

## **Ethnic Nationalism to Civic Nationalism**

### **What is the issue?**

With minority rights being increasingly under threat in recent period, it is time to reflect on shift from ethnic nationalism to civic nationalism.

***Neither the colourless vagueness of cosmopolitanism, nor the fierce self-idolatry of nation-worship, is the goal of human history - Rabindranath Tagore.***

### **How has the idea of 'nationalism' evolved in the West?**

- Among democratic states one of the earliest cases of making pluralism and liberal constitutional values the basis of nationalism is that of the U.S.
- After the destruction of the indigenous population, the United States essentially became a nation of immigrants.
- Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg address starts with referring to the -

"nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal"

- In a 2009 speech, Barack Obama said -

"One of the great strengths of the United States is...we do not consider ourselves a Christian nation, (but) a nation of citizens who are bound by ideals and a set of values"

- The ideals and values here is presumably that as enshrined in the Constitution.
- Despite its many historical (and often racially motivated) lapses, this is a major example in history of "constitutional patriotism".
- It stands in contrast to patriotism based on "blood and soil" which had popular appeal in Germany.
- This has been associated with a great deal of persecution, violence and devastation, in history.
- Worryingly, it is this "ethnic nationalism" that appeals to today's populists.

### **What are the dangers of ethnic nationalism?**

- **Suppression** - People's identities are necessarily multi-layered but ethnic nationalism privileges one of these layers.
- This is usually based on the narrow particularities of religion, language or culture, which makes it easy to mobilise certain groups.
- It promotes primitive defensive-aggressive urge to fight against "enemy" groups.
- The ethnic nationalist leaders too are skilled at encouraging it.
- In comparison, the liberal or folk-syncretic traditions are sometimes too fragile to resist this attitude.
- **Anti-globalisation** - Ethnic-nationalist populists are opposed to globalisation.
- This is because they are against global rules restraining national sovereignty and they want to "take back control".
- But in so doing they over-centralise the powers of the national leader.
- They, thereby, dissipate the forces of decentralisation and autonomy of local communities within the country.
- Today's world economy is one of integrated global value chains and continuous swapping of parts, components, and tasks across borders.
- Clearly, a retreat from relatively free trade will be extremely harmful for the national interests of most countries.
- Notably, trade makes for cheaper producer inputs on which India's production base is heavily dependent.

### **How does this work in the present scenario?**

- The internal minority groups are often victims of suspicion by the majoritarian ethnic nationalists.
- They are suspected to be the proverbial fifth column aiding an enemy state.
- This is mostly the case in India, China, Russia, Indonesia, Poland, Hungary and so on.
- Even without the enemy state, the inevitable divisions of a heterogeneous society worry the leaders of the homogenising mission.
- Because, ethnic nationalism is almost always associated with suppressing the "little people" and their localised cultures for the larger cause of national integration.
- E.g., peasants into Frenchmen, the marginal groups like Dalits and Adivasis in India into the larger Hindu society, Han-Sinification of Tibetans and Uighurs in China, etc
- In the name of national integration and fighting enemies both outside and within, the minority rights are undermined.
- The procedures of democracy ("due process") are also sidelined.
- Those who promote ethnic nationalism accuse liberals of appeasing the

minorities, and try to suppress dissent as “anti-national”.

- This remains the case with blacks and Hispanics in the US, immigrants in Europe, Kurds in Turkey, Muslims in India, etc.

### **What ideals is Civic nationalism based on?**

- **Democracy** - Civic nationalism emphasises on the procedural aspects of democracy.
- It stresses on the liberal constitutional values and tries to use the pre-commitment of a foundational document for its cause.
- Through this, it binds the hands of subsequent generations if they display majoritarian tendencies curbing basic civil rights.
- E.g. during the Civil Rights movement Martin Luther King was referring to the Constitution
- He thus appealed to Americans, “to be true to what you said on paper”.
- **Local autonomy** - Unlike the centralisation tendency exhibited in ethnic-nationalism, civic nationalism emphasises on local autonomy.
- **Economy** - Civic nationalists accept some restrictions on national sovereignty to agree on multilateral rules on global public goods.
- This is also the case in global environmental damage or international spread of crime, and restrictions on cross-border tax-dodging.
- Notably, this ultimately helps the national interest.

### **What should be done?**

- It is possible and necessary to build healthy alternatives to the kinds of radical ethnic nationalism that is seen around now.
- This is possible even without giving up on the nationalist cultural pride or the bonding of local communities consistent with larger humanitarian principles.

**Source: Business Standard**

