Chapter 7: Nationalism

Exercises — Exercises

Q1 How is a nation different from other forms of collective belonging?

A nation is not a casual collection of people, and it differs from other groups in how its members are linked. A family rests on face-to-face relationships in which everyone personally knows the others. Tribes, clans and other kinship groups are bound by marriage and descent, so even unknown members can, if needed, be traced through those ties. In a nation, we may never meet most fellow nationals and need not share ties of descent with them. A nation is largely an 'imagined' community, held together by the collective beliefs, aspirations and imaginations of its members. It rests on shared belief, a sense of continuing history, identification with a territory or homeland, and shared political ideals. Above all, a nation aspires to an independent political existence, which is what distinguishes it from other groups.

Q2 What do you understand by the right to national self-determination? How has this idea resulted in both formation of and challenges to nation-states?

The right to national self-determination is a nation's claim to govern itself and determine its own future development. In making it, a nation seeks recognition from the international community as a distinct political entity or state. Such claims usually come from people who have long lived together on a given land with a sense of common identity, and sometimes from a wish for a state that protects or privileges the group's culture.

Formation of states: in nineteenth-century Europe the idea of one culture, one state gained acceptance. After World War I the Treaty of Versailles created several small, newly independent states on this basis. Asian and African liberation movements also used the right against colonial rule, arguing that independence would bring dignity, recognition and protection of collective interests.

Challenges: it was virtually impossible to satisfy every demand. Redrawing boundaries caused mass migration, millions displaced from their homes, and communal violence. New states still contained several ethnic communities, so minorities remained disadvantaged. In Asia and Africa, migration, border wars and violence continued. Even states born of struggle now face minorities demanding self-determination, as with the Basques, Kurds and Tamils. The solution lies in making existing states more democratic and equal rather than creating ever more states.

Q3 "We have seen that nationalism can unite people as well as divide them, liberate them as well as generate bitterness and conflict". Illustrate your answer with examples.

Nationalism has been one of the most compelling political creeds of the last two centuries, inspiring intense loyalty as well as deep hatred.

Uniting: in nineteenth-century Europe it led to the unification of many small kingdoms into larger nation-states; present-day Germany and Italy were formed this way. New states also arose in Latin America, and local dialects and loyalties merged into common state languages and loyalties. A similar consolidation took place in India.

Liberating: nationalist struggles contributed to the break-up of the Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires in early twentieth-century Europe, and of the British, French, Dutch and Portuguese empires in Asia and Africa. India's freedom struggle was a nationalist struggle for independence from foreign control.

Dividing and causing conflict: nationalism has also fuelled wars and bitterness. Since 1960 separatist movements have emerged among the Quebecois in Canada, the Basques in Spain, the Kurds in Turkey and Iraq, and the Tamils in Sri Lanka. Redrawing boundaries after World War I displaced millions and led to communal violence.

Q4 Neither descent, nor language, nor religion or ethnicity can claim to be a common factor in nationalisms all over the world. Comment.

It is commonly believed that nations are groups sharing descent, language, religion or ethnicity. In fact, no common set of characteristics is present in all nations.

Language: Canada includes both English-speaking and French-speaking peoples, and India has many languages spoken in different regions by different communities, yet both are nations.

Religion and descent: many nations lack a common religion, and the same holds for race or descent.

The chapter adds that a shared cultural identity is also risky for democracies. All major religions are internally diverse, with sects that interpret texts differently, so forging identity on a single religion tends to produce an authoritative and oppressive society. Most societies are also culturally diverse, so imposing one religious or linguistic identity would exclude some groups and limit equal treatment and liberty. A nation is therefore better imagined in political terms, as loyalty to values enshrined in the Constitution, than through a single religion, race or language.

Q5 Illustrate with suitable examples the factors that lead to the emergence of nationalist feelings.

Several factors help people imagine themselves as a nation.

Shared beliefs: a nation exists when its members believe they belong together, much like a team that sees itself as a collective group.

History: people perceive a continuing historical identity, drawing on collective memories, legends and records. Indian nationalists invoked ancient civilisation and cultural heritage; Nehru wrote in The Discovery of India of a 'tremendous impress of oneness' holding Indians together.

Territory: living together on a land over a long period gives a sense of collective identity and a homeland, called motherland, fatherland or holy land. Jewish people, though dispersed, claimed Palestine as their promised land; the Indian nation identifies with the rivers, mountains and regions of the subcontinent.

Shared political ideals: members share a vision of the state they want, with values such as democracy, secularism and liberalism, and a collective aspiration for independent political existence.

Common cultural markers such as language, religion and festivals can also bring people together, though they are not common to all nations. Colonial domination, as in Asia and Africa, further spurred nationalist feeling.

Q6 How is a democracy more effective than authoritarian governments in dealing with conflicting nationalist aspirations?

The chapter argues that new states are not the solution to conflicting nationalist aspirations; making existing states more democratic and equal is. Democracy lets people of different cultural and ethnic identities live as partners and equal citizens. It can define national identity inclusively, recognising the unique contribution of every cultural community. Democratic societies can also protect minorities, for example the Indian Constitution's elaborate provisions for religious, linguistic and cultural minorities, and group rights such as constitutional protection of language and culture or representation in legislative bodies. These measures give equal treatment and protect group identity, which may satisfy aspirations without separate statehood. In a democracy, the citizen's political identity can encompass the many identities people hold. Democracy is built on equal treatment and liberty for all, whereas imposing one religious or linguistic identity, or ignoring minorities, would limit these ideals and make it hard to win the loyalty of members. Dealing with such demands democratically still needs considerable generosity and skill.

Q7 What do you think are the limitations of nationalism?

The chapter points to several limitations.

1. Conflict and division: nationalism has caused wars and bitterness, and separatist struggles threaten to divide existing states.

2. Impractical self-determination: granting statehood to every group that sees itself as a nation is impossible and probably undesirable. It could create states too small to be economically and politically viable and multiply the problems of minorities.

3. Costs to people: redrawing boundaries for one culture, one state caused mass migration, displacement and communal violence, and still left minorities disadvantaged inside new states.

4. Oppression of minorities: even states born of nationalist struggle may act against minorities within their territory who claim self-determination.

5. Narrowness: Tagore criticised narrow nationalism, saying patriotism should not triumph over humanity. He feared that rejecting the west for supposedly Indian traditions could become hostility to other influences, including Islam and Christianity.

6. Identity claims: intolerant, homogenising forms of identity and nationalism are dangerous, since each person holds many identities.