

India and its rich history and varied culture history essay



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We all claim to be “ Indian” from time to time, part of a country with a rich history and vast and varied culture and are proud of its glorious past. But most of us are actually clueless about this history that we proclaim to be proud of. We don’t know how or what makes us Indian. Whether it is the fact that we belong to a land mass that is bound by the ocean on 3 sides and mountains on the other or whether because we have been always told that we are Indians. Is India just a geographical entity plotted on a map, come together for only reasons of geographical convenience or is there more to it? Is there politics involved in the formation of the country? What were the factors that influenced this formation?

We all know from our history books that what we know as India is a new creation. The India before independence was very different from the India that we see today. Of course it is common knowledge that pre-1947 India consisted of modern day Pakistan and Bangladesh. Pre-independent India may have been geographically a larger entity but it was mainly nothing but a collection of fragmented kingdoms and princely states. Thus it didn’t really exist politically speaking.

The answer to what exactly is India is a complex one. There are lot of issues underlying the formation of the India we know today. Each geographical entity, political entity community and religion will have their own view of what they think “ India” is. Each his own history to tell giving a view of “ India” that is unique. When we ask a Kashmiri pundit what he thinks India is and then asks the same question to a fisherman at the Tamil Nadu coastland we should be prepared to get a widely contrasting answer. The question may elicit an altogether different response in the mind of a Naga as compared to

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a Kutchi from the Kutch region of India. These answers would also have varied over the passage of time. More importantly outsiders have a still different view of what they view India as. It is this idea of India that we will explore in the coming few pages. We shall try to explore India in terms of depth, time and space.

NATION AND NATIONALISM:

“ A nation is a group of people who share culture, ethnicity and language, often possessing or seeking its own independent government.” (Nation, 2010)

“ Nationalism involves a strong identification of a group of individuals with a political entity defined in national terms, i. e. a nation. Often, it is the belief that an ethnic group has a right to statehood, or that citizenship in a state should be limited to one ethnic group, or that multinationality in a single state should necessarily comprise the right to express and exercise national identity even by minorities.” (Nationalism, 2010)

Thus we can see how both nation and nationalism are defined. Nationalism can be said to happen when one imagines that there are others like him. Let's go back to the question of what makes a nation? Is it a continuous stretch of land? That the people share a common language? Or a common religion? Does the fact that they belong to the same race or ethnicity a reason enough for them to be called a nation? If all or either of these were to be considered then India still wouldn't qualify to be a nation. Neither is it a single piece of continuous land, nor does it have a common language or religion. We are divided by race and ethnicity as well. And yet we call

ourselves a nation. We believe that we all are Indians. One country. One people. We think of ourselves as being part of one whole.

India has all kinds of differences within it. It is a great example of syncretism and cultural pluralism. Time and again India has been defined as the melting pot of cultures. As clichéd as it may sound it is also true. India's history in terms of trade and military have ensured that India's culture be constantly enriched from both within and without.

A nation is a nation as long as it thinks of itself as a nation. The moment the people of the nation, stop seeing themselves as one the nation ceases to exist. The spirit of nationalism or belonging is sometimes nothing more than the idea that we do not belong to somewhere else. Once this idea that maybe we identify better with others come into the picture trouble more often than not starts within the political boundary of the nation. It is the political boundaries that make up a nation. If political boundaries become the boundaries of the mind then the nation starts seething in trouble.

Nationalism is a highly fluid phenomena and needs constant work on it. For a nation to endure it needs to both forget and remember. A balance between the two would be ideal.

Throughout history we can see many that the idea of India has been questioned and at times revised to suit the political and economical conditions that were prevalent then. Like in the case of creation of the separate state of Pakistan. The state of Pakistan was as we all know once an integral part of the north western part of India. People of the north lived together sharing similar culture and languages. However during the British

raj especially during the 1930's there was a need felt by many for a "northwestern India for Indian Muslims". Thus where there was a feeling of nationalism existing till then there arose a feeling that maybe the two people there are actually very different from each other. Thus they felt a need for a new state. The people there no longer felt as being part of a common nation. In fact a sense of not belonging to a set of people called Indians actually was growing among the many Muslims of India. Actually nationalism can also be defined as this feeling of not belonging to some part as opposed to belonging somewhere.

There existed two views with regards to the formation of a separate Pakistan. Many felt that the fact that the two nations shared a common history for a long time along with various other factors like food, culture, traditions, languages. India and Pakistan also shared various environments like cultural, economical, political and historical. They had together withstood many invasions from various dynasties in the past. Thus there was a sense of common pride shared between the two nations. In view of all this a lot of people felt a solidarity and oneness that they did not wish to part with. On the other hand there was a view among others especially Muslims that they were not fully given their recognitions within a largely Hindu nation. They felt that they did not share any common values between their Hindu neighbours and themselves. There grew a sense of uneasiness among the people. Political leaders too leveraged the situation. Thus creating a new state of Pakistan which had a majority population of Muslims. Pakistan was envisioned as a Islamic state by its leaders at its formation and till today continues to be so.

As in 1947 India was partitioned on the basis of religion, it set a precedent for other religions too. When India was divided to Pakistan and India the Sikhs of the Punjab region of both Pakistan and India felt deprived and discriminated against. There were a lot of Sikhs in the Punjab province of Pakistan who had to leave their homes. Thus the Sikhs were not in favour of the formation of a separate state of Pakistan. But later when they felt discriminated against they too felt the needs for carving out a separate state called Khalistan for themselves. This state was essentially for the Punjabi speaking population. After the Muslims it was the turn of the Sikhs to feel that they were no longer the part of India. The spirit of nationality that was resounding in the country suddenly failed to be identified with by a certain section of the society. There was a feeling that a separate state would be far beneficial to the people than just being a part of the larger Indian nation. However through various political intercourses the Khalistan Movement died over time and now they do not feel the urgent need for a separate state. The political parties that championed the cause of a separate state have now mellowed down. Though there exists some problems in certain areas more or less the movement for the separate state has now gone down.

But all's not well in other parts of the land of India. To the north-east we have a high feeling of restlessness. The people in the 7 sister states of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Manipur, and Nagaland. When we spoke of geographical stretch of land we may have been correct when we said that what binds a nation is the continuity of land. This group of states find themselves isolated from the rest of the country. As the only thing that connects them to the rest of the world is a narrow strip of

land called the “ Siliguri Corridor”. Also this region is very different from the rest of the India in terms of ethnicity, language, culture and the likes. This also has increased the gap that is found between them and the rest of the nation. Most of these areas are also inhabited by tribes thus again deepening the gap between them and the rest of India. Often they find themselves misunderstood. They often called “ Chinese” in spite of the fact that they have been a part of our country for a long time. Also as most of them have lived with a lot of Christian Missionaries they have a slightly westernized culture which further alienates them from the “ culturally hindu” India. They are looked in with suspicion and often taken to be outsiders. They also find themselves underrepresented in positions of authority. The authorities are often nothing but outsiders to them who aren’t actually interested in the welfare of the people of their land. They often feel that they should indeed be by themselves and ask for a separate state for themselves. Also they have a lot of problems of poverty and unemployment. This has led to a lot of unrest among the people of that particular area. They started revolting against the authorities there. There are have been in recent times an increasing case of insurgency in these areas. The militancy is actually a result of years of gross neglect by the various governments that have come and gone. There is this feeling among the people there that may be they are better off on their own.

Thus we can see that the reason for various people to feel the need for a separate nation often varies. For some it is religion for some because they do not feel that they are treated fairly. For some others a feeling that they no find themselves aligned with the thinking of the rest of the country that they

find themselves a part of. Often minorities in a country feel threatened that their culture will never survive in the light of the general culture prevalent in the nation. They believe they will always be given a step motherly treatment. Many a times the majority of the nation fails to understand that what keep the nation together is nothing but a feeling of security when being a part of a larger whole. When that security vanishes or diminishes people often find themselves intimidated by the rest of the population. Often resulting in unrest among them. This unrest if not tackled in time will result in armed struggle and a lot of bloodshed. The ties that bind the nation will then be lost thus many times leaving no option but to sever ties with that nation. After all it is nothing but that feeling of oneness and unity that we form nations on.

But sometimes the request is not of a separate nation but a separate state. This request too can be in the basis of a distinct culture or language or even resources. As we can see in the case of the Andhra- Telangana issue. For years now the two regions have been at loggerheads with each other. During the British rule itself these states were administered under two different rules. The region of Telangana containing Hyderabad was under princely rule and the rest of Andhra was under the British rule under the Madras presidency. Both the regions were composed of Telugu speaking people. After independence, the States Reorganisation Commission was formed to form states on the basis of linguistics. At that time itself the Commission was not in favour of merging the two regions even though they spoke a common language. Most leaders also felt that it is the people's opinion that should matter most when the states are being formed. The people of the region to

did not want to be merged into one state. However due to circumstances the two states were merged. It should be noted that the two regions were unequal in the distribution of resources. While Telangana region had a lot of resources and money the Andhra region was not very rich in resources. This led to a lot of uneasiness among the people of the Telangana region as they felt that they money of their region will be used for the development of the Andhra region. This led to a lot of unrest. Also at that time the impression given was that if later the people did not feel like staying together the merger could be done away with. From then till now there is a growing feeling among the people of the region that they have been losing out on opportunities of employment and development as they have the baggage of the very under developed Andhra to carry on their shoulders. However nothing was really done for long. Recently in 2009 finally the government of India decided to form a committee to look into the matter and check whether it is feasible to have a separate state of Telangana and Andhra.

One of the reasons for the Government to not willingly giving in to the request of a separate state is the fear that this will set an unnecessary precedent to all the states in the future. More states may come in to the forefront and ask for a separate state on the basis of language, resource, culture etc. This has left them in a position where they are not doing much to remedy the issues in either Telangana or for that matter even the North east. India is a country marked by a large variety. Even within states there are various languages spoken and each language has its own dialects. If all the people of the nation slowly find that they are very different from their neighbours and hence wish that they get a separate nation or a separate

state, there will be no India left with so to speak. When the nation was formed we did know about the large cultural diversity that it wished to encompass within it. We had then willingly decided to live peacefully and be tolerant of every differences. We believed that our common pride and history would keep us together.

Though a separate nation of Pakistan was formed on the basis of the Islamic religion, many Muslims of the country still chose to stay back in India. All was going well till the demolition of the Babri Masjid by the Hindu extremists. They believed that the site of the mosque was the site of the birth of Lord Ram. They had overnight demolished the entire structure. This caused a lot of anger in the hearts of the Muslims. They were hurt by the gross injustice. The Muslims retaliated by riots and bombings. The country had erupted into fire overnight. Hindus and Muslims living together suddenly became wary of each other. There was an environment of animosity created. The relations between the two communities had soured just like in the days of the partition. Thus religion had come back to haunt the people of India. People started looking at everyone with suspicion. It also became a card for the leaders of the various political parties to play with. But with time some wounds heal. Most people forgot what actually happened there. After all a nation is made up of memories both remembered and forgotten. People chose to forget what they knew was best left forgotten.

Thus the nation of India has gone through a variety of instances when it's nationality was under threat. What is most important to be noticed is that most of things that cause unrest in a nation are those that are the most constant things of the nation. Things that will forever remain. Things that

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cannot suddenly disappear. No matter how much we move forward in time the religions in our will still remain. The distribution of resources will still be there. The majority will still remain the majority. As a result we can see that there is no permanent solution. The nation will always face problems at one time or the other with regards to these aspects. No matter how much we wish to solve these issues. They will forever persist.

But this does not mean that we do not have things in common. It is in our differences that we find the most similarities sometimes. The most basic of things sometimes can bind us. Take for example food. In spite of the fact that the different parts of the country have different food habits and food preferences we see that in spite of this. The whole nation seems to enjoy these delicacies as much as they would their own. Wheat is the staple diet up north while rice is the only thing served at meals down south. If fish finds a prominence at the dinner tables in the coastal areas, the various meats adorn the tables in the interiors of the nation. How each of these food items is cooked also differs from place to place. Also there are various traditions associated with various food articles. Where in some places ginger is not eaten because of religious significance in some other cuisine without garlic is impossible. In some places coconut oil can only be applied on the hair while in some others no food is complete without the liberal drizzle of heated coconut oil. But basically all over India food is used as a means of bringing people together. A family comes together at the end of the day to eat dinner be that in the valleys of Kashmir or in the plains of Maharashtra. Food is the integral part of any function or ritual. Be it births, initiation ceremonies, weddings or even deaths. Food is comfort. Food is the means of welcoming

someone. Food is what reminds everyone of home. “ Ma ka haath ka khaana” is a statement that resounds in every Indian irrespective of language, religion, caste, class, or region.

The sense of the unity that we constantly describe Indians to be possessing is just an idea that is created by the masses. An idea that keeps us together. Many times the differences are so glaring that the only way to move forward from them is to ignore them. Sometimes the similarities are so evident that we know that only an Indian can know what that is. It is this Indianess that binds us together. It is because of this that we look out for a Indian face when we land in a foreign land. In fact there we do not even care if the person is a Pakistani, we just are happy with the fact that the person shares a culture similar to us. That the person understands the same language and eats the same food that we do too. In all our differences and in all our similarities we always remain Indian. No matter how many nations are carved out of India, we will always remain Indian in our approaches to life. We will always remain Indian in our mind. As India is nothing but an idea that was created in the minds of a billion people.