# A Critical Analysis of Anderson's *Imagined Communities* with Special Reference to India

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## 1. Introduction

Nationalism has become one of the most tenacious ideological bonds binding human beings together into separate political communities. There is no doubt that its value may vary, its particular content may change, but fundamentally the nationalist feeling is described in terms of a shared feeling of togetherness that defines the "we" against the "they". Nations are invariably defined in terms of a community and in terms ofthe loyalty of its citizens to the community. It is indeed a community of values shared by all its citizens, a common heritage, a common history, a common character, a common sense and a common will.

Basically, a nation has three constitutive elements: ethnie, states and territory. The most common typologies are derived from the respective weight that each of these elements has had in defining the nation. If an ethnic group forms its own state, we get 'ethno - nationalism'; if a state uses its bureaucracy to mobilize a single national culture, we get 'official nationalism'; finally, if the inhabitants of a certain territory secede from a larger state or colonial power, and from a new multi - ethnic state with a joint national ideology, we get 'plural nationalism'. We would like, now, to see if we can use these three types (derived from Anderson and Smith) to map the Indian nation. The typology is constructed on the basis of all the routes that states and ethnies have followed to nationhood.

The first route, the creation of a new state on ethno - religious grounds, has been of little importance in East and Southeast Asia, but more so in South Asia. The second route, the broadening of an existing state into nationhood (official nationalism), is the route which was followed by Japan and Thailand. The third route, anti - colonial liberation, leading to the creation of a plural state in a political space demarcated by European imperialism, has characterized those parts of South and Southeast Asia where the colonial states did not converge with any former dynastic realm. This route, which was paved by the colonial regimes, has been taken by India.

In the above para, I have made out the type of nationalism prevailing in India. Now, here I will try to show whether Anderson's concept of nation and nationalism is applicable to India or not and if not then why?

**Anderson's view of nation and nationalism**
While many studies have been written on nationalist political movements, the sense of nationality—the idea of a personal and cultural feeling of belonging to a nation has not been addressed with proportionate attention. In this respect, Benedict Anderson has filled this void with his widely acclaimed work *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, considered one of the most original among the scholarship on, by offering us a novel formulation of the concept of 'nation' as something which is given a workable definition he termed the 'imagined community'.

Concerned with the question of the origin of and dissemination of national consciousness, Anderson demonstrated that, in the framework of a universal history nations were not to be construed as the determinate products of given sociological conditions such as language, race or religion. In his own formulation, these nations had been, in Europe and everywhere else in the world, imagined into existence. He argues that the nation is a cultural construct, not in the sense of building on historical tradition but in that of being collectively imagined by all these going to the same kinds of school, viewing or listening to the same media, sharing the same mental map of the nation and its surrounding world, or visiting the same museums. There is thus nothing immanent, or original about the nation; it is a construct, similar everywhere, only using different symbols, but it always considers itself as antique.

Anderson starts by arguing that nationalism is "a radically changed form of consciousness" (Anderson, 1991: xiv). For him, the nation is an "imagined political community - and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (Ibid: 6). To define it, he starts with the reason why the nation has to be imagined: "It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their community" (Ibid: 6). Thus, an imagined community is different from an actual community because it is not (and cannot be) based on quotidian face - to - face interaction between its members. Instead, members hold in their minds a mental image of their affinity.

Anderson argues that there are three aspects to what is being imagined (Ibid: 7):
1) As "limitation" because even the largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic boundaries, beyond which lie other nations.
2) As "sovereignty" because the concept was born in an age in which Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely - ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm.

3) As "community" because regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as deep, horizontal comradeship.

Anderson is insistent that "imagined" does not mean "false", because all communities beyond the original gatherer - hunter groups have to conduct a similar act of imagining: "communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/ genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined" (Ibid: 6). Anderson's argument is that this imagining took place historically with the collapsing of three fundamental cultural conceptions that he outlines as (Ibid: 36):

1) The first of these was the idea that a particular script - language offered privileged access to ontological truth, precisely because it was an inseparable part of that truth.
2) Second was the belief that society was naturally organized around and under high centres — monarchs who were persons apart from other human beings and who ruled by some form of cosmological (divine) dispensation.
3) Third was a conception of temporality in which cosmology and history were indistinguishable, the origins of the world and of men essentially identical.

Such notions rooted human lives and families in the very nature of things, giving certain meanings to the everyday fatalities of existence (above all death, loss and servitude) and offering in various ways, redemption from them. All these conceptions were subverted by economic change, discoveries, social and scientific and the development of increasingly rapid communications. "No surprise then that the search was on, so to speak, for a new way of linking fraternity, power and time together" (Ibid: 36).

For Anderson, the solution was provided by the emergence of "print capitalism". He sees print capitalism as laying the foundation in these ways: they created unified field of exchange and communication, they gave a new fixed form to language, and they created a language of power of a kind, different from the older administrative vernaculars. Print capitalism created the possibility of a vast market beyond the tiny minority who could understand Latin. According to him, print - language (Ibid: 44 - 45):
1) Created unified field of exchange communication below Latin and above the spoken vernacular,
2) Gave a new fixity to language which in the long run helped to build that image of antiquity so central to the subjective idea of the nation, and
3) Created languages of power with certain dialects playing a dominant part in communication through printing.

These were "largely unselfconscious processes resulting from the explosive interaction between capitalism, technology and human linguistic diversity" (Ibid: 45). Although vernacular language was critical to the original formation of national consciousness, once nationalism became available as a model, it was no longer necessary for new nation to have this as their basis. Thus, Anderson argues that one of the major components of the environment in which nations emerged was language.

Two more factors in Anderson's argument could be regarded as central to the origins of nationalism—*the decline of dynastic realm* and *the changing apprehension of time.* The former was important because it called for a new foundation of legitimacy and, in due course of time, nations came to be regarded as providing that foundation. The ruling elites even stated at some point to consciously try and shape emerging nations in a certain way through the instrument of nationalist ideology. The changing apprehension of time allowed for the first time a look to the past as to history and not as a reflection of the future or realization of the future. It allowed for the first time a look at the future as to an essentially, limitless period of time. The present became the calendaric present and not the scatological expectation of the end of the world. This allowed for new opportunities for "manufacturing" commonality creating a sense of tradition and continuity that would be convincing enough to create the community in the imagination of the people.

The remainder of the book sets out how national consciousness spread and was transmuted into nationalism. He argues there were three main kinds of nationalism, arising in successive waves: "Creole Nationalism" associated with the revolt of the American colonies ("creole" in its Spanish use means a Latin American of European ancestry); "Language Nationalism" associated with Western Europe; and "Official Nationalism" associated with central and Eastern Europe and with the Asian and African anti - colonial movements.

In this way, Anderson explained the conception of nation and nationalism more than any previous writer. Anderson established that the phenomenon of nationalism was constructed and historical, not natural and eternal.

### Can Anderson's views be relevant to India?

What Anderson failed to take sufficient notice of, however, is the extent to which the boundaries of the imaginable for 'most of the world' are already determined by a particular form of the nation - state prescribed by the West. Embedded within that form, according to Partha Chatterjee, is a predetermined relationship between community and the state, in which community must take the form of nation: " (t) he modern state, embedded as it is within the universal narrative of capital, cannot recognize within its jurisdiction any form of community except the single, determinate, demographically enumerable form of nation. " (Chatterjee, 1993: 238)

India has a greater cultural variety. One of its cultural varieties is that religious factors have played much the same divisive role that vernacular languages have played in Europe. What Benedict Anderson calls the standard linguistic or vernacular model is difficult to find in Asia, and this confirms that India has not just pirated European models, but has based the image of her nation on the differences that she herself considers most important.

India was a kind of historical community although it was not unified under one state. What made India into a nation - state in our wide definition of the word was not racial, religious or linguistic unity, but the inclusive idea of an Indian

civilization with a great peninsular geo - body. But the civilizational, inclusive strand of Indian nationalism has all along been challenged by regional and religious opposition groups. It is important not to forget that Gandhi's nationalism was not so much aimed at the criterion of a nation - state; he rarely talked about an Indian nation. Nationalism was patriotism, in defence of a nation, but of a moral order derived from ancestral loyalty and communal integrity. His mission was to recreate the sense of an Indian civilization, regarding its people and create the conditions for autonomous moral growth.

There is no doubt that Asian nations have been formed in the image of African and European modular forms, to use Benedict Anderson's expression, but this is only one side of the coin. On the other are the limitations imposed by, the usage made of local culture. There is something to be learnt from the Bengali Subaltern intellectual Partha Chatterjee, who attacks the idea that Indian national identity was imagined uniquely through the lens of the colonial power, and asks: If non - western nationalists could choose only between certain forms of already imagined communities, what then was there left to imagine? He challenges Benedict Anderson by broadening the question of identity from the political to the 'private' sphere and arguing that identities were also formed and kept alive in homes and social networks where Europeans had no access.

Chatterjee concedes that the British established the religious, caste, linguistic and ethnic categories that are used in modern India, and acknowledges the role of these categories in the formation of Indian national identity. Still, he rejects the idea that 'India' is an entirely modern creation, and argues: "The more nationalism engaged in its contest with the colonial power in the outer domain of politics, the more it insisted on displaying the marks of 'essential' cultural differences so as to keep out the colonizer from that inner domain of national life and to proclaim its sovereignty over it. " (Ibid: 26) This 'essential' inner or spiritual domain of culture was never colonized, he claims, and although it was developed in response to Western imperialism, it was always Indian and never European. In the inner domain, the nation was already sovereign. Further, Chatterjee ventures to disrupt the unifying aspiration of Indian nationalism, and argues that there are different co - existing national voices or 'fragments' –among women, peasants, elite, castes, outcasts - each with its separate discourse. Anderson never, actually, addresses the real problem: how does nationalist thought overcome cultural relativism in order to create a 'homogeneous' cultural identity to which millions of people can willingly subordinate existing socio - political and cultural identities? If the masses are to be invited into history in a language they understand, how is this to be achieved? What is the language? It cannot be language as such since language is not a viable basis for constructing identities that are limited. As Anderson himself points out, languages are open - ended and can be learnt; nor can it be print - language rather than language *per se* since print - languages are no less open than spoken ones. Anderson's implication is that print - languages create a vernacular literary tradition on a national basis but that again presupposes a per - existing national identity, and creation of 'national' traditions must. By very definition, come after the concept of nation has first

been imagined. In any case, there are many nations throughout the world that share the same language. Therefore, the 'language' of nationalism must be conceived of differently, in idiomatic rather than linguistic terms.

## 2. Conclusion

Though Anderson had a very important place among nationalists, his idea of 'imagined communities' was criticized by many philosophers. In India, it can be said that it is not a totally natural country, because most of its parts have been added and separated during its creation. But it cannot be said to be imagined also. Because it has a variety of languages, castes, religions etc. So, it is an objective civilization that has made it a nation, not a subjective imagination. The print media has come here, after its existence as a nation. So, it cannot be taken as a cause of building a nation at least in India.

The question is that, is there no way out of a self - serving image of the nation that will steer clear of imagining the nation? Yes, it seems there is, if we can go back to Tagore. Let us remember him in this mad world of flaming national passions, "It is my conviction", wrote Tagore in *Nationalism*, "that my countrymen will truly gain their India by fighting against the education which teaches them that a country is greater than the ideals of humanity" (Tagore, 1996: 423). Tagore draws the concept of nation not in the sense that Anderson has imagined or Western nations have built, but in the sense of civilization and culture, personal relations. Gandhi has also accepted the existence of nation in India, before the arrival of the Britishers, in its ancient tradition and civilization. India has not imitated the concept of nation - state from the West after being ruled by the Britishers, but it had that sense of nationhood in its tradition, in its culture and in its 'civilization'. Though it is acceptable that the modern concept of nation has affected it to a great extent, but it does not conclude that it has built the Indian nation. It has only modified our nation. Gandhi, in his book *Hind Swaraj* (1938), not only criticized modernity but also gave a full description of what kind of a nation India is and should be.

Thus, Anderson's view of imagined communities was totally affected by his surroundings. Perhaps, he was not fully aware of the conditions of other countries like India, where language, print media, etc. were not the root cause of nation - building. So, it can be said that though his theory was very effective and praiseful, it does not suit the context of India.

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