



Literature and national consciousness

Professor Jyotirmoy Guhathakurta was a Bangladeshi educator and humanist. In 1971, he was a Reader at the University of Dhaka, as well as provost of Jagannath Hall. On the black night of March 25, 1971, Pakistani military officers broke into his flat and shot Professor Jyotirmoy Guhathakurta in cold blood after cordoning off the entire Dhaka University campus with tanks, mortars and armed vehicles. The wounded intellectual died of his injuries on March 30, 1971. This article was originally published in 1962 in 'Matters of Moment' and was later reprinted in 'Jyotirmoy Guhathakurta Sharokgrantha'.

National consciousness, unless we twist the expression to mean tribal consciousness which is as old as history, is a comparatively recent phenomenon. It originated in Europe during the Reformation, when the State was separated from the church. It was then mixed up with a new religious consciousness which endorsed the separation and in its extreme form i.e., the Puritan Movement sought to remove all intermediaries not only between the state and the individual but also between God and man. But National consciousness, which was originally defensive, was little more than the instinctive love one feels for one's own community strengthened by allegiance to the newly organised Nation trying to defend itself against the forces of Counter-Reformation. National consciousness evolved into Nationalism or the Cult of Nation in Germany during the Napoleonic regime in the early nineteenth century. The idealisation of the Nation-State, a distinctive feature of German culture, was the result of a widespread feeling of frustration among the Germans who had been struggling without success to carve out a Nation-State ever since the sixteenth century. Fichte, the romantic prophet of German Nationalism wrote:

"The Germans are the (chosen) people,

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Professor Jyotirmoy Guhathakurta (1920-1971).

metaphysically destined, possessed of the moral right, to fulfil the destiny by every means of cunning and force."

Thanks to the spread of liberal education under the British, National consciousness in the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent has been on the whole free from the trait of aggressive nationalism. The Hindu National consciousness under the influence of Bankim, Tilak and Arabindo came perilously close to the Aryan past, the deification of the historic-geographical entity, Bharat. There was also the added stimulus from the victory of an Asiatic nation in the Russo-Japanese war. But the Gandhian cult of non-violence and liberalism of CR Das acted as brakes to the nationalist zeal of the extremists. The liberal trend in Hindu Nationalism was the direct consequence of achievements of the men of the Bengali Renaissance such as Rammohan, Madhusudan, Vidyasagar and Tagore. With them, National consciousness was just another name for the instinctive

love of one's own country and her life-giving traditions which they all tried to reevaluate, each in his own way in the light of western rationalism.

The beginning of Muslim National consciousness may be traced in the anti-British Wahabi Movement which paradoxically enough was supranational in character. The Wahabi has been described as "Anabaptist in religion and red-republican in politics." Toynbee has described them as zealots who were up against everything modern. The Wahabis were, however, the first terrorists of India and took prominent part in the peasant revolts in Bengal against the indigo planters. They were puritan and were highly critical of the hybridisation of Muslim culture in the eastern parts of India. The more intellectually and spiritually gifted leaders of the Khilafat Movement tried without success to launch a freedom movement with a view to establishing a caliphate in the Muslim world in the beginning of the twentieth

century. There is a tendency in certain quarters to trace the origin of the Pakistan movement in the ideas of the Khilafatis. The argument runs like this: The Muslim League when it was first founded was more concerned with jobs for the educated Muslim and separate electorate than independence from British Raj. The spirit behind the Lahore Resolution, 1940 was therefore a new thing altogether. Wasn't it the same spirit that moved the Wahabis and the Khilafatis? To my mind, the new spirit at work is the spirit of the new middle class which had already begun to assert, a class which was brought into existence by the pioneering efforts of Sir Syed Ahmad and which was the Muslim counterpart of the English-educated Hindu middle class intelligentsia. Deeply rooted in the spiritual traditions of Islam, Sir Syed realised, as Rammohan had done half a century earlier, that without western education which they had hitherto ignored, the Muslims of the subcontinent could not make much headway in a world completely dominated by the scientific and humanistic culture of the west. If there is any progenitor of the Pakistan movement, it is the Aligarh movement. There was no trace of the politico-cultural medievalism of the Khilafatis in the temper and outlook of the leadership of the Pakistan movement, which grew as the Hindu Nationalist movement gathered momentum. It grew as an "opposition" in a bid for its legitimate share of political power.

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