

Discourse Analysis on Right-Wing Identity Politics and Nation Building in India

Yesu Anthony I

Research Scholar

Department of Philosophy, Satya Nilayam Institute of Philosophy and Culture, 201, Kalki Krishnamurthy Salai, Thiruvannamiyur, Chennai 600041, Tamil Nadu, India.

ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to analyze how in India the Identity politics of the right-wing dominant group decide the directions of nation building and attempts to construct a supra monolithic

Brahmanical culture which is posing a threat to the very spirit of pluralism, democracy guaranteed by the Indian constitution. And also, how identity politics is attempting to design nation building process based on a new principle which is divisive and negates the other. Against this background, this paper analyses how identity construction, identity politics, and nation building take the center stage in Indian politics. It also highlights the salient features of right-wing identity politics and their relevance in nation-building. The article claims that the collective consciousness required for nation-building does not have to be based on a single identity. As a result, ethnic cleansing will result from identities developed out of deep hatred for 'the other' and identities that seek exclusion. Instead, a non-aggressive and inclusive nation-building process based on the common identities of the Indian Subcontinent is recommended.

Key Words: Identity; Identity politics; Movements; Nation Building; Nationalism.

1. Introduction

We live in an age when political colonization seems to become a matter of the past in our age. But it isn't. Now it is right-wing Identity politics in other words "[...] cultural colonization which seems to be yet another form of the same monster" (D'Souza, 1996, p. 6) that drains the richness of every other culture and in a special way endangers the very survival and coexistence of multi-cultures and identities. In other words, it is widely debated whether India's democracy increasingly becoming illiberal? In the name of the nation-building process, it is the identity politics that takes leniency towards "redefining heritage through it's 'excluding' nationalism, flawed conceptions of history" (Thappar, 2018) observes Romila Thapar. The nationalism proposed by Hindutva and it's under currents need to be critically analyzed. Can India, the largest democracy in the world be an exception to re orient all its effort in embracing multicultural and multi religious and multilingual and multi-ethnic dimension in

building the nation for the future generation? What would be some of the immediate responses that we need to propose? Any project for nation building that overlooks the otherness and intercultural need will produce counter effect and it will never be incomplete.

2. Identity and identity politics

Identity politics is a modern phenomenon that could be approached from different perspectives, and it embraces a wide range of socio-political phenomena. Identity politics is a "tendency for people of a particular religion, race, social background, etc. to form exclusive political alliances, moving away from traditional broad based party politics" (Soanes & Stevenson, 2006, p. 861). Identity politics emerges "when people adopt political positions based on their ethnicity, race, sexuality or religion rather than on broader policies" (Fukuyama, 2018b). They are the Identity politics of the left-wing groups and identity politics of the right-wing groups. While elaborating the above point Fukuyama states that "the left has focused less on broad

economic equality and more on promoting the interests of a wide variety of groups perceived as being marginalized — blacks, immigrants, women, Hispanics, the LGBT community, and refugees. The right, meanwhile, is redefining itself as a collection of patriots who seek to protect traditional national identity, an identity that is often explicitly connected to race, ethnicity, or religion” (Fukuyama, 2018c). For example, the feminist movements, such as Dalit movements, the Civil rights movement, Labor movements, and African freedom struggle movements are examples of left-wing identity politics. “Though identity politics started on the left, it has been more potent on the right” (Fukuyama, 2018b). Now, all over the world, right-wing identity politics is active in full swing. We need to differentiate the “identities that are the outcome of oppression, exploitation and neglect and the identities that have domination, exclusion, and discrimination as their agenda.

There is a difference between identity assertions of the marginalized communities aiming at democratizing society and the narrow identity politics led by community elites to propagate separatism and exclusionism” (Srikanth, 2003, p. 2427). Identity politics of the right wing divides the people and provokes hate politics. They look at the “cultural differences and the consequent assertion of marginalized people as the root cause for inter-group conflict in a plural society. They believe that this conflict is due to these ‘others’ who are not assimilated into the majority or dominant culture that would eventually question the hegemony of the dominant” (Dastidar, 2001, p. 1006). Here the dominant elites are disturbed by the empowerment of the subaltern and marginalized groups of people whose empowerment is a death blow to the powerful. Against this background, the right-wing groups are forcefully designing a politics to counteract the empowerment of the marginalized and to maintain their statuesque. They approach everything from this perspective. Both Identity and nationalism are modern ideologies that play a vital role in the nation building process.

3. Nation Building – A Construction

Nation building is a constructive product of social engineering. It doesn’t happen by historical accident or by revolution. But an individual who comes into society and constructs it in such a way that he could feel one with the society in which he has nurtured a

sense of community. National sentiments and national identity are produced, implanted, disseminated consciously in the mind of every individual. Nation building aims at constructing consciousness of the people while state-building aims at establishing infrastructures. In this invented tradition, roots, common culture, common traditions, common genealogy, and common geography, a common language the meaning of human existence unfolds and the political stability through the unification of the people is designed. Nation building is nothing but the construction of the nations, constructing people into a community of communities where they feel a shared sense of identity. And this shared sense of identity is constructed through various means. Therefore, “Nation-building refers to a more abstract process of developing a shared sense of identity or community among the various groups making up the population of a particular state” (Dinnen, 2006, p. 1). We can further understand that “Nation Building is the most common form of collective identity formation to legitimize public power within a given country. This is an essentially indigenous process which often not only projects a meaningful future but also draws on existing traditions, and customs, redefining them as national characteristics to support the nation’s claim to sovereignty and uniqueness” (Häußler et al., 2005, p. 586). Therefore, a state for political stability deliberately constructs national consciousness. Identity politics of the right-wing group storming into this process and collective consciousness is being constructed on a single identity. Therefore, *identical identity construction* is dangerous and unethical in a multicultural context.

4. Salient Features of Identity politics in nation building in India

4.1. Identity politics undermines democratic solidarity in building the nation

Identity politics adopt “democratic recession” in Building the nation. Francis Fukuyama gives the background for the emergence of identity politics. He mentions the “third wave” of democratization (Fukuyama, 2018a, p. 13) where liberal democracy i.e., the electoral democracy increased from 35 to more than 110, between 1970 to 2000 drastically came down thereafter. He further observes with disappointment that a country like “Russia has reverted to authoritarian traditions. What was far more unexpected was that threats to

democracy should arise from within established democracies themselves” (Fukuyama, 2018a, p. 8). The narrow identity politics of the right wing is gaining momentum all over the globe against liberal democratic politics. In India which is the largest democracy in the world where the BJP government and its ideology slowly deviate from the secular liberal democratic pillars of the Indian constitution to a narrow aggressive identity politics.

The foundations of democracy, pluralism, and secularism are opposed by identity politics or interpreted in different ways. Democracy positively should enable different groups to negotiate with one another freely. And this negotiation should be inclusive. While elaborating this point, Narendar Pani highlights two important components; “first, they would have to ensure that no one is left out of the exercise. Second, the exercise itself would allow for wide-ranging participation in the negotiation process” (Pani, 2010, pp. 183–184). This should be the heart of any nation-building process where Privilege is not “defined as unearned advantage gained by the membership of a historically powerful group, while oppression is being subject to constraints on one’s liberty because of membership of a historically disadvantaged group” (Bushnell & Wild, 2017, p. 15). It ensures and articulates that all privileges and support to those who share the identity of the dominant group and others become the victim of identical identity construction. In India, in the name of nation-building, the majority of the dominant groups “believe that the Hindu identity was the dominant one in India and, as such, should override all their other identities” (Pani, 2010, p. 187). Romila Thapar openly states that “it is becoming increasingly illiberal by leaps and bounds. You have all kinds of bans – on books, food, clothing, and censorship of creative expression. It is said that women are raped because they don’t behave properly, they don’t dress properly, and they go out after dusk (Thappar, 2015). This type of democratic recession is the characteristic of right-wing Identity politics. The founding fathers of RSS from the beginning are undemocratic in their claim. Golwalkar said that “the foreign races in Hindustan must either adopt the Hindu religion, must entertain no idea but those of the glorification of the Hindu race and culture [...] or may stay in the country, wholly subordinated to the Hindu Nation, claiming nothing,

deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment – not even citizen’s rights” (Kuruvachira, 2005, p. 19). V.D. Savarkar also had maintained a similar view in saying that “the Hindus will never tolerate the absurd and the unheard-of claim of the minorities to have any preferential treatment weightages or special favors” (Kuruvachira, 2005, p. 19). Thus, Identity politics is illiberal and undemocratic undermining the freedom of multicultural groups and the existence of multiple identities.

4.2. **Hate politics-the other is constructed**

Another important feature of identity politics in building the nation is that it nurtures animosity between different groups. Majoritarian’s identical identity construction and politics are being built on constructing ‘the Other’. Projecting ‘the other’ as the cause for all their misery and sorrows. Globally we can observe that identity politics constructs a common enemy against which majoritarianism of nation is built. As for as India is concerned the Muslims, Christians, and the communists are projected as common enemies namely ‘the other’ who are not part of the mainstream of the nation. Moreover, Shashi Tharoor observes how the identity politics of hindutvavadis promotes hate politics and anti-Muslim sentiments following the words of Truschke “that India was subjected to repeated defeats over the centuries, including by several generations of Muslim conquerors that enfeebled the people and their land their sentiments [are] often undergirded by modern anti-Muslim sentiments” (Tharoor, 2018a, p. 98). Golwalkar while speaking about Christians, he said that “they seem to be quite harmless but if they indulge in such activities and consider themselves as agents of the international movement for the spread of Christianity and refuse to offer their first loyalty to the land of their birth and behave as true children of the heritage and culture of their ancestors they will remain here as hostiles and will have to be treated as such (J. Kuruvachira, 2005, p. 152). Again, in his *We our nationhood* defined, he depicts the arrival of Muslims as an evil day and since then until now the Hindu nation has been courageously fighting on to shake off the despoilers (Tharoor, 2018c, p. 150). The Muslims of the nation are portrayed as anti-national by the mere fact that they belong to this religion. “There is a strong muttered feeling that Muslims by the very fact

of being Muslim must be anti-national and disrespectful of Hindu culture, and in need of being put down with a firm hand, under any pretext” (Rajan, 2008, p. 81). Oppression and privilege are created not just by political institutions, but cultural phenomena like the use of language and the ‘construction’ of identity (Bushnell & Wild, 2017, p. 15). Identity politics survives on projecting an enemy constantly. It goes to any extent of establishing their hegemony by constructing some group as the enemy of the majority. “To secure its rights over its national resources and neutralize potential threats to its hegemony from others who are imagined as competitors, rivals and even enemy, it purged, Persecuted, and compelled others to leave the confines of its territory. But the violence, oppression, and tyranny of the concept of a nation are manifested more brutally when finished with the ‘others,’ the nations begin creating ‘others’ from within itself” (Nag, 2001, p. 4754). Identity politics is constantly in need of projecting an enemy for its survival. It will keep on constructing the enemy within and projecting ‘the others’ explicitly.

Rajiv Malhotra and Aravindan Neelakandan in their book *Breaking India* project a great threat to the unity of India by various groups. They try to convince the readers that there is an internal and international conspiracy to “break the spine of Indian Civilization” (Rajiv Malhotra, 2017, p. 1), which is coordinated and well-funded by the US and Europe through the network of Organizations, Individuals, churches, private think tanks and academics (Rajiv Malhotra, 2017, p. xii). They are trying to construct all those who oppose them as anti-national, and they need to be kept aside while building the nation. Thus, they try to poison the mind of people and create a fear in them about *the other*. In India, the Nation-building process makes use of this identity politics in branding them namely Muslims and Christians as anti-national forces having nexus with the multinational network. By stating this, they try to consolidate or construct the nation on a single identity namely religion. Thus, the long-cherished fraternity and brotherhood among different groups are damaged. But we need to understand that “the other groups are not” the Other “but are merely different (iated) in certain respects”. (Häußler et al., 2005, p. 602). People can be grouped and identified in many ways possible

but, these identities need to be aggregated and animated for the good of the community and not to annihilate other identities.

4.3. Historicization of myths and Mythicization of History

Mythicization of History and Historicization of Myth is used as an essential element of identity politics. Identity politics employs it in identity framing and the identity construction of the nation and individuals for nation-building. India is not a homogeneous country rather it is a heterogeneous country filled with multiple identities and characters. As for as identity politics in building the nation is concerned, we need to understand that it is a deliberate attempt of the vested interest group which engages seriously in connecting myths and history. The construction of the other, the hate politics, and the hegemony of the dominant group is always in need of a solid foundation on which they try to build the nation. Right-wing identity politics involves making use of history and myths to justify their claims that it wants to propagate for its survival and to maintain the status quo of the social order in favour of them. To maintain their hegemony, they historicize the myths and mythicize the history. Peter Berger points out that *the* “mythicization of the socially constructed, precarious” nomos” (the social order) in the sacred mode “cosmisation” is essential for its stability” (Lobo, 2008, p. 22). As we have seen earlier that identity politics is the only construction that aims at consolidating collective consciousness for building the nation but, aims at establishing supramonolithic Hindu nationalism extensively uses myths to maintain the identity that wants to create. Srimayee Dam states that “the adherents of identity politics utilize the power of myths, cultural symbols, and kinship relations to mould the feeling of shared community and subsequently politicize these aspects to claim recognition of their particular identities” (Dam, 2011, p. 914). Amos wilder adds a new dimension in stating that new religious tradition according to the need of the hour actively involves in Remythicizing “an old myth in a new historical crisis situation” (Lobo, 2008, p. 36). Thus, myth and history function closely in identity politics to build the nation. They need each other to justify their claims. “Numerically the Hindus are considered to be the majority, which inspires many Hindu loyalist groups like the RSS (*Rashtriya Swayam*

Sevak Sangh) or the Siva Sena and political parties like the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) or the Hindu Mahasabha to claim that India is a Hindu State. These claims generate homogenizing myths about India and its history (Dam, 2011, p. 917). Thus, identity politics generates or invents myths and symbols to give a good reason for their claims for dominance in building the Indian society.

4.4. Identity politics is attempting to rewrite the history of nation-building

History is the heart of any national identity and also in any individual's life. The right-wing identity politics in India is manipulating the history of India and above all, it could be said that in the name of nation-building history is being high jacked from its present position. A.G. Noorani in his recent book very emphatically states that "The RSS is at war with India's past, and it is a menace to India" (Noorani, 2019, p. 11). In line with this thinking, the right-wing Identity politics in India aims at "Re-writing Indian history along Hindu nationalist lines is another important objective of Hindutva, and it aims to establish the ideology within the discipline of History" (The central Parliamentary Board, 1950, pp. 32–33). In the name of nation-building, there is an effort to construct 'Indianness' or 'national identity' by redefining the national history. In this construction of Indianness religion is projected into a nationalist political ideology and through which the Hindu nationalist consciousness is being "historically engineered" (Chomsky, 2000, pp. 76–79). When we analyze the nation-building process in India, we observe the Construction of a new history other than the history cherished all these decades seem to be in opposition to the very spirit of pluralism on which free India was constructed. Moreover, Romila Thapar points out that, "the Ministry of Culture has constituted a committee of bureaucrats, archaeologists, and Sanskritists to write a 'revisionist' history of India against the "existing version" proliferating in schools and universities which, ideologues in this vein have held, is coloured by the corrupting influence of Marxism and anti-Hindu sentiment" (Thappar, 2018). And she further observes that the revisionist committee is entrusted with two important objectives: "the pressing need to illustrate that present-day Hindus have descended directly from the earliest historical

inhabitants of the subcontinent and that their myths, literature, and traditions are not imaginations but fact, history, and the gospel truth" (Thappar, 2018). And, without hesitation they claim, "forty thousand years of cultural ancestral heritage" (Vsk team, 2018). which is nothing but a myth.

The recent political development in this regard aims at constructing a narrow aggressive Hindu nationalism. Shashi Tharoor (Tharoor, 2018b, p. 96) states that in 2016, the Ministry of Culture appointed a committee to examine ancient Indian history and whose task was part of large plans to revise India's history. And he further validates his argument by quoting Balmukund Pandey, the head of the historical research wing of the RSS: "The time is now, to restore India's past glory by establishing that ancient Hindu texts are act, not a myth" and further he documents that "the panel is referred to in government documents as the committee for the 'holistic study of origin and evolution of Indian culture since 12,000 years before the present and its interface with other cultures of the world (Tharoor, 2018b, p. 96). Thus, Identity politics in India is very keen on changing the history in other words rewriting the history of the nation, people, culture, freedom struggle, from their point of view. This process of rewriting history constructs a very strong foundation for the resurgence of the identity politics of the dominant. Rewriting history is influenced by subjective feelings and personal prejudices and well-executed plans pose a great threat to the existence of other identities. This, re-writing effort is to "maintain its control over levers of formal political power" ("Is Inclusive Hindutva a Common Good," 2018, p. 7) and to assert that 'Hindutva' alone can be the basis of India's unity, is a clear sign that the Indian society is burying the shared history and shared culture of the pluralist country that is India. Shashi Tharoor summarizes that cultural project of the right-wing Identity politics that encoded in the slogan "*nationalize and spiritualize*", therefore, is twofold: First, to retrieve and disseminate the cultural traditions of the "golden" Hindu past; and second, to eliminate all accretions that had become part of the heritage" (Tharoor, 2018b, p. 95). Identity politics in India systematically initiates all the efforts to impose the Vedic culture on every sphere of Indian Life. Therefore, they strongly advocate that the construction of the glorious

past is an essential part of identity politics which consolidates the people to establish the utopian past in the present. They insist that the past was glorious and flawless which has been maligned by ‘the Other’ and the implication is to redeem the past by tackling ‘the other’.

4.5. **Hindu, Hindi India-a supra monolithic state**

There is a serious and organized effort to construct India into a supra monolithic state founding on the communalistic maxims “*Hindu, Hindi India*” (Rajadurai, 1993, p. 1). History has witnessed how these efforts resulted in innumerable atrocities being unleashed on the Dalits, Muslims, Christians, and tribal communities in the history of India. Therefore, we understand that the nation-building process is diverted from the spirit of the Indian constitution which was strongly built on secularism and Democracy to a narrow Hindutva ideological mould. “What the freedom fighters fought for was Indian Nationalism but what has come out is Hindu fascism” (Nedumaran, 2017, p. 15) says Nedumaran in his recent book the unrealized Hindu Nationalism and Realized Hindu Fascism and he further states that the Brahmins and high castes intellectuals strongly believe that they could build their hegemony over India through the nation-building process. And, to achieve this national unity they put forward Indian Nationalism through which they wanted to unite everyone against colonizers. By quoting S.V. Rajadurai, he claims that Hindu revivalism was the basis of Indian nationalism and the origin of the national freedom movement (Nedumaran, 2017, pp. 145–146). To spread Hindutva principles in all walks of life, the RSS started over a period of time more frontal organizations and others. They have systematically infiltrated into all walks of life saffronizing the nation. e.g., workers union, students’ union, farmers union, Hindu Swayamsevak sang i.e., the overseas branch of RSS, etc.

There is a widespread tendency among many in India to confuse Hindutva with Hinduism. Here, we do not equate Hindutva with Hinduism. Hinduism as a religion has its richness and spiritual wealth but Hindutva as an ideological tool and vision used to subjugate all the others into a supra-monolithic Hindu nation and culture poses a great threat of fascism. Here in India, homogenizing heterogeneous characteristics of India is certainly a threat to

the existence of all the other religions, cultures, languages, traditions, and state autonomy of this vast country. Bringing everyone under one label will never enhance the life of Indian society. “The nature of the society” they claim “is the Sanskriti. This is the Sanskriti which binds us all together, this is our identity and that is the reason it’s known as Hindu Rashtra” (“Hindu Sanskriti or Bharatiya Sanskriti, We Have This as Our Identity,” 2016) says RSS Sarsanghachalak Dr. Mohan Bhagwat Here we seriously doubt, and we could hear the cry of public intellectuals like Romila Thapar, and Amartya Sen openly condemning that India is moving towards fascism. Savarkar, the man who coined the word ‘Hindutva’, himself said: “Hinduism is only a derivative, a fraction, a part of Hindutva” (Savarkar, 2003, p. 3). “Hindutva is not identical with what is vaguely indicated by the term Hinduism” (Savarkar, 2003, p. 4). Then it is obvious from these statements that they have an ulterior motive in proposing Hindutva, a philosophy that navigates the nation-building process in India. Supra monolithic Hindu nation, which celebrates the hegemony of Brahmanism and Vedic life, seems to be the goal of the nation-building process of identity politics in India.

4.6. **Controlling the Civil society-changing the social order**

Yet another component of identity politics in building the nation is that it tries to bring every part of the administration under its clutch. Its ulterior motive is to invert all that is not in line with their thinking. We need to understand that it “aspires not to government but perpetual reign, seeking to replace the established institutions and customs of our country with notions supposedly more democratic and reflective of society’s diversity. Identity politics, then, is a far-reaching critique of our entire social order. Having this as its motive identity politics is penetrating every part of the social order and capsizes civil society to its advantage. Because present social order for them is something that needs to be replaced with their new aggressive social ideals. Romila Thapar states that “What is happening now is again a clamping down on freedoms but added to this is that these are accompanied by attempts to assert the control of Hindu organizations over civil society, and this has introduced a strong communal content into their activities” (Thappar, 2015). Strengthening the view of Romila Thappar, Kuruvachira rightly observes

that “Hindutva has penetrated into almost every aspect of Indian life so that its protagonists even go so far as to claim that a Hindu cannot exist without Hindutva” (Vedprakash & Raghuraman, 2003, p. 10). Thus, identity politics while building the nation tries to change the social order and seeks perpetual reigning by bringing all the national institutions under its control.

5. Conclusion

It should be kept in mind that the “demand for recognition of one’s identity is a master concept that unifies much of what is going on in world politics today” (Fukuyama, 2018a, p. 10). India is known for its diverse and multicultural identities. Every culture in India deserves its legitimate space in this mosaic of cultures. Every human being is vested with multiple identities. For nation building, we do need a *strong* group sense of belonging. But this group’s sense of belonging or collective consciousness need not depend on a single identity. It’s not which identity that matters rather is it the identity of my choice? what is important is how I share that identity is important. The nation is not merely a physical structure of the society, rather it is connected with the attitude or collective consciousness of the people towards the state and not only to the state but also it is belongingness, ‘we -feeling’, group consciousness that exists amidst the citizens living in the state. In other words, it is a sharing of common identity. We can share a common identity along with cherishing multiple identities. But the problem comes when it is insisted that all should share only one identity which would deny the presence of other diverse identities. The presence of multiple identities will not be a block for a sense of community feeling. As we have analyzed the nation-building process in India, it is tossed between liberal democracy which was the mind of the founding fathers of the nation, and illiberal Hindutva *Dharmocracy* spearheaded by the orthodox upper caste fundamentalist groups. Against this background identity construction, identity politics, and nation-building take the center stage in Indian politics. Nonaggressive and inclusive nation-building is to be fostered. An identity born out of deep hatred for ‘the other’ and identities that seek exclusion will lead to ethnic cleansing. Therefore, respecting and recognizing one’s identity is a fundamental human right that has to be honoured and upheld failing which the

nation-building process would be incomplete and partial.

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