I prefer the phrase ‘felt community’ to the term ‘nation’. This is because, I think, it helps one better understand the large, trans-local, human solidarities and the premises upon which they form.

Some Theorists of the Nation and Nationalism

How do nations emerge? What factors give rise to nationalisms? There is a considerable amount of theoretical literature on these issues and it is not possible to provide a representative summary of it in a mere article. However, I wish to introduce the reader to three works of scholarship which are considered mandatory readings for anyone seeking to investigate and comprehend the twin, entwined phenomena of nations and nationalisms.

The first is Eric Hobsbawm’s *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780*. Considered one of the greatest historians of the twentieth century, Hobsbawm argues that nations are a historical novelty, that is, a relatively recent phenomenon. We see him pointing out that well into the nineteenth century there were large masses of people who did not think of themselves as nations. Estonian peasants, he claims, did not think in “national terms” and the word ‘Estonian’ itself came into use only in the 1860s.[1] States, on the other hand, were not necessarily identified with a nationality – a people distinguished by their language and ethnicity. Russia, for example, was
the realm of the Tsar, holy icons and the Orthodox faith, anyone who belonged to it was a *Russky*. According to Hobsbawm, both European nation-states and nationalisms emerged on account of developments unique to the nineteenth century. To begin with, European states democratized and turned their subjects into citizens, then, warfare came to be such that it required the large scale participation of ordinary people. European states now, perforce, had to identify with the populations they ruled and seek legitimacy among them. They sought to do this by utilizing sentiments and symbols. European states, thus, ‘invented traditions’, such as the national anthem, and declared allegiance to a ‘national language’ – that is, they tried to be ‘national states’. However, since these states were generally quite heterogeneous, the adoption of a ‘national language’ inevitably left parts of their populations, which did not speak it, alienated. This caused a proliferation of nationalisms as multiple linguistic groups of Europe now tried to acquire their own states.

The second important theorist of the nation-state and nationalism is Ernest Gellner. In his book *Nations and Nationalism* he argues that these are phenomena engendered by industrialization. Gellner calls nationalism a “political principle” according to which the “political and the national unit” should be “congruent”, or, in unity. That is, nationalism seeks to create a state that represents, and is in identity with, a nation. And what might be a nation, or “national unit”? According to Gellner, it is an entity endowed with a certain culture and premised upon “men’s conviction, loyalties and solidarities”. Prior to the emergence of the industrial economy, in the agrarian age, Gellner claims, political units were not congruent with nations. In other words, they were not identified with cultural demographics constituted by human convictions, loyalties and solidarities. This was because agrarian societies were culturally fragmented and heterogeneous on account of lacking in mass literacy. In these societies literacy was the preserve of a privileged few and most of their populations were divided into culturally differentiated small communities, they lacked linguistic homogeneity. There was, thus, no cultural cohesion between the elite and non-elite and even among the non-elite. Resultantly, the typical political unit in the agrarian age was one in which a “central dominant authority” co-existed with “semi autonomous local units”. The fusion between polity and culture happens in the industrial age, because an industrial society requires standardized mass literacy so that individuals are mobile, not restricted to their traditional roles, and (theoretically) anyone at a job is replaceable by anyone. This causes the erasure of the diversity characteristic of agrarian societies as industrializing states build a national education system in which everyone is socialized, taught and trained the same way. Industrial states in the process, thus, according to Gellner, generate homogeneity, identify themselves with a particular language and culture and create nations.

The third theorist I want to bring up here is Benedict Anderson, the author of the widely cited work *Imagined Communities*. He calls a nation “an imagined political community”, because “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them.” Anderson argues that in Europe these imagined political communities emerged in the wake of “print capitalism”, the invention of the printing press which made possible the publishing industry. A catalyst in the process was the Reformation (beginning in 1518). As Martin Luther polemicized against the Catholic Church “a religious propaganda war”
broke out in Europe. Continuing into the next century, it created a vernacular print market. Martin Luther’s writings, for example, were brought out in cheap popular editions and created “large, new reading publics.”[10] Apparently, as more and more people now read the same stuff, in the vernaculars they spoke everyday (German, English, French, Spanish, etc.), they were connected to each other in “unified fields of exchange and communication.”[11] This, according to Anderson, provided a basis to national consciousness. Much later, in the nineteenth century, printing technology facilitated a large quantum of pioneering lexicographical and grammatical work. Dictionaries and grammars of hitherto marginal languages such as Ukrainian and Norwegian were now composed and published. The result was the growth of multiple new nationalisms.[12]

My Disagreement with the Theorists

With due humility, while being acutely aware of their greatness as scholars and my own insignificance, I disagree with Hobsbawm, Gellner and Anderson. The heuristic approach of all of them is Marxist, or materialist – they trace the origins of nations and nationalism in institutional (relating to the state), economic and technological transformation (in the mind of a Marxist the three are correlated). This approach, in my view, impairs their studies and the conclusions they arrive at. These gentlemen assume that they are studying and theorizing the emergence of nations and nationalisms, but, in my opinion, they are not. I will argue that two of them, Hobsbawm and Gellner, actually study and theorize the emergence of a particular ‘state form’ – a type of government, or polity – that emerged in the West following democratization and industrialization. This ‘state form’ intervened in the realm of culture to systematize it as per its own requirements, by choosing and patronizing a ‘national language’, inventing traditions, or by creating and standardizing a system of mass instruction. I will say that the democratic, post-industrial ‘state form’ did this so that its order enforcing capacity (ability to control and govern a population) could be further consolidated – both participative democracy and industrialization necessitated it. Citizens endowed with voting and civil rights and a (nominally) free population of wage earners employed in the industries could not be controlled by brute force alone. Hence, the new ‘state form’ sought to manage the way they thought and acted through the cultural route. So, I will say that Hobsbawm and Gellner actually enlighten us on the emergence of modern ‘governmentality’[13], not nations and nationalism. If by them we mean large human solidarities and their expression, the new governmentality did not invent them but creatively utilized them to attain greater efficacy. It is always possible that these human solidarities originated long ago as ‘felt communities’. What about the proliferation of nationalisms that Hobsbawm describes? Well, one could see that as so many rebellions by cultures disenfranchised by the new governmentality – when a culture was not patronized by a ‘state form’ it sought to create its own. This does not mean that the large (culturally informed) human solidarities that these rebellions were expressing originated with them. I would argue that there is always a possibility of them being much older, perhaps they too originated as ‘felt communities’.

Moving on to Anderson, I find his claim that ‘print capitalism’ caused the emergence of these “imagined political communities” called nations quite erroneous. I would, instead, say that printing technology aided their further consolidation, for, definitely, the English and the French
existed as peoples when there were no printing presses in Europe. These are ‘historical nations’ whose self-awareness much predates the world transforming invention by Johannes Gutenberg. ‘Frenchness’, for example, “is sometimes treated as beginning in the fifteenth century”, at the end of the Hundred Years’ War which had built up to be a national conflict with England.[14] As about the English, the historian Robert Tombs claims that, already by the ninth century CE, they could be recognized “as an embryonic nation” (as the ‘Angeleynn’) – “there was an English Church with English saints, which prayed for ‘the king of the English and his army’….”[15] Moving on to the Germans (or, rather, the German speaking people), the existence of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation in medieval Europe seems to suggest that at least their ruling elite already had something akin to a ‘national awareness’. Further, could not we say that those composing Ukrainian and Norwegian dictionaries and grammars did so because they presupposed the existence of a Ukrainian and Norwegian people? These pioneering lexicographers and grammarians very likely saw themselves addressing populations with a level of cultural and linguistic self-awareness. In my opinion, dictionaries and grammars inventing, or bringing forth, Ukrainians and Norwegians is very remote. I know too little of the Spanish to comment, but I cannot resist rounding off my discussion of Gellner with a reference to the Greeks of the classical age. Anyone who has read the Histories of Herodotus knows that he begins them with an intention to record the “great and wonderful actions of the Greeks and Barbarians…. “[16] Now, ‘barbarian’ was a generic description the ancient Greeks used for all non-Greeks (not necessarily in a pejorative sense) because they saw themselves to be distinct from them, two thousand years before the emergence of “print capitalism” they already had a sense of being a unique people. That is why, despite being politically fragmented into numerous city states, they united against the invading Persians in 480 BCE. That is also why the three hundred Spartans died fighting them in the battle of Thermopylae. The Greeks were an ancient ‘felt community’.

Inadequacy of the Term ‘Nation’, ‘Felt Community’ More Useful

I prefer the phrase ‘felt community’[17] to the term ‘nation’. This is because, I think, it helps one better understand the large, trans-local, human solidarities and the premises upon which they form. Calling them ‘nations’, in my view, limits our understanding of them. The word ‘nation’ is now just too inextricably associated with the new ‘state form’ that emerged in Europe in the nineteenth century. As we saw above, for some very influential Marxist scholarship the emergence of the two is identical, in its perception they rise together in history. Also, the expression ‘nation’ does not do justice to our own country, its experience and expression of oneness. They much predate the growth of the post-industrial and democratic European ‘state form’ which resorted to deliberate cultural systematization and particularism and, of course, of “print capitalism”. India is an ancient ‘felt community’; its antiquity is much greater than that of modern governmentality, it was not constructed by the Indian state that was born on August 15 1947.

A ‘felt community’ does not require the modern ‘state-form’, governmentality, or the printing press, because, it does not emerge through deliberate cultural or linguistic systematization. What do I mean by a ‘felt community’? I will explain it as a collectively shared experience (feeling) of
belonging – to a matrix of meanings and a land. How does a ‘felt community’ function, or form? It functions and forms through a symbols aided dissemination of this sense of belonging. In my opinion, this process manifests itself as ‘culture’. The anthropologist Clifford Geertz calls cultures webs of significance.[18] He further writes that his concept of culture is mainly a “semiotic one”. [19] In other words, he sees culture as a complex or set of symbols which evoke meanings. Culture, he further writes, “is public because meaning is.” [20] It is also an “interworked” system[21], that is, the signs, or symbols, which constitute culture, refer to each other, they are interconnected. I find this Geertzian description of culture very useful in understanding how ‘felt communities’ might emerge and attain cohesion, sometimes over a very large geographical spread. I would say that they do so by sharing in a pool of (interconnected) symbols and the meanings they evoke. Culture (in the Geertzian sense), thus, is important to a ‘felt community’ as a carrier and disseminator of meanings; consequently, it can work autonomous of the state and, hence, does not necessarily need systemization through governmentality (in the form of a standardized language or mode of instruction). The experience of the meanings that constitute a culture might be private, but the act of sharing in them could be very much public and collective. This could happen if symbols, and the meanings they contain, are mapped onto a land. Thus, large masses of people could belong to the same set of meanings and a land, by perceiving the same symbols across its length and breadth they might learn to see it as a great unity (even if they do not form one linguistic community). This is exactly how, I will say, we Indians, denizens of Bharata, have been a ‘felt community’ for thousands of years (despite being linguistically un-standardized).

Wherever you go in Bharata, you come across the same symbols – you see the swastika, the lotus, the Devatas carved upon the spires and walls of temples, or installed in their garbhagrihas as vigrahas, just to give a few obvious examples. These symbols are “interworked”, they are interconnected since they evoke meanings that talk as much to each other as they do to us, and they incorporate us collectively into the same matrix of meanings. Our tirthas are symbols too; they are symbolic of a crossing over from the material to the spiritual plane. The word tirtha itself means a ‘crossing’. And these symbols are mapped onto the earth of Bharata in the form of a grid, making it a sacred geography. As Diana L. Eck, Professor of Comparative religion and Indian Studies at the University of Harvard, writes, none of our pilgrimages stand alone, they are “inter-referential” and together create “a living, storied, and intricately connected landscape.” [22] Thus, working on the sacred city of Kashi, Eck realized that it could be understood “only in the context of a much wider system of meanings….”[23] Kashi, for example, is only one among seven moksha bestowing cities, the other six being Ayodhya, Mathura, Hardwar, Kanchi, Ujjain and Dwarka. It is also one of the twelve places where Bhagawan Shiva manifested as a jyotirlinga. This is just one example of how the same meanings have been dispersed upon the earth of Bharata for thousands of years, and, partaking of them, those inhabiting it have formed a ‘felt community’. Another example of the dispersal of meanings is the spread of the Sanskrit language in Bharata, once it extended from the Brahmaputra valley to the Indus basin, and from the valley of Kashmir down to the tip of the southern peninsula. As a medium of the composition of kavyas, shastras and itihasas, the Sanskrit language was a bearer of meanings par excellence, of both vyavharika (practical, or
worldly) and paramarthika (spiritual) relevance. The same meanings were thus communicated to both the non-elite and elite of Bharata, the former beheld them embodied in the vigrahas of Devatas and tirthas, the latter read and discussed them in texts.

It can be legitimately argued that the ancients Greeks were a ‘felt community’ because they too had a grid of sacred sites spread across their land – Delphi, Dodona, Olympia, the temple of Hephaestus in Athens, and the Sanctuary of Poseidon at Sounion, just to name a few. The ancient Greeks must have encountered coterminous sacred meanings there. I would like to suggest that (perhaps) the ninth century CE English (the ‘Angelecynn’), and medieval French and German speakers were similar ‘felt communities’ formed through matrices of meanings communicated by symbols, in simple language, their culture (in the Geertzian sense), much before it was systematized by the modern ‘state form’.

The Left’s Incomprehension of the Indian ‘Felt Community’

What do I mean by the ‘Left’? I mean by it two groups of people, the political Left, that is, the old style classical, or textual Marxists (believers in dogmas derived from the writings of Karl Marx), associated with the sundry Communist parties of the country, and the academics in our university circuit whose sympathies lie with, or lean towards, the political Left.

The former cannot comprehend and recognize a ‘felt community’ because they take a very cynical view of culture. For Marx, society is the outcome of the production process[24] and is composed of contending and conflicting classes.[25] This is because, according to him, a society is the sum of a set of production relations (also termed a ‘mode of production’ or ‘socio economic formation’ by Marxists) which create dominant and subordinate classes, depending on who control the means of production and who merely work them. Medieval European feudal society, for example, was dominated by the class of lords. They controlled the arable land, the chief means of production, the subordinate class were the peasants who worked on it. In the Marxist world view and interpretation of history, culture is an instrument in the hands of the dominant or ruling class, “culture is determined by the ruling class interest….”[26] It can be used to keep the subordinate class docile in order to exploit it, or to legitimize exploitation. In the Marxist view, such cultural instrumentality is manifest in the alliance between the Church and aristocracy in medieval Europe – the former kept the peasantry opiated with religion so that it, along with the aristocracy, could exploit them. Thus, culture, for old style Marxists, is not made up of symbols that create a web of meanings, it merely serves as a cloak for exploitation. Hence, the political Left cannot imagine culture as the basis for a ‘felt community’. Heck, it cannot even imagine something like a ‘felt community’ to begin with. So it cannot see us Indians as one. The political Left can only understand us as this enormous demographic riven into the exploiters and the exploited.

The academics that lean towards the Left cannot imagine ‘felt communities’ because they think in terms of ‘nations’. And their understanding of nations is determined by the likes of Hobsbawm, Gellner and Anderson, Marxists who see them as the outcome of conscious state action, or economic and technological developments. So, our leftist academics might see nations as pure
constructions, or, at least, not as formations that derive from a genuine, ancient human experience (like the pre-modern Greek, or English, ‘felt communities’). Further, it is not unusual for one to come across left leaning learned folks in our academia who believe that nations are, in fact, wholly unreal. An example is Prof Jairus Banaji. Once, while delivering a lecture at Jawaharlal Nehru University, he loudly wondered whether “nations exist the way that classes exist?”[27] Thereafter, Prof Banaji went on to tell his audience that they do not, only classes, he concluded, are real, not nations.[28] You cannot expect such a red hot Marxist, incapable of thinking beyond classes, to perceive the Indian ‘felt community’, can you? Then there are leftist academics for whom India is a construct that emerged only in the colonial period. According to Sudipta Kaviraj, “European writers writing on India…constructed…India and presented it to Indians looking for an identity.”[29] To put it plainly, for this celebrated political scientist, we Indians and our rashtra are both figments of the European imagination. And there are those for whom our rashtra is an elite enterprise. Take, for instance, Partha Chatterjee, for whom the “arrival” of Indian nationalism (its fruition through the attainment of Indian independence) was also its constitution into a “state ideology” which appropriated “the life of the nation into the life of the state”[30] – as the manifestation of rationality, progress and reason, it now decided for the nation (as I understand). The full implication of this conclusion by Chatterjee is, in my opinion, that Indian nationalism was a venture of the elite who did not quite trust the ‘nation’, or the masses. We see him claiming, for example, that “mature nationalist thought” in India made a distinction between the “domain of rationality” and the “domain of unreason” – the latter was identified with subaltern (mass, non-elite) politics.[31] So, what emerged into freedom in 1947 was an elite ‘state form’, which did not quite trust its citizens, it was not the expression of an ancient ‘felt community’ – this, in my view, is the take away from the claims of Prof Chatterjee. Trust me, Banaji, Kaviraj and Chatterjee are fairly representative of leftist Indian academia. I could look for, and bring up, a few more of their type. But this has turned out be a fairly long piece already, so I conclude here.

References

See Chapter 3, ‘Industrial Society’.


Ibid., p.40.

Ibid., p.44.


[13] I have borrowed this word from the philosopher, Michel Foucault. He means by it a government’s effort to guide and control the conduct of a population.


[17] I have borrowed this phrase from the historian Rajat Kanta Ray. See The Felt Community. Commonalty and Mentality before the Emergence of Indian Nationalism (New Delhi: OUP, 2003).


Ibid.

Ibid., p.12.


[23] Ibid.


Ibid., p.24.

Ibid., p.29.

[27] What the Nation Really Needs to Know. The JNU Nationalism Lectures (Harper Collins Publishers India, 2016), p.259. These ‘nationalism lectures’ were organized by the Jawaharlal Nehru University Teachers’ Union in the aftermath of the 9 February 2016 incident at JNU. To know more about the whole affair please refer to my previous article (JNU, the Headquarters of the Breaking India Enterprise). Prof. Banaji is associated with the School of African and Oriental
Studies at the University of London. His lecture titled ‘The political Culture of Fascism’ was delivered on 11 March 2016.

[28] Ibid., p.260.


[31] Ibid., p.153.

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