

## Book Review

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G. ALOYSIUS. Nationalism without a nation in India.  
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Indian nationalism has been subject to several scholarly analyses. A plethora of studies have been undertaken under various disciplines and in multiple dimensions to comprehend the phenomenon of nationalism in India. Yet the significance of G. Aloysius' *Nationalism without a Nation in India* is acute because of the fact that this book puts forth an understanding of the Indian nation and nationalism which is different from several similar attempts undertaken to understand the same. The significance of the work further lies in the fact that Aloysius is a historical sociologist who has conducted this study not by referring to the grand old narratives of history, but by taking recourse to new approaches of studying History, like the Subaltern approach. Dipankar Gupta (2011) also propagates a similar approach towards the analysis of Indian nationalism.

Aloysius's work emanates from his theoretical base on Ernest Gellner's notion of understanding nationalism. Thus, nationalism is conceived as a modern phenomenon, which Gellner defines as a 'congruence between culture and power' (Gellner, 2008). Elucidating on the modernity of the Indian society, Aloysius argues that modernity in India was particularly pronounced with what he refers to as the 'structural unification' that took place in the initial phase of the British in India. This structural unification, according to Aloysius was marked by the bureaucratization of the privileged upper castes and classes which in addition to their aristocracy, also rendered them an administrative power. Thus, the new modern world was guided by entities like education, skills, quality, etc. While admitting that some kind of culture-power congruence could also be seen in ancient times, Aloysius rests the novelty of the modern notion of this congruence on two important aspects. One aspect is manifested in the idea that other cultures or nations act as an obstacle to one's own, and hence there lies a tendency to liberate from it. The other aspect, Aloysius argues,

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lies in the attempts to establish an egalitarian, homogenous culture-power congruence within one's society.

This work provides a strong critique to the conventional notion of the growth of Indian nationalism. The commonly held perception of scholarships on Indian nationalism is that it developed and spread in the form of a common struggle of a unified India against British colonialism. Thus, Indian nationalism is seen as a unifying force and the struggle for independence as the manifestation of this unity. Aloysius displaces this proposition by arguing that Indian nationalism culminated in a complexity of developments in the colonial period which rested on two prominent aspects. On the one hand, there was the rise of the hitherto unprivileged masses who had been at the receiving end of the upper-caste dominated hierarchical social structure in an anti-Brahmanical and anti-caste stance. He argues that the aim behind the rise of the masses was to destabilize the ascriptive nature of the society, which is an exemplification of what he refers to as 'homogenisation of power within'. On the other hand, the upper-caste privileged section of the Indian society, in the name of protecting and upholding the Indian traditions (actually dominant Brahmanical traditions), maintained their anti-colonial position. The hypocrisy reflected in the attitude of those belonging to the upper castes is referred to by Aloysius as 'appropriation of power from without'. He further argues that the deliberation behind such a stance is two-fold: to free India from foreign clutches; and more importantly to prevent any kind of alliance between the British colonizers and those in the lower ends of the social hierarchy, which could otherwise be a potential detriment to the dominance of the Brahmanical order. This way of analyzing the idea of nationalism from the below, or as he asserts, the consideration of the 'underdog's point of view', provides the way for Aloysius to escape the fallacies committed by others, particularly the historians, of falling into the trap of glorification of Indian nationalism by projecting it as a grand unified mass movement. It thereby allows Aloysius to make way for a more critical and inclusive understanding of nationalism in India. In his discussion on nationalism, Eric Hobsbawm (1990) emphasized on comprehending the idea of nationalism from 'above' and 'below'.

Aloysius also provides a strong criticism to the Gandhian way of nationalist mobilization. He questions the general perception on Gandhi's role in taking the Indian nationalist movement to a new height, by leveling two criticisms against it. Aloysius convincingly throws a new light on Gandhi's role in the nationalist movement by arguing that on the one hand, Gandhi actually diverted the focus of the unprivileged

masses from anti-Brahmanical attacks, to instead consent to and join the political currents and moves led by the privileged groups. On the other hand, Gandhi promoted the upper caste conservative traditions, which were hostile to the large unprivileged masses, by bringing into fore leaders from those sections to organize the masses and earn their consent, according to Aloysius.

Drawing from his propositions, Aloysius puts forth the central argument of the book which marks his in-depth and critical understanding of the idea of Indian nationalism. He asserts that owing to the inability of Indian nationalism to accommodate the masses, the nation could never be born in India. Thus the notion that nationalism invented the nation in India is merely an illusion. The self-evidence of this illusion, he asserts, lies on the following: first, it can be seen that nationalism witnessed the rise of two contradictory forces (led by two distinct sections of the society belonging to two opposing social and economic backgrounds), which further highlights the lack of consensus within one's own culture. The other significant dimension is yet another stark reality that plagued India after it attained independence from the British colonizers. This was the rise of multiple contrasting and conflicting communities, and hence the rise of multiple nationalisms within India, which failed to recognize themselves as part of the grand idea of one Indian nation due to several kinds of differences and incompatibilities based on caste, religion, language, etc. This proposition has been reiterated by several scholars. For example, Mishra (2000) and Baruah (1999) have highlighted the relevance of this argument by illustrating the context of the subnationalist politics of North-East India. In his work, Aloysius argues that the nation failed to emerge in India, merely giving way to the formation of a state.

Aloysius's work is a significant step in terms of its reach and clarity in providing a holistic and inclusive understanding of Indian nationalism, leaping forward by filling in the gaps in the studies on this area.

### **References**

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