

## Women and the construction of the nation

Dr. Navarupa Bhuyan  
Guest Faculty, NLUJAA

### Abstract:

The idea of the nation is a constructed one to bring the people who reside in it with a feeling of oneness and to bring reverence to the idea of a common nation. This is done through various ways, considering events of the past as well as the present times. In this imagination of the nation, the idea of gender, especially women play a very crucial role. This paper looks at the role of women in the construction of the nation. Though in popular narrative and functioning of the nation, women appear to occupy and are often pushed to a marginalized position, yet when we look in detail how the idea of nation is shaped, we find that the importance of the role of women that cannot be left undiscussed. In everyday life, the invocation of the nation seems incomplete without women. The recent events of internal conflicts in the nation and the representation of women in it and how, helps to understand the situation.

### Introduction:

Benedict Anderson (2005) defines nation in an anthropological spirit as “an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign”. The nation according to him is considered as imagined as the people residing in it will never know, meet or hear from their fellow nation mates, but still in their minds lives the image of their communion. A nation according to Ernest Renan (2018) is a soul, a spiritual principle and this principle is constituted of two things – one lies in the past, of the possession of common memories; and the other lies in the present, the consent to live together.

Thus, as we can see from the views of Anderson and Renan, a nation is something that has to be constructed, produced and reproduced through various instruments of the past and the present that would lead to the imagination of a community identity among the people living in it. The nation, as Mrinalini Sinha (2000) says, is constructed and renewed through numerous ordinary and extraordinary practises that introduce it to the social structure as well as the people's collective conscience. The importance of 'innovation' in the establishment of national communities is underlined here, both in terms of manufacture and of innovative recombination of existing elements. Feminist inquiry has examined this created national character in which gender discourse is utilised to represent the nation. The predominance of "familial and gendered imagery" is a key aspect of nationalist speech. Nations are conceived to as "domestic genealogies." The term nation is derived from the Latin word “natio”, which means "to be born". People are either "born into" or "naturalised" into national citizenship. The nation is frequently referred to as the Heimat (homeland), and people's relationships to certain territories, languages, cultures, or shared histories are referred to as motherlands or fatherlands, mother tongues, or mother culture (Sinha, 2000).

However, even then we see that women have been marginalized and are often marked as absent from the nation building project. When one looks at this aspect with careful analysis one cannot ignore the fact that often the nation is constructed, produced and reproduced

on the idea of women. This paper discusses the ways women forms an integral part in the construction of the idea of the nation. It goes on to explain the role that women play in representing the ideal nation and how almost everything related to the territorial aspect of the nation – physical and cultural, is marked by considering women.

The violence on women in every country, specially on the women's bodies helps to understand how the construction of nation is gendered and the honour of nation lies in its women. This idea of honour associated with the nation, extends at the community level too among people. The recent disrobing and parading naked of two women in Manipur by male members of the opposite community reflects the attitude towards women when constructing boundaries.

### Gender and Nation:

Nation and gender are both historic and social construct and they form one another in many a way. For instance, Topography is mapped in gendered terms in a way as the soil of the nation is always feminised. National mythologies also are based generally on gender roles and narratives are filled with women as mothers, wife and maiden. Nation building practices through their division of labour in terms of gender also construct gendered practices by always associating women as the reproducer, symbolically as well as physically, and their bodies serve as the symbol and boundary of the nation, and men who fill the feminine spaces are considered to be the protector and defender of women, as well as the nation.

Nira Yuval Davis' (1998) work on gendered nationalism is highlighted in her work, where she initially states that women are essentially considered as biological reproducers of the nation, accentuating the reproductive function of women. Second, they bear the 'weight of representation' as cultural reproducers of the nation. Third, as the embodiment of the homeland. The symbolic portrayal of the female body with family/community/nation honour, which portrayed

women as mothers, wives, and daughters, made them even more vulnerable to gendered violence.

### **Nation and women's bodies:**

Women's bodies thus mark the vulnerability of borders, as during any conflict it is the women's body that is used as the site of violence. Thus, the motherland is considered as one that is passive and vulnerable in need of protection and fatherland, the force behind government and military action must defend it (Mostov, 2012). As Michael Billig (1995) has mentioned, the rape of the motherland is considered more important than the rape of a real mother. Likewise with the national honour attached to the body of women, the violation and rape of individual women is considered equal to that done to the nation. However, though women of the nation are considered as mothers, women of "others" are considered as traitors and producer of enemies. So, we can see how the women's body act as the site of struggle by men.

Women are the biological reproducers of the nation's members. They bear sons to battle for the nation and daughters to care for it. Women who refuse to play this role are labelled selfish, unwomanly, and unpatriotic; women who have abortions are labelled traitors above all. Women, as mothers, are the nation's reproducers, yet they are also potential foes and traitors, partners in its demise. The other's women are adversaries because they breed, increasing the number of outsiders and conspiring to dilute and destroy the nation through their progeny. As a result, while "our" women must be venerated as mothers, all women's bodies must be under controlled to assert and prove their national identity by using their masculine powers. Because the ethnonational idea of nation defines the society as a family, motherhood and reproduction must be supervised by the nation's guardians. Women's bodies, acting as incubators, are thus critical to the nation's external and interior limits. Women serve as custodians of national values, as signifiers of the boundaries of group identity, distinguishing it from alien others." Women preserve traditions in the home, observe dietary and other rituals, and reflect the virtue of the nation through their chastity and modesty (Mostov, 1995).

### **Indian nation and the construction of gender:**

In the Indian context, when we look at the idea of construction of the nation in terms of gender, the ideas presented by Partha Chatterjee (1989) while talking about the construction of the "new Indian women" in relation to reproducing and reconstructing the nation remains significant. Chatterjee argues that for Indian nationalists in the late nineteenth century, it was superfluous to copy the west in anything other than the material world. They even claimed it was superfluous to do so, because the east was spiritually superior to the west. According to them, the need of the hour was to "cultivate the material techniques of the material

domain" while also retaining and strengthening the present spiritual essence of national culture. As a result, western modernity was selectively appropriated. The material realm is the external environment that conditions, influences, and drives us to adapt. The spiritual sphere is the most important and resides within. They believe that as long as India retains its spiritual character, it can make all of the necessary adjustments to adapt to the demands of a modern material world without losing its fundamental identity. To apply this distinction to daily life, the social space is separated into ghar and bahir. The bahir is the material world's outer domain, where practical considerations prevail, and is primarily the domain of men. The ghar is the spiritual world's inner region, devoid of the profane actions of the material world, and women are its representation. As a result of the distinct social spaces of the ghar and bahir, there is also a division of gender roles. The west was able to colonise the world due to its superior material culture, but it was unable to conquer the east's inner essential identity, which is rooted in its superior spiritual culture. In this realm, the east was in charge of its own destiny. The nationalists did not reject modernity, but rather attempted to incorporate it into their nationalist vision. Its defining feature was locating its women's position in the 'modern' world by outlining social and moral ideals.

The key point of emphasis was that regardless of changes in the exterior conditions of life for women, they must not lose their inherent spiritualism (feminine values) and become essentially westernised. Education became a means for cultural refinement of women in the nationalist construct of the new woman. Women's femininity was defined by defining specific culturally evident spiritual attributes, and once achieved, they can take on any position in the external world. By granting women the honour of a new responsibility, they were committed to legitimise subjugation.

Thus, patriarchy combined its coercive authority with the delicate method of persuasion, which was expressed in the inverted ideological form of the power relation between the sexes; the adoration of women as Goddesses or mothers. This new lady with feminine qualities became a metaphor for the "nation," embodying traits such as self-sacrifice, compassion, dedication, spirituality, and so on.

### **Conclusion:**

Thus, we have seen that the construction of the nation relies on the women of the nation. However, it is not any kind of women that would fit the national narrative of the kind of women who would be considered best to represent the nation and whom the male members of the nation are bound to protect showing their bravery and sacrifices.

### **Bibliography:**

Anderson, B. (2005). Imagined communities. Nations and nationalism: A reader, 48-60.

- Billig, M. (1995). Banal nationalism. *Banal nationalism*, 1-208.
- Chatterjee, P. (1989). Colonialism, nationalism, and colonized women: The contest in India. *American ethnologist*, 16(4), 622-633.
- Mostov, J. (1995). Our Women/Their Women: Symbolic Boundaries. *Territorial Markers and Violence in the Balkans in Peace and Change: A Journal of Peace Research*.
- Mostov, J. (2012). Sexing the nation/desexing the body: Politics of national identity in the former Yugoslavia. In *Gender ironies of nationalism* (pp. 89-110). Routledge.
- Renan, E. (2018). *What is a nation? And other political writings*. Columbia University Press.
- Yuval-Davis, N. (1998). Gender and Nation. *Women, ethnicity and nationalism: The politics of transition*, 23-35.