The Changing Dynamic of Nationalism in India

Mains: *GS I – Society*

Why in News?

In India, the idea of nationalism has never been fixed it has evolved from an anti-colonial movement built around unity and reform into a fiercely contested political idea.

What is Nationalism?

- **Nationalism** is a shared sense of belonging to a nation, a feeling of "we" among people who live together and share history, institutions, or aspirations.
- In public debate, political thinkers often contrast two main ways this belonging is imagined:
- **Civic Nationalism -** Rooted in shared democratic and constitutional principles such as liberty, equality, justice, fraternity, and secularism regardless of religion, caste, language, or region.
- **Ethnic Nationalism-** Rooted in a narrower cultural, linguistic, or religious identity, where belonging is closely tied to a dominant group's traditions and can make minority or marginalized groups feel like outsiders.

What is the comparison between historical roots and contemporary shifts?

- India's national movement grew primarily as an **anti-imperialist struggle** against colonial rule.
- Because India had vast religious, linguistic, and social diversity alongside deep-seated hierarchies like caste leaders and Constitution-makers emphasized accommodation, social reform, fundamental rights, and democratic participation.
- **Rise of Majoritarian -** When nationalism leans heavily toward cultural or religious uniformity, minorities, Dalits, Adivasis, and other marginalized communities can face heightened insecurity, discrimination, or vigilante hostility.
- **Patriarchy and Masculinized Imagery -** Nationalism is sometimes projected in rigid, muscular, or patriarchal terms that push back against women's agency, social reform, or questioning of authority.
- **Narrowing Space for Dissent-** Criticizing government policies or offering alternative visions of society can sometimes be mislabeled as "anti-national," even though peaceful debate and dissent are vital to a healthy democracy.
- **Links with Economic Power –** Observers such as economist Prabhat Patnaik have noted that strong cultural or identity-driven politics can sometimes draw attention away from everyday economic grievances like jobs, wages, and inequality, while aligning comfortably with big corporate interests.

Dimension	Civic / Constitutional Nationalism	Ethnic / Majoritarian Nationalism

Basis of Belonging	Shared citizenship, constitutional values, and equal rights	Shared cultural, religious, or majoritarian identity
Approach to Diversity	Pluralistic; accommodates varied faiths, languages, and lifestyles	Tends toward cultural uniformity or dominance of one group
Role of Dissent	Seen as a normal, healthy part of democratic accountability	Often viewed with suspicion or treated as disloyalty
Social & Economic Focus	Emphasizes equality, social justice, and welfare for all citizens	Can overshadow class, livelihood, and redistribution issues

What are the key tensions and challenges for democracy?

- **Social Cohesion-** Sharp identity divides can weaken trust among communities and strain everyday harmony.
- **Protection of Vulnerable Groups-** Marginalized citizens depend heavily on the rule of law and equal protection to live with dignity and safety.
- **Democratic Culture-** When loyalty to a particular political line is equated with patriotism, citizens may hesitate to speak up on public issues.
- **Everyday Livelihoods-** Over-reliance on symbolic identity politics can crowd out serious policy attention to education, healthcare, employment, and economic fairness.

What is the way forward?

- Keep liberty, equality, fraternity, secularism, and justice at the center of public life.
- Ensure equal protection under the law and respect for India’s linguistic, religious, and cultural diversity.
- Treat constructive criticism and citizen participation as strengths of a mature democracy rather than threats.
- Pair national pride with tangible progress in jobs, social security, gender equality, and opportunity for every section of society.

Reference

[The Hindu | Changing dynamic of nationalism in India]

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