

book review

Of State and Nationalism

by M. S Prabhakara

India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality by Sanjib Baruah; University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1999; pp xxiii + 257, \$36.50.

COMBATIVE and polemical in its tone and substance, this passionately engaged but dense narrative challenges the received concepts of the State and Nationalism as articulated in Indian nationalist discourse - a structure and an idea invested with an immaculate, eternally valid and near-mystical properties. The narrative does not claim to be, and indeed is not, a dry, impersonal and normatively detached academic exercise either.

On the contrary, the author makes clear in the introductory chapter his committed engagement as an "interested and implicated observer". Baruah is indeed deeply involved personally and professionally in the memories and experiences of his narrative - as an "ethnic Assamese" (a term he says he is uncomfortable with even while using it) at a personal level, and as a political scientist teaching in the United States at the professional level.

The focus of the narrative is the Brahmaputra Valley, historically the core of Assam. However, the narrative also touches on the peripheral areas of this core which once formed a part of what one might call the "geographical Assam". These peripheral areas were politically, economically and culturally in varying degrees of proximity and distance from the core, the relations marked by amity or hostility or indifference and ignorance. Indeed, the present problems plaguing Assam cannot be understood except in the context of the historical process of the changes in the very physical contours of Assam.

A crucial element of these changes which has a bearing on the present situation is the widely shared perception among the majority of ethnic Assamese that they have only been passive spectators, if not the pre-destined victims of conspiracies hatched by foreigners and outsiders which they could barely comprehend, of these developments which have fundamentally affected their land and their history, their past and their future.

Chapters 2 to 5 dealing with the geographical and territorial background of the growth of Assamese nationalism delineate these changes and the underlying rationale of both the colonial regime and independent India. The process involved an artificially imposed enlargement of the territory of the Province of Assam by the colonial regime and, since Independence, an insensitive imposed process of progressive dismemberment of the State of Assam. Integral to this process was migration into Assam, the last land frontier providing opportunities for those enterprise enough to seize them, and its inevitable impact on the demography of the region. These developments

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have posed grave challenges to the concept and, even more importantly and irrespective of its "empirical validity", the self-perception of the Assamese as a distinct and internally coherent people, a nationality within the broader framework of a pan-Indian civilisation and the Indian nation-state, a jati, and to use Baruah's expression, a "sub-nation". (The Assamese word jati, meaning a people and a nation, has a significance going far beyond the relatively restricted meaning the term has in other Indian languages.) THESE chapters together chart the historical and ideological terrain which provided fertile ground for the anti-foreigner agitation in Assam. A notable feature of the narrative is that it brings together diverse themes from sources which one would not normally tap, as for instance, the interesting analysis of the songs of Bhupen Hazarika, to reinforce some of the arguments and to weave together the complex political and ideological landscape in Assam and the rest of northeastern India, where received notions and ideas of nation, nationality and sub-nationalism continue to be in contestation.

What one misses, however, is an equally in-depth treatment of the economic issues of development and underdevelopment that have contributed to the tensions. Indeed, the argument about the failure of the centralised Indian state and, concomitantly, of the necessity of a federal arrangement to overcome the tensions between the nation-state and disaffected nationalities (or sub-nations) overemphasises the organisational features of the Indian dilemma and fails to look at the far more serious structural weaknesses arising out of unequal relations of production and distribution. The sharp and telling analysis of the superstructural contradictions and weaknesses does contrast with the relatively weak treatment of the corresponding contradictions in the sub-structural material base. The rest of the narrative deals with the agitation itself, and the other ideas and forces that are causally related to the Assam agitation. The chal-

lenges posed by the insurrections in the core territory of Assam by the United Liberation Front of Assam (to India) and by the Bodo agitation (to Assam and in its later stages, to India) and together to the neatly contrived concepts of sub-nationalisms of India's States and less well-defined regions and peoples existing in manageable and manipulable relations of violently articulated tension and understated complicity with the great nationalism of the Indian nation-state are yet to be resolved. Implicit in the analysis is the belief that even if these were to be eventually managed, the issues raised will not disappear and are likely to take fresh forms and manifest themselves in other areas.

The above is a necessarily selective summary of the themes of the book. However, its real subject is the larger dilemma postulated in its very title - India Against Itself. This is a dilemma that is self-evidently as much an Assamese dilemma as an Indian one in that the various people of India, even those whose repudiation of Indian nationhood is apparently absolute, continue to negotiate, sometimes in violent confrontation and sometimes by making openly opportunistic deals (the two processes are not mutually exclusive - a working arrangement to live together in that necessarily flawed structure, the nation-state of India).

Is that admittedly flawed structure worth defending? Does it, can it, engage its citizens in any reasonable dialogue? Setting aside the Indian dilemma, is the very concept of a nation-state, what Baruah characterises as the "contingent and contested nature of nations and nationalities", and the dismissively derided process of "nation-building" in societies that have emerged from centuries of colonial rule worth one's loyalty? Can a nation-state sustain itself without the ideological prop of aggressive and exclusivist nationalism? Is there a necessary dichotomy between "nations" or "peoples" on the one hand and the "nation-state" on the other as categories that have a right to self-determination, that holy Wilsonian cow

which is lined up with remarkable selectivity only when existing post-colonial states striving to consolidate themselves as nation-states are confronted with separatist movements? Formulations on the "declining relevance" of the nation-state inform the argument of this narrative throughout. Linked to this is the sharp criticism of "nation-building" both as an envisaged objective and as an operational exercise. Given the fact that India and Assam is the theme of the narrative, it is perhaps natural that the criticism in this regard is made only in respect of these processes as they are at work in nation-states that have emerged from colonial rule. The obverse side of Baruah's often valid criticisms of unilaterally imposed exercises in "nation-building" is the process of re-colonisation that is also at work in these entities, often with the complicit support of civil society structures and non-governmental organisations heavily funded by the West. This broader agenda which stares one in the face when one sees them at work in societies ravaged by war and starvation, appears never to have been questioned. Not to put too fine a point on it, the single minded objective of the U.S., the one and only imperial power since the end of the Second World War, has been the effective debilitation of other nation-states - except of course of itself and those under its wings. Even in the latter case, a weakening is sought, although this is problematic, as is evident in the rivalries among the U.S., the European Union and Japan. The major part of the task was accomplished with the destruction of the Soviet Union and the dismantling of the "existing socialist states" of Eastern Europe. Unlike earlier battles, this battle has not directly involved weapons of war and the physical occupation of defeated territories. Rather, apart from the systematic subversion and appropriation of international instrumentalities like the United Nations and the World Trade Organisation (WTO) to serve the national objectives of the U.S., the most effective weapons have been ideological and technologi-

cal ones - the beguiling promises and visions of consumerism and the so-called liberalisation and globalisation.

This is not to question the destructive, even self-destructive, potential of nationalism. An Indian scarcely needs to be reminded that the culmination of the national struggle was as much national independence as national slaughter. Indeed, the current ascendancy of Hindutva nationalism can be causally linked to the symbols and forces mobilised during the national struggle. However, to argue that the excesses of rampant nationalism of the Indian state in northeastern India could have somehow been mitigated if only the Indian polity had a working federal system, seems such an inadequate remedy to the horrors the narrative has delineated with such passion. Only the wilfully blind can fail to see the horrors and cruelties perpetrated by the very structures and organisations and individuals, who, while themselves being victims of rampant nationalism of the Indian state, posit against it even more restrictive and exclusivist sub-nationalisms. One last point about Baruah's treatment of what he calls "cultural politics of language". A key element of Assamese nationalist discourse is the position of the Assamese language in the province and the State of Assam at all points of its constitution and reconstitution, and the contested relations between Assamese and Bengali before and since Independence. The standard view of the "fears" about the future of the Assamese in their one and only homeland is that those who have migrated (or more accurately their descendants) left Assam from former East Bengal (legal), former East Pakistan and present day Bangladesh (illegal) being Bengali-speaking would, over a period of time, outnumber the indigenous Assamese-speaking people, thus endangering the very existence of the people and their tongue. Baruah cites the observation of C.S. Mullan, the superintendent of the 1931 Census in Assam, on migration into Assam of "land-hungry Bengali immigrants, mostly Muslims, from the districts of

eastern Bengal and in particular from Mymensingh". The culmination of this process, envisaged in metaphors of war and invasion, would be that in another 30 years, it would not be improbable that "Sibsagar district would be the only part of Assam in which an Assamese will find himself at home". This reading has for long been a favourite text of Assamese nationalist discourse. It was also a constant in the polemics of the leaders of the anti-foreigner agitation. Baruah, however, notes that the critics of the agitation find Mullan's "fears" to have been misplaced. "Contrary to Mullan's mischievous prediction," Baruah quotes one such critic, "the entire East Bengal Muslim peasant community adopted the Assamya language as their mother tongue."

It is surprising that the real nature of the "fear" of Assamese nationalists about the present and putative future identification of their home language is missed on both sides of this polemical divide. The fear is not that the descendants of erstwhile migrants will, at some point in the future, claim to be Bengali speakers, and thus reduce Assamese speakers to a minority in Assam. Rather, the real fear is that this section of the population, most of whom have been probably using Assamese for at least two generations, will not merely continue to speak the language but indeed claim it as their own, stealing away, as it were, a crucial cultural patrimony which defines the Assamese people. This is the significance of the inscriptions on the graves of those killed in the Nellie massacres of the 1983 elections - the overwhelming majority of whom were of East Bengal origin - being in Assamese.

Incidentally, and as seen from the perspective of this reviewer from his present domicile, similar are the "fears" of the Afrikaners in South Africa about the future of Afrikaans under a democratic dispensation and without the kind of state and official patronage it enjoyed under apartheid. However, the real "fear" is not about the future of Afrikaans as such, but that the language, like so many other claimed symbols of Afrikanerdom cherished as the unique patrimony of the white Afrikaner, is being taken over, used or abused in vibrant and independently creative ways by other people who, despite their historic contribution to the growth and development of Afrikaans had been despised and made outcasts under apartheid. Closer home, one thinks of the grand escension with which a creative endeavour by Bengali Muslims used to be greeted not so long ago by those who too viewed Bengali language as their own unique and exclusive patrimony. How things have changed! For, if Bengali as a language and literature has any future at all in the long run, it will have to be in Bangladesh, where it is the national language, unlike in India, where it is only one of several.

essay

Ataturk's Influence in the Independence Struggles of Subcontinent and its Later Effects in Bangladesh

by Mohammad Nurul Huda

BY the independence struggle of the subcontinent we intend to cover a period of somewhat two hundred years that started with the advent of British rulers in this part of the world. However, in a way this history dates back to prehistoric era if we take into account the waves of invaders who came to this mysterious and mystic part of the East ranging from the coast of the Bay of Bengal to the heights of Hindukush mountains bordering Afghanistan over the ages. The Muslims who came and conquered the entire land around the middle ages also converted it into their dear homeland as well, which is why the history of the subcontinent now legitimately narrates them as children of its soil. This is also true of the earlier settlers who were different in colours, shapes, cultures, religion and pattern of living, but did not hesitate to accept its varied grounds as their homeland. This subcontinent no more exists as a political entity, rather it is now loosely federated as a regional concept of socio-cultural and political cooperations under the nomenclature South Asia, consisting of seven sovereign states. The last invaders of this region are British colonial masters who did not hesitate to quit the land as soon as they lost the power to rule the people of this area leaving behind a lost of colonial legacies. The movement of driving them away from the then subcontinent is as old as the start of their subjugation, but

visibly it started in a big way almost one hundred years after losing its grounds to the invading East India Company who had entered the land in the guise of missionaries and merchants, but finally embarked upon their cherished goal of becoming masters to rule the subcontinent for nearly two hundred years. In 1757 the last independent ruler of Bengal Nawab Sirajuddoula lost the battle of Plassey to the mercenaries of East India Company who represented the royal throne of England. The fall of independent Bengal to the Britishers also signalled the fall of entire subcontinent to the colonizers. Likewise the start of resistance in Bengal at a later date also generated the electrifying effect all over the region and the colonial masters had to keep alert almost all the time guarding their safety in Bengal. It is also true that such movements and resistance were mostly geared up by the patriotic Muslim leaders who happened to become immediate forerunner as masters of the area. However, as time passed by people belonging to all communities joined their hand in such attempts to keep the ruling cliques panicky. However, organized resistance grew much later excepting a few localized attempts in the remote pockets of Bengal and frontiers provinces by very small groups. However the year 1857 saw the first organized attempt of an all-out revolt against the Britishers by the native members of the combined British

armed forces, as a result of which a violent Sepoy Mutiny flared up in almost all the parts of the subcontinent shaking the royal throne of the British Raj. However, this mutiny did not produce any lasting results for a good many reasons. The British rulers in collaboration with their local allies came successfully in subduing the unprecedented onslaughts staged by the revolting soldiers who failed to discover a dependable commander to bring laurels for their countrymen as a whole. This futile Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, among any other things, left this minimum lesson for the future freedom fighters of the subcontinent that without an intrepid and uncompromising political leader gifted with strategic military skills to command and reconstruct groups of freedom fighters, no battle can be finally won even in their home ground. Thereafter another one hundred years passed by, before the independence of the subcontinent was regained at the cost of numerous lives and splitting the country into a number of sovereign states following the traditional colonial policy of divide and rule. The final phase of winning spree started in Bengal and other parts of the subcontinent not before the end of first world war. One is tempted to comment that this fighting spirit shaped and accelerated enormously with the news that Turkish Forces had won the battle of Sakarya against the invading Greek army blessed by colonial and imperialist

forces of the West under the charismatic leadership of its charismatic commander-in-chief Mustafa Kemal Pasha. The reason however is not far to seek. The freedom loving people of the world, especially Asia looked in Kemal the image of a conquering hero whom they had been searching for long since. The same optimism was also reflected in the comments of Kemal himself who, after his final victory over the foes at home and abroad, declared that colonialism, would soon loose its ground around the globe. The liberation movement that he led sounded the death-knell of colonialism. It is precisely from this bend of history that Mustafa Kemal came to be identified as the source of a cherished victory for the freedom fighters of the subcontinent. The independence struggle of the subcontinent was essentially a military and political phenomenon, which is why Kemal's primary influence figured as a master strategist and a hero of many battles for his people. However, the wide spread socio-cultural impacts that he left are unmistakable and still pervade the people of this region. So Kemal's influence in liberating the people of South Asia was not localized and timebound, but it is still felt as a pulsating feeling among his lovers. Kemal is no more a name, rather it is an instrument to make a happy present and shape a better future for many of them. This is how he is now a household name in this part of the world. It is also

interesting to note that Kemal's image was first identified by a soldier-poet of the subcontinent, who declared a total war for all-out emancipation of mankind as whole.

This is how Mustafa Kemal Pasha came as a socio-political and cultural link between the people of Turkey and those of the subcontinent. In fact, Ataturk or the Father of Turkish Nation, has gathered the nation of nationalism in an acceptably affirmative way by proposing the idea of rediscovering the indigenous home factors for the people of the third world countries who opted for selfrule on the basis of defined nationalism. This nationalist Kemal transcended the borders of Turkey as an oft-remembered name in most parts of the subcontinent, particularly in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan.

Ataturk became familiar in this part of the world since the second decade of the twentieth century - a time when the freedom loving people of this region were left with no choice other than organizing themselves into an warring nation with a view to launching all-out onslaughts against the imperialist British masters for wresting their own rights to selfrule. Right at this moment, as we had hinted earlier, Mustafa Kemal Pasha had been working wonders by inflicting decisive defeats on the invading occupation army and ensuring the rightful sovereignty for his mother-

land, Turkey, that never fell under any foreign subjugation. He not only emerged victorious against the imperialist invaders, but also won his battle against the internal forces of regression wearing the masks of religious fundamentalism. The struggle against the internal foes was not less significant.

Kemal's victorious image rose to the height of perpetual source of inspiration to the independence loving people of Indian subcontinent, specially the Muslims who discovered in Ataturk a Gazi, whom they loved to adore with all their hearts. No doubt, Kemal's image was discovered by a person no less than Kazi Nazrul Islam (now the National poet of Bangladesh), who wrote the first-ever poem on Ataturk in 1921. Himself a soldier just returned from warfield,

Nazrul found in Commander Kemal his cherished HERO, whom he later called in one of his most celebrated poems (Vidrohi) an eternal rebel, a symbol of an uncompromising fighter who would not give up his sword until he attains final victory.

To be continued

For unavoidable reasons the second part of the fiction Purnimar Raat translated by Mir Walizurman could not be published today. The second part would run next Saturday.

— Literary Editor