialism. Nationalism was the main ideology and the instrument with whose help this struggle was launched. In the context of the Indian Nationalist Movement, Indian nationalism represented two major ideas: anti-imperialism and national unity. In other words, any person, movement or organization that practised and upheld these two ideas, could be considered a nationalist.

But nationalism, it is important to remember, was not confined only to India. It was not even confined to the countries of Asia and Africa that came under foreign domination and struggled to get rid of it. Nationalism was truly a global phenomenon that emerged in most countries of the world and made its presence felt. It has been argued that nationalism has been the most powerful political force in the modern world. It has manifested itself as politics, ideology, movement, belief system, a sentiment and also a passion. Large numbers of stories, poems, novels and literature have been written on the theme of nationalism. Nationalism would thus appear to be a complex phenomenon that has emerged in very different and contrasting conditions. Both the developed industrial societies of Europe and the undeveloped societies of Asia and Africa, came under the spell of nationalism. Societies that had very little in common were pervaded by the phenomenon of nationalism roughly at around the same time (18<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century). It would thus appear that there must be a general, universal explanation for its emergence, apart from specific explanations applicable only to the context. In other words, we are talking about a *theory* of nationalism. This theory (or theories) should account for nationalism *in general*. This Unit will explain to you some of the general theories of nationalism.

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## 1.2 UNDERSTANDING NATION, NATIONALISM AND NATION-STATE

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This Unit will focus on three things: 1) some of the major debates and controversies related to nationalism; 2) the various theories of nationalism that have been offered by the social scientists; and 3) the relevance these theories hold for India as a case-study.

What really is the question of nationalism? And why is it important?

### 1.2.1 The Question of Nationalism

When we speak of nationalism, we speak of a period between eighteenth and twentieth century. It was during this period that a large number of small, local communities began to be transformed into (a relatively smaller number of) large and homogenous communities. To put it simply, a large number of small communities began to be transformed into a small number of large communities. The largeness of numbers was replaced by the largeness of size. The new communities were marked by new ties and solidarities. New solidarities began to develop that were somewhat impersonal in nature and yet very powerful. Groups and individuals, not familiar with one another, began to look upon themselves as members of this newly created large invisible community called the Nation. What was involved in this process was a new type of imagination. New communities were getting created above all through an “imagination”. The new communities were not constituted by reciprocity, common sharing of resources, or familiarity. Most communities in history (village communities, speech communities or other local groups) had been based on familiarity. The new national communities, on the contrary, were based on unfamiliarity and anonymity. The new communities were brought together, not so much by common everyday experiences, but by a certain kind of imagination. It was precisely in this sense that Benedict Anderson, a leading theorist on nationalism, referred to nations as “imagined communities”.

What is more, these new groups and communities also began to insist that they should have *their* own representative state. In other words, state systems should not be external and alien to groups and communities (as was the case through most of human history), but should emanate from the communities and should be representative of them. This was really a novel situation. This congruence or identification between the state and society was something quite novel and unusual. These new features of the condition also became the defining features of nation, nationalism and nation-state. Ernest Gellner, another important theorist of nationalism, defined these terms in the opening paragraph of his book: “Nationalism is primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent. Nationalism as a sentiment, or as a movement, can best be defined in terms of this principle. Nationalist *sentiment* is the feeling of anger aroused by the violation of the principle, or the feeling of satisfaction aroused by its fulfilment. A nationalist *movement* is one actuated by a sentiment of this kind” (Ernest Gellner 1983: 1).

This definition of nationalism has the merit of clarity and explicitness. The only problem with this is that it is contingent upon an understanding of nation. If nationalism as a political principle represent a congruence of state (political unit) and nation (national

unit), then we should be able to define nation, in order to understand nationalism, as per this definition. A definition of nation is not easy. It is both difficult and contentious. The main trouble with any attempt to define nation is that at any given time, we would find a large number of nations that do not conform to *that* definition. It would thus appear that the actual world of nations is so diverse (in spite of their commonalities) that no single definition can hope to include them all. It is partly for this reason that scholars have generally refrained from providing a universal definition of nation, *applicable to all situations*. They have found it easier to describe specific nations. It has been much more difficult to abstract certain broad principles on the basis of specific experiences. Ernest Gellner identified two attributes that could possibly form part of the generic definition – **culture** and **will**. But he was himself aware of the inadequacy of either, and indeed both of them in correctly identifying all types of nations. To quote him again:

“What then is this contingent, but in our age seemingly universal and normative, idea of the nation? Discussion of two very makeshift, temporary definitions will help to pinpoint this elusive concept. 1) Two men are of the same nation if and only if they share the same culture, where culture in turn means a system of ideas and signs and associations and ways of behaving and communication. 2) Two men are of the same nation if and only if they *recognize* each other as belonging to the same nation. In other words, nations maketh man; nations are the artefacts of men’s convictions and loyalties and solidarities. A mere category of persons (say, occupants of a given territory, or speakers of a given language, for example) becomes a nation if and when the members of the category firmly recognize certain mutual rights and duties to each other in virtue of their shared membership of it..... Each of these provisional definitions, the cultural and the voluntaristic, has some merit. Each of them singles out an element which is of real importance in the understanding of nationalism. But neither is adequate. Definitions of culture, presupposed by the first definition, in the anthropological rather than the normative sense, are notoriously difficult and unsatisfactory. It is probably best to approach this problem by using this term [nation] without attempting too much in the way of formal definition.” (Ibid., p. 7)

### 1.2.2 Defining Nation and Nation-State

The definitional difficulties mentioned in the previous section notwithstanding, we can still, for the sake of clarity, attempt temporary, makeshift definitions of the two terms – nation and nation-state.

Perhaps the first step towards defining nation is to question and also reject its naturalness. A nation is not a natural human community, given to us. It is historical category, i.e., it is a human community that has been made in history and through history. It is a product of certain historical conditions.

Prior to modern times, i.e., before emergence of nationalism in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the word ‘nation’ was used in a whole range of ways. In particular it was employed either in the sense of a race (a biological category) or in the sense of a clan (a social category larger than the family and connected through ties). These usages had nothing in common with the present day usage of the word ‘nation’ except in so far as they all refer to a human collectivity, which shares certain traits in common.

An entirely new element was imparted to this understanding towards the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Ernest Renan, a French scholar, rejected both the racial/biological as well as the natural definitions of nation. Instead he put forward a voluntaristic definition of nation, based on 'will, memory and consciousness'. This definition had two major characteristics:

- 1) It did not see nations as an *a priori* reality, existing in a natural kind of way. Instead it saw nations as being formed through the forces of history.
- 2) It also rejected the notion that nations were formed by natural boundaries such as rivers, mountains and oceans. Instead they were formed by subjective factors such as will and consciousness.

This indeed was a major breakthrough in the understanding of nations. It looked at nations as contingencies brought about by human will. Upon this understanding, there was nothing stable or permanent about nations. They could be formed and also dissolved. In his famous speech on nations, delivered in 1882, Renan said: "Nations are not something eternal. They have begun; they will end. They will be replaced in all probability, by a European confederation. But such is not the law of the century in which we live. At the present time the existence of nations happens to be good, even necessary. Their existence is a guarantee of liberty, which would be lost if the world had only one law and only one master."

There was however one major problem with this understanding, quite apart from the fact that it concentrated solely on Europe. It accounted for nations very well and effectively, by creating categories (will, memory and consciousness) that could give as a clue to nations. But these categories were so general in nature they could be found in most communities. Many non-national communities could also be identified on the basis of will and consciousness. Indeed it can be said that most, if not all, human communities can be defined on this basis. How to then distinguish nation as a unique and distinctive human community from an enormously large pool of all kinds of human communities? Renan's definition captured the generic part of nations very well but neglected their distinctive part. In other words, it had the merit of being very inclusive. Its defect was that it was not sufficiently exclusive.

Some of the shortcomings of Renan's understanding were addressed by Joseph Stalin in 1913. He focused on the distinctive features of nations. Stalin defined nations in the following words: "A nation is a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture." This definition laid down five main features that would give us a clue to nations: historic continuity, common language, territory, common grid of economic life and a common culture.

Stalin's understanding was in some ways the opposite of Renan's, even though they both shared the basic digits that nations were *formed* and did not exist as an *a priori* reality. If Renan approached nations from the generic side of the scale, Stalin went to the other end and approached nations from the specific side. Stalin highlighted the distinctive part so much that he perhaps ignored the role of general attributes such as will and consciousness in the making of a nation. If we take the example of European Jews in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we would find that the Jewish nation is not adequately covered by Stalin's definition. But it is covered by Renan's.

There is no doubt that Stalin's definition was an advance over Renan's. But even both the definitions put together cannot cover all the possible nations in the world. What is the vital element missing? It is here that Ernest Gellner comes in quite handy. He provided the missing element in 1983 in his book *Nations and Nationalism*. He put forward the important and somewhat controversial idea that nations in the end are made by nationalism, and not the other way round. It is not the case that already formed nations create their own justification through the ideology of nationalism; but rather that nations are made by nationalism. If we apply this understanding to the Indian case, we would infer that it was not the Indian nation that created Indian nationalism, but rather that the Indian nation itself was created (along with various other factors, of course) by the ideology of Indian nationalism.

The addition of this missing element can then complete our definition of nation. If we put all the three elements together – subjective, objective, and ideological, we can say with confidence that we have a definition of nation that covers all the possible nations, which is inclusive enough to cover all nations and also exclusive enough to distinguish nations from other non-national human communities. Here is then our complete definition: By nation we refer to a large, anonymous human community that is brought together by subjective features such as will, consciousness and memory; objective features such as historic continuity, common language, territory, economic life and common culture; and ideological features such as nationalism.

The merit of this definition is that no actual, potential or conceivable nation is outside its net. Yet it excluded the non-nations. It is important however to remember that not all features of this definition apply to all situations. Indian nationalism, for instance, was not based on a common language. Jewish or Polish nationalisms were not based on common territory, or even a common economic life. Many other nationalists of Eastern Europe (Albania for instance) were not based on any great historic continuity. So, not all nations are covered by all the features of the definition. But all in all, we can say that that all the nations – actual or potential – are covered by some features of the definition and that no nation can possibly exist outside this definition net.

Once a comprehensive and inclusive definition of nation is available to us (thanks to the contributions made by Renan in 1882, Stalin in 1913 and Gellner in 1983, stretched over the period of a hundred years), it is easier for us to understand nationalism and nation-state. Nationalism, as mentioned earlier in this unit is the insistence on the congruence of nation and state, in other words that the state should be representative of the people. This is virtually a precondition of nationalism. A nation-state is actually a state of this kind. The human history has been pervaded by all kinds of state systems but none of them fulfilled this nationalist condition. It is only under modern times and conditions that a new type of state – nation-state – emerges in which the society and state are organically connected to each other. To put it differently, nationalism is the main actor that insists on the creation of a nation-state. Nations are large modern communities which desire their own representative state. Nationalism actually helps to bring it about.

Having understood something about nations and nationalism at an elementary level, it is now time to discuss the theories of nationalism, i.e., the major attempts to explain this phenomenon.

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### 1.3 CHALLENGES BEFORE A THEORY OF NATIONALISM

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It is significant that the emergence of new national communities happened to coincide with another monumental phenomenon in the world – transformation of the world from agrarian to industrial and the creation of a new type of social order – industrial society. Was it simply a coincidence or were the two transformations (from small local communities to large national communities and from agrarian societies to an industrial social order) connected to each other in a cause-effect relationship? Many scholars thought that the two were integrally connected. Ernest Gellner provided a neat and elegant theory of how the emergence of nationalism was the product of this transformation and was deeply implicated in it. Many others have agreed with him on this point. A large number of scholars have looked at nationalism, as distinctively modern, and some have specifically linked it to industrialism. Upon this view, there was something about industrialism that created nations. The creation of nations was inherent in the process of industrialism. Some of the features of the industrial society were such that the raw material of diverse human communities began to be transformed into the somewhat finished product of neat, standardized, homogenized, large national communities. Evidently the great nationalist experiences of the world required a theory that would be comprehensive enough to cover the range of those experiences. The theory focusing on industrialism did address some questions but left some other questions unanswered.

In particular there was one major trouble with the theory that linked nationalism to industrialism. It is now clear that as industrialism developed, it was confined to small pockets of European countries. Nationalism, by comparison, had spread to large parts of the world. Industrialism and nationalism may have begun at roughly around the same time (late 18<sup>th</sup>- 19<sup>th</sup> centuries) but after that their trajectories became very dissimilar. Their trajectories also went contrary to anticipations made about them. On industrialism the general anticipation was that gradually industrial affluence would be diffused and would spread to other parts of the world. Nationalism by comparison was considered a European, rather than a global phenomenon. But both the anticipations turned out not to be the case. Industrialism did not get diffused to the rest of the world in an even and uniform manner. Instead it led to the creation of a European ‘core’ and a periphery that consisted of the countries of Asia and Africa. The economies of these societies were placed at the service of the core. The core-periphery transactions were carried out through new devices such as imperialism and colonialism.

Nationalism by comparison did spread to the rest of the world and developed as truly a global phenomenon. There was nothing strictly European about it. It also cast its spell on areas and communities that were far from industrialised. This then was a real challenge for a theory of nationalism that sought to explain it in terms of the spread of industrialism and located it within the matrix of industrialism. This called for a new approach and a different explanation.

It should be quite clear that a phenomenon as widespread as nationalism could not have come about simply as an accident. If large parts of the world went through a similar experience, broadly at the same time, then there must be a valid explanation for it. Moreover there also must be broadly similar set of circumstances giving birth

to nationalism. What for instance was common between 19<sup>th</sup> century England and 20<sup>th</sup> century India? One was an advance industrial country and an imperialist super power. The other was an economically backward country undergoing imperialist domination. Which common set of circumstances could have brought about nationalism in both these societies?

It was partly for dilemmas such as the ones mentioned above, that we do not have one dominant theory of nationalism, but many. It is not so much that we have different types of nationalisms. But we do have very different explanations for the emergence of nationalism. So divergent are these explanations that Benedict Anderson has written: “...it is hard to think of any political phenomenon which remains so puzzling and about which there is less analytic consensus. No widely accepted definition exists. No one has been able to demonstrate decisively either its modernity or its antiquity...[any collection of writings on nationalism] finds the authors more often with their backs to one another, staring out at different, obscure horizons, than engaged in hand to hand combat.” (Benedict Anderson, “Introduction” in Gopal Balakrishnan (ed.), *Mapping the Nation*, p. 1). He also stated that the political power of nationalism is matched by its philosophical poverty. This implies that whereas everybody recognizes the political power nationalism enjoys in modern world, there is very little consensus on what has brought it about. Let us therefore turn to different ways in which nationalism has been understood and explained by social scientists.

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## 1.4 THEORIES OF NATIONALISM

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Before we illustrate the different theories of nationalism, one or two general points may be made. All the theorists of nationalism would agree that a phenomenon as pervasive and widespread as nationalism cannot be explained only by specific or endogenous factors or factors operative within the society. It can only be satisfactorily explained by external or exogenous factors, or factors from outside the particular society. As Tom Nairn, a leading scholar on nationalism, has put it: “However, it is not true that nationalism of any kind is really the product of these internal motions as such.... Welsh *national-ism* [emphasizing the nation] of course has much to do with the specifics of the Welsh people, their history, their particular forms of oppression and all the rest of it. But Welsh *national-ism* [emphasizing the Ism] – that generic, universal necessity recorded in the very term we are very interested in – has nothing to do with Wales. It is not a Welsh fact, but a fact of general developmental history, that at a specific time the Welsh land and people are forced into the historical process in this fashion.” (Tom Nairn, *The Break-up of Britain: Crisis and Neo-Nationalism*.)

The main difference among the theorists of nationalism lies in the *identification* of these external factors. Some would look at nationalism as a necessary stage of human development that all societies must go through, sooner or later. Some others might see it in more general terms as the unfolding of the ‘human spirit’, or a great social and psychological need for identity, or for identifying with a larger whole. But all would agree that the phenomenon of nationalism has a broad, trans-country, generic explanation. If nationalism can be identified on the basis of some common traits, experienced by different societies broadly at the same time (18<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup> centuries), then there must be some general explanations for it.

However similarities among theorists end here. The theorists may all agree on a need for theory but not on the substance of the theories. They offer very diverse explanations for nationalism. These differences can be best understood through binaries. These binaries range from looking at nationalism as either an accident or a great human need, either necessary or contingent, either ideational (i.e., product of certain ideas) or materialist, either a false consciousness or a great human aspiration, either brought about by certain important social groups or by structures. But the most important binary is that between modernists and non-modernists. Let us look at this binary in some details.

### **1.4.1 Non-Modernist Theories**

As far as theories of nationalism are concerned, perhaps the biggest dividing line is between modernist and non-modernist ones. The modernists look upon nationalism as a modern phenomenon and a product of not more than the last three centuries. On the other side of the divide are the non-modernists who refuse to privilege the modern period for an understanding of nationalism and instead look at the larger spread of time. Their argument is that a phenomenon as deeply pervasive and implicated in human life as nationalism could not have simply been created in such a short span of time and that the phenomenon must have evolved over a long stretch of time.

At this stage it is necessary to highlight that both the positions – modernist as well as non-modernist – are internally quite diverse. Not all modernists agree with each and share little in common except for being modernists. Likewise non-modernists too come in all shapes and sizes. They could easily be divided between evolutionists, naturalists and perennialists. Naturalists often see the nation as something natural and rooted in human mind. They see nationalism as a very natural human sentiment. Upon this understanding, it is somehow natural for people to be nationalists. Since they consider it as natural, they do not have to provide any explanation for it. One major scholar for instance referred to nationalism as a “state of mind”. Naturalists do not use expressions like rise or growth or emergence of nationalism. They only talk about a permanent, timeless presence of nationalist feeling in the minds and hearts of people. Nationalism therefore does not need an explanation. Upon this nationalist view, it is not nationalism but its absence that has to be explained.

Close to the naturalists position is the perennialist position. This is often found in the approach of nationalists themselves. The practitioners and ideologues of nationalism often tend to see their brand of nationalism as fully formed in their history. To take an example, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the ideologue and propagator of Pakistani nationalism, often said from 1940 onwards, that a Muslim nation was not a product of recent political developments, but that a Muslim nation existed in a fully finished form in the medieval past. When Jinnah was asked about the exact location of his Muslim nation and when it came into being, he provided an interesting answer: Pakistan already existed since a long time; it was not created in the recent past. He clarified further in a speech: “Pakistan ... was not the product of the conduct or misconduct of Hindus. It had always been there; only they [Muslims] were not conscious of it. ... Pakistan started the moment the first non-Muslim was converted to Islam long before the Muslims established their rule. ... Throughout the ages Hindus had remained Hindus and Muslims had remained Muslims and they had not merged their entities – that was the basis for Pakistan” (Jinnah’s speech in Aligarh, March 1944, Khurshid Ahmad Khan Yusufi (ed.), *Speeches, Statements and Messages of the Quaid-e-*



*Azam*, Vol. III, pp. 1840-41). This was a classic example of nationalism as an ‘invented tradition’.

At this stage it is necessary to bring out the distinction between a nationalist position and a position on nationalism. All nations have a ‘self-image’ as articulated by the nationalist ideologues or the leaders. It is important for us to understand this self-image, which tells us a great deal about that particular nation. But it is equally important for us not to endorse it as necessarily valid. In other words, nations and nationalism should be understood as real and powerful sociological phenomena, but their reality is quite different from the tale told about them by nationalists themselves. In the scholarly works on nationalism, the perennialist position has been understood and described as an “invented tradition”. What is invented tradition? The idea of “invented tradition” carries the following connotation:

- 1) Nationalists tend to use and invoke the past and traditions as a legitimizing device to validate their nationalist projects.
- 2) They also claim legitimacy for *their* nation by claiming its presence in the past, history and traditions, or as a continuation from the past.
- 3) In such a projection, the tradition is not presented as it was, but rather it is invented or manufactured. The invention of the tradition is done in such a manner so as to support nationalist claims. Jinnah could justify his Muslim nation, only by asserting that there had been no interaction between Hindus and Muslims and hence a Muslim nation existed since a long time in Indian history. In this way, antiquity and tradition were being used to provide legitimacy for a fully modern ‘Muslim nation’. The tradition was not being invoked as it was; it was being tailored and projected in a such a manner so as to justify and legitimize the Muslim nation. One way of seeking this legitimacy was to show the presence of this ‘Muslim nation’ in the distant past and in tradition. For this purpose, the tradition was being ‘invented’. The concept of “invented traditions” was coined by leading historian Eric Hobsbawm and it has been a useful concept in understanding the nature of nations and nationalism.

Yet another important non-modernist position is the evolutionist one. It recognizes the pervasive presence of nationalism in the modern period but argues that it can be explained by going to the pre-modern period of human history. This argument focuses on pre-existing cultural traditions, heritages and various other ethnic ties, sentiments and collective memories “which have coalesced over the generations” and thus contributed to the emergence of nations in modern times. To take an example, the nature and pattern of modern Greek nationalism can be understood better by focusing on both the period of Byzantine imperialism and also the classical antiquity. Anthony D. Smith is one of the major proponents of this approach. This approach looks not at the broad and general patterns but features specific to each society. It does not focus so much on what is common to all nations, but rather on what is distinctive about each nation.

### 1.4.2 Modernist Theories

As against the non-modernist approaches towards understanding nationalism are the modernist ones. As mentioned earlier, not all modernists agree with one another, and that the modernist camp is as diverse as the non-modernist one, if not more

so. One of the earliest modernist arguments was provided by Elie Kedouri in 1961. Kedouri looked at nationalism primarily as a doctrine (as against a force) and saw it as rooted in the intellectual history of modern Europe. The first sentence of his book is self-explanatory: "Nationalism is a doctrine invented in Europe at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century." (Elie Kedouri, *Nationalism*, p. 1) This was a non-structural explanation of nationalism which saw nationalism as rooted, not in concrete structures and specific conditions, but merely in ideas and doctrines of some European thinkers. An effective alternative to Kedouri was provided by Ernest Gellner who provided the structural explanation.

Gellner saw the emergence of nationalism as the integral part of the transformation of the world from agrarian to industrial. In this sense his theory is both structural and materialist. It is structural in the sense that he does not see it as the result of the activities of a few groups and individual but as the unfolding of new economic and productive forces creating new interplays of power and culture. His theory is materialist in the sense that it looks not as ideas and doctrines as the basic motor in the emergence of nationalist. Rather it sees nationalism as the product of the functioning of new material forces. The theory does recognize the primacy of economic forces in creating new conditions. Following is in brief the essence of Gellner's theory of nationalism:

For reasons not clear to anyone, a new, distinctive and unprecedented type of economy emerged and was established on the Atlantic shores of Europe around the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This new economy, generically called the industrial economy, had some unique features, compared to earlier economies. One, It was based on perpetual growth. Indeed the economy could survive only if it grew and kept growing. The growing economy completely dismantled the stability of the old order. Two, It required full or substantial literacy for its functioning. This literacy had to be of a homogenous kind so that a large number of anonymous people, unfamiliar with one another, could also communicate with one another. Three, It was characterized by remarkable mobility, both occupation and spatial. Large numbers of people were uprooted from their traditional occupations, locations and cultures. As a result of the functioning of the new economy, they were thrown around from their cosy community settings and were placed in unfamiliar and alien situations. Four, the new economy was also based on egalitarianism. The new economy operated like a hurricane or a huge tidal wave that destroyed the earlier hierarchies based on rank and status. It destroyed old cultures, old structures, old hierarchies and also old community isolation. The mobility and anonymity of the new order created conditions for egalitarianism. Five, the preservation of the old, elite high-culture was found to be completely incompatible with the functioning of the new economy. Under the new situation, the high culture of the elites could not remain confined to the few at the top. It had to become shared and pervasive. So, both the multiple local folk cultures and an exclusive high culture were replaced and transformed into a pervasive and a shared high culture.

The new economy was backed up by modern science and technology and was so powerful that it destroyed the old order and, in time, replaced it with a new social order. The earlier faultlines in the European society (based on rank and status) were eroded and replaced by new boundaries based on culture. New cultures (based on the earlier exclusive high cultures and local folk cultures) developed in these societies and most members, deprived of their earlier cultural moorings, aspired

to be incorporated into the new cultures. At the same time, the role of the state became very important. The new economic apparatus became so large that it could be effectively managed only by the state. The state could maintain it only if it enjoyed the support and the allegiance of the people. This effective state-society partnership could be built only if all were members of the same culture. It was therefore necessary that the state should be representative of the society. All this called for a very new type of arrangement:

- Ordinary people, having been deprived of their cultural moorings, could now aspire to live with dignity only as members of the new high culture. The new high culture could be promoted and protected only by the state. But that could happen only if the people and the state belonged to the same culture. Hence the necessity of a state as representative of the people and from the same cultural stock as the people.
- The new economy was so large that it could not effectively run without the participation of a large number of people. But people had to be trained for the new jobs and roles. Hence 'education' became very necessary. This education had to be uniformly imparted across different categories and could be effectively provided only by the state. Therefore state became very important. In the process of imparting common education, state also released homogenizing forces, which helped in the creation of the new cultural community (or communities), tied through common culture.
- The state could not carry out its task till it had the support and allegiance of the people. It was necessary that people 'belong' to the state and that this belonging should be direct without being mediated by any other ties of kinship and community.

In other words, people should become citizens and should be directly responsible to the state.

In the functioning of all these processes, nationalism becomes the inevitable and inescapable consequence. The modern economy requires it; the modern state requires it; the society also requires it. This is the crux of Gellner's explanation for nationalism.

Gellner provided a credible theory of nationalism. One major problem with it was that it did not seem to correspond to developments in India or indeed in other colonies. The strength of Gellner's theory was that it captured the global nature of the phenomenon very well. Yet it did not seem to adequately cover the nationalist experiences of the colonial societies of Asia and Africa. Indeed it could be said that his theory had been constructed almost entirely on the basis of Western European experiences and then universalized as valid for all of mankind. Is there a theory that can be said to have done justice to the experiences of the colonial societies? It is here that Tom Nairn comes in quite handy. In his book, *Break-Up of Great Britain*, Tom Nairn has explained nationalism as having emanated not from the industrialized European societies but from the colonial societies.

Tom Nairn is both modernist and universalist. He is modernist in the sense that he sees nationalism as a product of the last two centuries. He is universalist because he looks at nationalism as a specific feature of the general historical development of modern world. For him nationalism is an inevitable and integral consequence of a particular stage of human development. In clearer terms, Nairn sees nationalism

as a consequence of the capitalist transformation of the world and of the uneven underdevelopment inherent in capitalism. Here is the essence of his theory:

The world capitalism that emerged in certain pockets of Europe towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, created a 'myth' of 'even development'. The myth was that gradually capitalism would get diffused throughout the world. But in reality no such even diffusion was possible. Capitalism actually flourished by creating a 'core' (of advanced capitalist countries of Europe) and a 'periphery' outside the area of the new industrial-capitalist-world economy, and at the service of the core.

The acute humiliation of unevenness was soon felt in the periphery (the colonial societies of Asia and Africa). The elite in these societies soon discovered that 'progress' in the abstract only meant 'domination' in the concrete for them. Moreover, this domination was exercised by powers that were alien and foreign. In other words capitalism created a system of imperialism and colonialism. It was in this sense that humanity's forward march became synonymous with 'Westernization'. In the colonial societies the elites discovered that they were being excluded from the new system and that their full incorporation in it was just not possible. A large majority of the people in the colonies had to be trampled over rather than initiated into the rules of the new game. They could only be exploited in the new system, not made partners in it at any stage.

So, it became clear to the elites in the colonial societies that capitalism had two different faces. Whereas it brought wealth, affluence and mobility to the European world, it brought economic underdevelopment and political subjugation to the people of the colonies. Nationalism was a reaction to *this* situation. The elite in the colonial societies had to take the initiative in organizing resistance to this situation of domination, exploitation and exclusion. This meant the conscious organization, mobilization and formation of a national community, cutting across class lines and focusing on the separate identity of this community. These elites did not have the economic and political institutions of modernity with whose help they could create this community. Therefore it had to be done on the basis of inherited past, speech, folk-lore, skin colour, etc. "The new middle-class intelligentsia of nationalism had to invite the masses into history; and the invitation card had to be written in a language they understood." Hence the focus on the language of the people. This new venture created a vertical alliance of the elite and the masses against foreign domination and united them in a common struggle to get rid of this domination. Nationalism was inherent in this process of the joint struggle of the elite and the masses against imperialism.

This really is the essence of Tom Nairn's theory. As you can see, this is essentially a modernist understanding of nationalism but very different from other modernist understandings which concentrated their attention on Europe. Tom Nairn, as you can see, is very close to the Indian experience of nationalism. His theory applies to anti-colonial nationalisms in general and Indian nationalism in particular.

It should be clear from the preceding discussion that it is necessary for us to talk, not of one grand theory but, of many and different theories of nationalism. Even those who share a basic premise or concern, such as the modernists do, offer very different explanations for the phenomenon of nationalism. Some focus on ideas and doctrines and some on concrete processes. Some focus on the role and activities of groups and classes and some on structures. Some see nationalism as emanating from within the heart of capitalism and some look at it as the consequence of the

uneven spread of capitalism and as a reaction to imperialism and colonialism. This diversity in theories is quite inevitable. Nationalist experiences have been so varied that no single theory can be expected to satisfactorily provide the explanation applicable to all situations.

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## 1.5 INDIAN NATIONALISM

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What about Indian nationalism? Does it fit into the established theories or does it need a separate theory of its own? It would be best to look at Indian nationalism as a case-study of nationalism in general, but as an important and distinctive case-study. It may not be necessary to construct a separate theory of Indian nationalism, but rather that general theories of nationalism will have to be modified and tailored so as to accommodate the Indian case-study. Perhaps one should separately look at the two components of the Indian experience – the Indian component (specific) and the nationalist (generic) one. It should therefore be seen both as *Indian* nationalism and also as Indian *nationalism*.

Let us discuss the generic component first. It is necessary to highlight the modernity of the Indian nation. Even though India is an old civilizational society with a long continuous history of many centuries, Indian nation is a modern phenomenon. Large parts of India were ruled by many large empires in the past (Mauryan, Gupta, Mughal) and this dynastic continuity did help in the evolution of an Indian identity during the pre-modern period. Yet it would not be correct to speak of an Indian nation prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. So whereas an Indian society or an Indian civilization certainly existed, a national community of Indian people certainly did not. An Indian nation was made in the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries by the ideology of Indian nationalism under conditions of British imperialism. So we can say that the general explanations of nationalism in terms of a stage of history would be relevant for an understanding of Indian nationalism too.

Indian nationalism was territorial rather than ethnic or religious. This meant that the claim to Indianness was put forward on the basis of territory and not religion. Anyone who lived on the India soil was considered a member of the national community. It was not so much the common culture or a common language (as elucidated by Stalin's definition) that went into the making of the national community, but rather the common economic exploitation under British imperialism.

Apart from some general features, Indian nationalism also had some distinctive features of its own. In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Indian intelligentsia was constantly told by some British scholars, bureaucrats and ethnographers that there was not, nor could ever be, an Indian nation. One British scholar John Strachey, wrote in his book, *India: Its Administration and Progress* (1888): "This is the first and most essential thing to learn about India – that there is not and never was an India or even any country of India, possessing according to European ideas, any sort of unity, physical, political, social or religious: no Indian nation, no 'people of India', of which we hear so much." Likewise John Seeley wrote in his book, *The Expansion of England* (1883): "The notion that India is a nationality rests upon that vulgar error which political science principally aims at eradication. India is not a political name, but only a geographical expression like Europe or Africa. It does not mark the territory of a nation and a language, but the territories of many nations and many languages."

It was broadly in these terms that the inherent impossibility of the Indian nation was highlighted. India was referred to as “a mere geographical expression”. The British colonial discourses on India emphasized India’s cultural, linguistic and religious diversity and looked upon it as a barrier to the development of Indian nationhood. One way of reacting to these statements would have been to go back to the mythical unity of Indian people in the past. But the majority of Indian intellectuals refrained from replying to the ‘no nation’ charge with an ‘always a nation’ assertion. They did not go over to the other extreme. Bipan Chandra writes: “The initiators of the Indian National Movement, the 19<sup>th</sup> century intellectuals, did not deny the British assertion that India was not yet a nation. They readily accepted that India was not yet a formed nation despite common history, geography and the elements of a common culture. They also accepted that nation and nationalism had not existed in India in the past. They acknowledged the incoherence of India as also the existence of multiplicity of identities in it. They also accepted that nation was not a natural or inevitable phenomenon but was a historical creation. But they denied that India could not become a nation. They answered the imperialist taunts by claiming that historical forces were gradually bringing the Indian people together and that India had now entered the process of becoming a nation. India, they said, was a nation-in-the-making, which was the title of Surendranath Banerjee’s autobiography.” (Bipan Chandra, “The Making of the Indian Nation”, in *Indica*, March 2004, p. 21).

And so, one important feature of the thinking of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Indian thinkers was to make a distinction between nation and civilization and highlight the novelty of the Indian nation. They argued that India was old civilization, but a new nation. Even those leaders who highlighted the superiority of Indian civilization and glorified India’s past, recognized the modernity of the Indian nation. Swami Vivekanand said in 1896: “A nation is being made out of India’s different races. I sometimes think they are no less various than the different peoples of Europe.” The 19<sup>th</sup> century Indian leaders constantly made references to “new nation”, new India, “new national spirit”, “development of nationhood” etc. It can therefore be said that ‘invention of tradition’ as a standard nationalist device was not resorted to by the 19<sup>th</sup> century Indian nationalists. They focused on the novelty rather than the antiquity of the Indian nation. It was however later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that some leaders considered Indian nation to be perennial and always present in Indian history. They also glorified India’s past and traditions and projected them on India’s present.

Apart from this feature, Indian nationalism was plural, non-coercive and civil. It was plural in the sense that the Indian nationalist leaders recognized the great Indian diversity but refused to consider it as a weakness or an obstacle that would have to go away in the journey towards nationhood. In other words, they consciously promoted the idea of the Indian nation as being based on cultural plurality rather than cultural monism. Perhaps the best statement endorsing India’s plurality and linking it with nationalism came from Mahatma Gandhi who wrote in his weekly journal *Harijan* in 1940: “India is a big country, a big nation, composed of different cultures which are tending to blend with one another, each complementing the rest. If I must wait for the completion of this process, I must wait. It may not be completed in my day. I shall love to die in the faith that it must come in the fullness of time.” As is clear from Gandhi’s statement, the Indian nationalist leaders fully recognized that nation making for India was a long process and far from accomplished. And

that India's diversity was no obstacle in India's nationhood. Nationalism and pluralism could be combined together. When India became independent and acquired a constitution in 1950, the Constitution makers refused to recognize any single language as the national language. Rather, they enlisted 14 important Indian languages and designated all of them as official languages. The number of India's official languages has now increased to 22.

Indian nation has also been remarkably non-coercive. It is true that all nationalisms are essentially homogenizing forces and they try to create a large pool of national culture in which all local and minority cultures are expected to merge. This really is the story of most nations of the world. Indian nation by comparison was remarkable non-coercive. It was based on the idea of 'consensus' but this consensus was not to be enforced from the top. Both during the period of the anti-imperialist struggle, and during the independence period, national unity was promoted through non-coercive ways and methods.

To sum up this section, there are certain features of Indian nationalism that conform to general pattern of nationalism as illustrated in the theories. But it also has its own specific features which may not be covered by the theories. Therefore it is essential that the general theories and principles of nationalism should retain enough flexibility to be able to accommodate different and diverse nationalist experiences in different parts of the world.

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## 1.6 SUMMARY

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This Unit has highlighted some of the major explanations for the emergence of the phenomenon of nationalism. The following points have been made in the Unit:

- An elementary understanding of terms such as nation, nationalism and nation-state is absolutely essential for our enquiry. Nation should be understood as a very special and distinctive human community. Nationalism is a political principle that insists that this national community should have its own representative State. Nation-State is the example of such a State in which the State is representative of the nation and emanates from it. To put it differently, different types of human communities have dotted the earth. Nation is one such human community, but a very unique and a special one, which appeared on the scene only towards the 19<sup>th</sup> century under particular circumstances. Likewise, various kinds of state systems have made their appearance in human history. Nation-State is one such State but a very unique and a special one. Nation-States also appeared on the scene only from 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards. The linkages between the two – nation and the Nation-State – can only be understood with reference to nationalism. Nationalism brings the two together.
- The theories of nationalism can be broadly divided into modernist and non-modernist ones. The modernist theories consider nationalism to be a modern phenomenon belonging to the history of the world during the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Some of the non-modernist theories tend to see nationalism as a 'natural human feeling' not requiring any particular explanation. Some others see nationalism as a prolonged evolution, spread over centuries in which various cultural or linguistic communities evolved into national communities.

- An influential modernist theory of nationalism has been provided by Ernest Gellner. Gellner locates the emergence of nationalism in the transformation of the world from agrarian to industrial. The functioning of the new industrial society was such that it necessitated the creation of large national communities. In other words there was something about the features and functioning of the industrial society that resulted in the emergence of nationalism as a force, all over the world.
- However, there was one major problem with Gellner's theory. The specific features of the industrial society, as outlined by Gellner, were fully operative only in the developed European societies. Nationalism, by contrast, emerged as a truly global force, active as much in the non-developed non-European zones of the world as in the European ones. The question therefore was: how to explain the emergence of nationalism in the countries of Asia and Africa, which had not experienced the affluence and growth brought about by industrialism?
- This question was answered by Tom Nairn, another modernist theorist of nationalism. Tom Nairn also, like Gellner, linked nationalism to the functioning of the global capitalist economy. But, unlike Gellner, he located his explanation, not in the growth, literacy and mobility of the industrial societies, but in the unevenness, dislocation and disparity created by industrialism, particularly across societies. This unevenness divided the world into a 'European core' and an 'Asian and African periphery'. In other words, capitalism created imperialism and colonialism. The elite of the periphery in particular experienced the humiliation of this unevenness. In order to counter it, they worked towards creating larger communities in unity and solidarity, cutting across lines, to fight imperialist domination. It was in this process that nationalism emerged in the colonies.
- Undoubtedly Tom Nairn's theory comes closer to the actual process in which a national community of Indian people evolved in the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> India. The Indian nationalist experience can be best understood if we divide it into a 'generic' and a 'specific' component. The generic component would be broadly similar to the process of nation-formation in other societies. However, the Indian experience had its own distinctive features. This Unit has highlighted both the generic and the specific features.
- To sum up, in order to properly understand and explain Indian nationalism, it is necessary to have a twin focus. One, we need to focus on the generic conditions and the unfolding of the global forces that resulted in the emergence of nationalism. At the same time, we need to focus on the specific Indian conditions that played a role in evolving a national community of the Indian people. The theories of nationalism need to take both the generic and the society-specific factors into consideration.

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## 1.7 EXERCISES

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- 1) Discuss the modernist theories about the emergence of nations and nationalism.
- 2) Critically discuss the various definitions of nations and nation-states.
- 3) What are the non-modernist theories of nationalism? What is their importance?