

Nationalism and Secularism in South Asian Literature

Nukhbah Taj Langah

University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Goutam Karmakar

University of the Western Cape, South Africa

This special issue of *Southeast Asian Review* (SARE) focuses on two main concerns arising from the historical context of South Asia: ‘nationalism’ and ‘secularism,’ both of which have continued to influence South Asia’s literary trajectory for decades. Therefore, these interconnected terms are the essential and indispensable entry points for academic interventions in South Asia. While the concept of a nation became more distinct following the French Revolution in the eighteenth century and garnered further impetus with the spread of European colonisation in the twentieth century (Habib 6), the evolution of nationalism in South Asia appears to be one of the most prominent as well as intensive aspects of colonial and postcolonial phases (Sabhlok 25). The impact of colonisation on the political identities of South Asia triggered forces of unification in the communities of South Asia (Habib 5), fostering the notion of a nation as a unified counter-entity to British political dominance. Nation and nationalism denoted a sense of cohesion and a means of unification through which colonised identities and hegemonized groups developed their politics of combating colonial power. Therefore, in the political context of South Asia, the emergence and development of nationalism cannot be comprehended through a monolithic or homogenous perspective but needs to be analysed as embedded in multifaceted and layered aims and notions. For the individuals and communities of South Asia, nationalism served as a unifying force, a point of cultural cohesion and political strength against which the ideological mechanisms of colonialism could be fought. However, nationalism in South Asia has also been marked by and culminated in conflicting principles of

ethnicity, religion, and language (Sabhlok 26) that eventually determined the rise of multiple subsets of nationalist movements in post-colonial South Asia.

The political scenario in the post-independence era in the countries of South Asia witnessed the rise of ethnonationalism and micronationalism in varied ways in the face of the demands of singular nation-state-centred nationalism. Upreti (542) studies nationalism in South Asia as both broad-based and narrow-based, and Korom and Magnusson (8) define nationalism in the subcontinent as a ‘pluralist phenomenon.’ This is because, on the one hand, certain symbolic practises have been used to reinforce nationalism in countries like India and Pakistan (e.g., the establishment of All India Radio and celebration of Independence and Republic Days in India), and on the other, certain ethnic symbols based on language, religion, and kinship have been used to propagate the discourse of ethnonationalism as a subset/counterforce to the state-dictated nationalism. This oscillation between ethnic and national identities, the politics of minority and majority, and cultural assimilation/bifurcation marks the political map of South Asia. The tussle between the state defining the nation versus the nation defining the state and the self-versus the dissenting other problematizes the intensive and conflictual terrain of nationalism, impacting the construction of citizenship as a volatile component in the geopolitics of South Asia.

The political situations governing the growth of ethno-nationalism and its dissemination, however, turned out to be more intriguing in Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and India, where religion and ethnicity started the newly created political agendas of nationalism. Some of the pertinent examples have been the Tamil movement in Sri Lanka, the Mizo (conversion to Christianity) movement in India, and the Baloch and Mohajir Quami Movement (MQM) in Pakistan. Religion became the basis of Pakistani nationalism, contesting ethnonationalism (Upreti 539), and Bangladesh as a nation grew out of the demands of linguistic nationalism. The emergence of Bangladesh testified to how the liberal democratic model adapted in the

Indian subcontinent after the end of British colonisation failed to address and accommodate the diversified interests of the different communities. Language, ethnicity, and religion have collectively played a prominent role in shaping the nationalist aspirations and movement in Bangladesh. For instance, in Sri Lanka, religious and cultural differences between the Tamils and the Sinhalese community disturbed the terrain of nationalism. In Nepal, Hindu nationalism was promoted by the monarchy in power but was challenged by Mongolians in the country. Such cases of internal ethnic conflicts posit that nationalism and its cartography in South Asia have been inescapably problematic and multifarious, exhibiting the fissures that exist between constitutional nationalism and civic nationalism. This in turn also interrogates the goals of constitutional secularism that postcolonial governments in the subcontinent claimed to accomplish. The rise of fundamentalist powers, the suppression of minorities in different countries of South Asia, and the propagation of vernacular or sub-nationalist movements as evidence of political convulsions show that nationalism and secularism emerge as densely loaded concepts and aspirations in the subcontinent. In addition to this, the creation and assumption of nation-states at the expense of certain historical cultural dispositions, as in the case of India and Pakistan's territorial and political desires in Kashmir, put the question of nationalism more in trouble, complicating the processes of nation-building and national citizenship.

It is noteworthy to point out that the contemporary concept of nation and nationalism serves as a fundamental catalyst for social discord and internal divisions within sovereign nations. In current discourse, there is a tendency to equate the concept of a nation with that of a sovereign territory, race, caste, tribe, or any other societal entity that surpasses the scale of a family unit. The aforementioned conceptualization of a nation has the potential to foster a fallacious understanding of the concept (Biswas 10). Nation-building in South Asia that demanded conformity from diverse ethnic and religious communities was thus often involved

in despotism and what Habib denotes as the ‘hooliganism’ of the state-authority (5). Adapting the European model of cohesive or uniform nationalism, the post-colonial governments failed to understand that highly stratified and ethnically divided South Asian countries could never be unified in that model. Nation-states, in their zeal to impose a hegemonic model, failed to understand and acknowledge the differentialities of cultural and social order. The ethno-cultural expectations of South Asian communities could never have been fitted into the monolithic model of nationhood or the broad notions of secularist politics that postcolonial state authorities championed. For instance, after its independence in 1947, India chose to remain constitutionally secular. However, the narratives of nationhood did not pertain to it. The cultural artefacts of Hinduism predominated the production of metanarratives of nationalism in postcolonial India, as Gautam Navlakha puts it in this way: “In India attempts at constructing a nation has [sic] proceeded along the lines of carving out ethnicity built around cultural artefacts of Hinduism howsoever defined or understood” (2951). Consequently, the marginalisation of ethnic others happened in surreptitious ways. Partha Chatterjee, in his *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* (1986) and *The Nation and its Fragments* (1993), discusses the inadequacy of the Western-oriented model of nationalism, stating how the ideological framework of nation in the South Asian subcontinent needs to be appropriated differently. Ashis Nandy, too, in a similar vein, offers a critique of the modern nation-state in India, saying that the “post-Independence elites tried to function with an imported concept of statecraft, legitimated in terms of the traditions of India’s high culture, and adjusted to suit the country’s needs, as the elites read those needs” (4).

Against the backdrop of such political disjuncture and the heterogeneous dimensions of nationalism in the South Asian context, this special issue becomes more pertinent. Some of the critical questions that this issue aims to approach and uncover are: how could democratic processes be implemented in independent states by separating politics from religion? How does

nationalism expand beyond the concept of a single nation due to its intricate ethnic, regional, and cultural offshoots? How does the idea of nations within an (independent) nation create the need for a broader understanding of nationalism? How does religious mobilisation become a carrier of culture within and beyond South Asian countries? How can (mis)conceptions regarding religious fundamentalism be understood through the policies and politics of secularism and postcolonial nationalism? In what ways does religion play a significant role in the creation of political structures and secular democracies in South Asia? How do nationalism and secularism intersect within the context of South Asia?

These questions lead to approaching the South Asian literary responses that have in many ways delineated and represented the conflictual dynamics of nationalism and secularism. Mallika Shakya's observation on the subaltern poetic voices becomes significant here, as she states that "we must not confuse nationalist cosmopolitan talk with (de)nationalized regional solidarity" (165) to be able to take an inclusive approach primarily towards those who have been minoritized. The two important issues that she highlights become elemental for this issue. In the first place, 'is there a way of being South Asian without flaunting or having to flaunt one's nationality and its relative diplomatic (and muscular) prowess? (165), and secondly, can ideological perceptions of nationalism in South Asia be explored through poetic and literary discourses better than political debates or theorizations? (168). Criticising the elites who defined the parameters of nationalism, often throwing the question of cultural citizenship in jeopardy, Mallika Shakya talks about identifying gaps in addressing many marginalised voices as represented through the literature of South Asia. For instance, the efforts of disregarding women as citizens in Nepal, genders being 'disenfranchised and marginalized' (164) or 'erasure of the history of the disenfranchised' (164) in general, need to be accounted for and acknowledged. One of the key objectives of this issue is to bring to the foreground the disparaged and silenced contexts of South Asian literary studies that would highlight the

diversified, plural, and polyphonic voices and representations of nationalism in the subcontinent. While the existing and emerging South Asian Anglophone literature shows the vibrancy of religion and nationalism, the diversity of cultures and the understanding of the complexities of religious influences also caution about the ways in which religion is capable of mobilizing and stimulating people politically (Ali et al 2). Religion and ethnicity, playing crucial roles in shaping the ‘politics of literature’, ‘mobilization ideology’ (6) and intersecting with the practises of caste (5) in several countries of South Asia, disrupt the comprehension of nationalism as a univocal one. The special issue attempts to draw attention to these particularities of literary and cultural interventions that delineate that nationalism and secularism have been the prioritised concepts yet have always been fraught with conflict with heterogeneous socio-cultural forces.

Synopsis of this Special Issue

Such convoluted contexts and identities belonging to South Asia raise the question of how well literature has represented these identities. Literature provides the prospects of reconnecting and resisting the identity clashes that have become far more intricate within the ethnic, racial, and linguistic realms. The crimes of sexual violence committed in the name of political war should therefore also be observed as reminders of redefining nationalism and reframing identities beyond religious and nationalistic boundaries. For example, the intersection between sexual violence, caste system, and nationalism, as discussed in one of the papers, focused on the experience of a Bihari woman, indicating that nationalism can take an extreme turn by instigating a sense of inclusiveness and exclusiveness, further sharpening the layers of marginality and political borders within South Asia. The overarching interest of all the contributors to this issue is first and foremost in re-theorising nationalism and secularism within the South Asian context through unconventional approaches. Secondly, to explore the

subcategories of nationalism; this may include but is not limited to ethnoreligious, ethnolinguistic, culinary, and spiritual nationalism intersecting with the class and caste system (untouchability), sense of community, and the process of othering, which has not ended with the process of colonisation. The papers problematize the crises emerging from the political and historical contexts of India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Afghanistan. This context has categorically impacted literary expressions while voicing the public's responses towards the two traumatic partitions, one in 1947 and the second in 1971. The 1971 Bangladesh War in the context of Pakistan serves as an illustrative case for examining the endeavours aimed at reconstructing identities in postcolonial surroundings. The Pakistani state, established with religious motivations, demonstrated the fragility of its ideology centred around religion as a defining factor, notably following the formation of Bangladesh. The partitions that occurred in Pakistan and Bangladesh have resulted in certain identities being in a state of uncertainty. This includes the Bihari community, which migrated to East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and India during the partition of 1947. Despite residing in these regions for several decades, they continue to face challenges in establishing a sense of belonging to any specific country. This predicament arises from suspicions about their allegiance to opposing factions in both nations. The present critical discourse is presented by Farzana Akhter. Simultaneously, the article by Madhurima Sen undertakes a critical evaluation of two Pakistani fictional works, namely "Bingo" by Tariq Rahman and "Hearth and Home" by Parveen Sarwar, which were published in 1973 as immediate responses to the war.

The article by Chithira James and Reju George Mathew explicates Dalit culinary practices as portrayed in the life narratives of Urmila Pawar and Baby Kamble. The authors argue that these practices challenge and redefine the concept of culinary nationalism, while also subverting the traditional beliefs surrounding ritual pollution and purity. Meena Sharma executes an investigation into fictional narratives originating from Nepal, with the aim of

analysing the evolving dynamics of Nepali nationalism as portrayed in contemporary Nepalese literature. This exploration takes place within the context of an ongoing discourse surrounding nationalism and the reevaluation of the state's framework in Nepal. In her study, Sharma examines the portrayal of life, region, and population in Nepal as presented in literary works. The article underscores the importance of comprehending Nepali Nationalism within the context of regional distinctions, social class, religious affiliation, and ethnic diversity. Through the process of redefining established narratives, the author critically examines the notion of Nepal as a unified nation and explores alternative perspectives on the concept of Nepali nationhood. Navin Sharma and Priyanka Tripathi examine the Sri Lankan civil war and the dominance of Sinhala-Buddhist ideology over the marginalised Tamil population. The authors engage in a critical analysis of the country's discrepancies, examining how it has failed to effectively function as both an authoritarian and a democratic state due to the influence of ethno-religious nationalism. This article proposes an examination of the strategies employed by literature to portray Human Rights violations in the context of South Asia, specifically through the analysis of selected Sri Lankan fiction that constructively challenge prevailing laws and policies.

In their study, Goutam Karmakar and Payal Pal investigate the ramifications of Partition from an epistemological perspective. This approach involves the identification and examination of specific narratives that serve as representative testimonies of the Partition. The authors here examine the notion of epistemic pluralism as an alternative to the prevailing approach of meta-significations of partition narratives while not considering the notion of monolithic perceptions of the 1947 event. This article posits that there exist alternative perspectives that extend beyond the overarching interpretations of partition narratives. These perspectives are exemplified by individuals who, through their persistent endeavours, have

redefined notions of self-assertion, resulting in the emergence of varied and vibrant epistemologies. The representation of Kashmir as a problematic political space and the nuances of (re)defining and redefining Kashmiriyat and its connection with nationalistic aspirations are still important foci of attention for many South Asian scholars. The communal concerns beyond religious boundaries and the ethnic diversity have failed to resolve the religious conflicts in Kashmir. Haadiyah Chishti and Romina Rashid's article discuss how the principles of neutrality and equality have failed and reflect the failure of secularism while also disrupting the serenity of Kashmir. The authors are sceptical about how the scholarship relates to Kashmir because the focus on this subject still revolves around distinguishing nationalism and religion instead of identifying ways of resolving these conflicts. While ongoing sexual abuse, violence, and persistent conflict in Kashmir, in the authors' view, are evidently reflecting the 'lost ideals of Kashmiriyat', the article also accentuates the need for saving the natural resources, culture, literary and mystic traditions for Kashmir by analysing chosen narrative. Nilanjan Chakraborty focuses on the Vedantic nationalism of Sri Aurobindo and succinctly analyses Sri Aurobindo's philosophic and eclectic approach towards nationalism, which, at the later stages of his life, amalgamates the proletariat with Vedantic mysticism. The objective of this study is to approach nationalism beyond the boundaries of Socialist and right-wing approaches. The concluding article of this issue by Avijit Das and Shri Krishan Rai analyses how Nadeem Aslam's *The Wasted Vigil* offers a critical examination of the complex and contested concept of Afghan nationalism, considering its multifaceted manifestations.

Realizing that these theoretical discussions may be complemented by creative approaches towards the thematic focus of this issue, we have also included two poetry translation samples by two emerging translators, Yasir Sarmad and Akhter Mirza. Yasir has focused on Faiz Ahmed Faiz's (1911–1984) poem *āj bāzār meñ pā-ba-jaulāñ chalo*, translated

as ‘Let us March to the *Bazar* with Shackles in Feet’, to memorialise Faiz’s political poetry as a commentary on the failure of democracy in Pakistan. Whereas, Akhtar Mirza has translated contemporary Urdu poet, Akhtar Raza Saleemi’s poem, ‘Ek Kahani’ translated as, ‘A Story’. This poem is a thought-provoking creative response to the mystery of “missing persons” belonging to Pakistan and the unresolved political dilemmas within a so-called independent nation; the poem voices the people and families who face the surveillance of intelligence. The issue also includes Deblina Rout’s review of *The City Speaks: Urban Spaces in Indian Literature*, thereby adding discussions on nationalism and secularism in the context of urban studies in India.

In brief, this issue deals with contemporary resistance literature in South Asia while also exploring the ways in which literature has critically commented on the political violence and trauma in these nations and highlighting the failure of nationalism and secularism in general. This focus may not be exhaustive but is not a limitation of this issue; it is a step forward as we endure our journey in the form of other academic projects that can continue to address this diverse, convoluted, and problematic political and historical ambience of South Asia.

Works cited

- Ali, Sk Sagir, Goutam Karmakar, and Nasima Islam, eds. *Religion in South Asian Anglophone Literature: Traversing Resistance, Margins and Extremism*. Routledge, 2021.
- Biswas, Debajyoti. “Introduction: Interdisciplinary perspectives on Indian nationalism.” *Nationalism in India: Texts and Contexts*, edited by Debajyoti Biswas and John Charles Ryan, Routledge, 2021, pp. 1-20.
- Chatterjee, Partha. *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse*. University of Minnesota Press, 1986.
- Chatterjee, Partha. *The Nation and its Fragments*. Princeton University Press, 1993.
- Habib, Irfan. “Nationalism in India: Past and Present.” *Social Scientist*, vol. 45, no. 3/4, 2017, pp. 3–8.

- Hilali, A. Z. "Political and Ethnic Waves in South Asia." *Pakistan Horizon*, vol. 58, no. 3, 2005, pp. 55–75.
- Korom, Frank J., and Jan Magnusson. "Guest Editors' Introduction: South Asian Nationalisms." *Asian Ethnology*, vol. 80, no. 1, 2021, pp. 5–18.
- Langah, Nukhbah Taj, ed. *Literary and non-Literary Responses towards 9/11: South Asia and Beyond*. Routledge, 2019.
- Nandy, Ashis. "The politics of secularism and the recovery of religious tolerance." *Alternatives*, vol. 13, no. 2, 1988, pp. 177–194.
- Navlakha, Gautam. "Bharat's Kashmir War." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 26, no. 51, 1991, pp. 2951–62.
- Sabhlok, Smita G. "Nationalism and ethnicity and the nation-state in South Asia." *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, vol. 8, no. 3, 2002, pp. 24-42.
- Shakya, Mallika. "Poetic Imagining(s) in South Asia: Writing Nation Through Sensibilities of Resistance." *Society and Culture in South Asia*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2022, pp. 163–173.
- Upreti, B. C. "Nationalism in South Asia: Trends and Interpretations." *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 67, no. 3, 2006, pp. 535–44.