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

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