



By AMITA KANEKAR

Where's the Nation?

The internal or real face of Indian nationalism is caste, said Prof G Aloysius, while delivering one of the Dr Ambedkar Memorial Lectures this year at the Goa Arts and Literature Fest, 2016, titled 'Retrieving Ambedkar for our Times and Places'.

Prof Aloysius is well-known for his book 'Nationalism without a Nation in India' (OUP, 1998), and its central idea that Indian nationalism has failed to produce a nation in the real sense. A nation, he said, is a modern way for different people to live and develop together. No nation has been around for very long, none from time immemorial. They were needs of the hour, arising specifically around the modern aspirations for liberty, equality, and fraternity. But equality, said Aloysius, is a category that has no meaning in itself. It is inequality that has meaning, with all its history, examples, practises, language, and so on. Equality therefore means the concrete dismantling of inequality. For instance, he added, following the Meiji Restoration in Japan, the elite Samurai class had to give up their traditional privileges in order to forge a modern society.

Nationalism is actually a part of modernity, explained Aloysius; it is a resource for regions that are modernising. But as nationalism moved into South Asia from Europe, it became less political and more cultural. Both kinds of nationalisms were born during the British Raj: the cultural nationalism of the dominant castes who found their age-old privileges threatened by colonial rule, and the political nationalism of the bahujans, who wanted freedom from age-old injustice and discrimination.

In theory, political nationalism is based on fraternity, which implies conscious unity, an 'anonymous camaraderie', where one respects the other as a fellow-citizen of the nation. When I sit on a bus in a modern nation, said Aloysius, I sit on just one seat, leaving enough space for my fellow-traveller, even though I know nothing about him/her. But in India, this doesn't happen—you see people asking people to move elsewhere, trying to hog both seats, keeping their luggage or their feet on the other seat, and so on. Because cultural nationalism is based on only subjective similarities – similar foods, similar festivals, similar clothes, and so on – not conscious unity.



In practice, the cultural nationalism of the savarnas glorified the culture of the subcontinent, which meant its caste culture, tradition and custom, and the supposed 'good old days' before British rule. Political nationalism in contrast was all for change, about political, social and economic rights, and the dismantling of inequality and discrimination. But cultural nationalism won, for the upper castes were both closer to the British and a pan-Indian community. Although the cause of political nationalism had many votaries, including staunch modernists like Dr Ambedkar, they were also local and apart, separated by distance, vernacular languages, and a lack of financial clout; thus they were easier to ignore.

Cultural nationalism won, and the result is stark. In Europe and Japan, many elite privileges were ended in the creation of the nation, but in India it has been the opposite. All privileges continue. Nationalism here is the celebration of ancient custom and tradition. Instead of modernity, argued Aloysius, what Indian nationalism has produced is simply *varnashrama dharma*.

The proof of this is all around us. A modern nation has universal and egalitarian education as one of its fundamental goals, said Aloysius. India however has developed a hierarchy of school boards and infrastructure: CBSC at the top, followed by ISCE and IB, and local or state boards at the bottom; prestigious central schools at the top, and ramshackle municipal, village, and tribal schools at the bottom; schools with horse-riding and swimming pools for some, and schools without toilets, classrooms or teachers for others! The same attitude prevails in the Medium of Instruction policies, with the much-desired English education only in private and central schools, while local and state schools—used by bahun communities—run perforce in the local vernacular. Here Goa goes a step further, by denying bahun their own vernacular, i.e. Romi Concanim, and instead inventing a sanskritised and useless Nagri Konkani to be enforced in state and aided schools.

*Varnashrama dharma*, in short, is anti-national in the real sense of the word. It is the reason why you can have invisibilised communities even in a place like Goa: communities which have never voted, which are yet to enter higher education, still forced to live in semi-bondage. *Varnashrama dharma* is the reason for normalised atrocities, like that of manual scavengers being killed on the job, when they do not even officially exist! The law may say

what it likes but tradition persists. And tradition says that it is fine that there is one standard of life for 'us' and another for 'them'.

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Ambedkar was a true nationalist, said Aloysius, i.e. a complete modernist. But he was defeated by the cultural nationalist politics of the Congress party. Thus, instead of a modern nation based on citizens with equal rights and duties, India has become a centralised and powerful state system, backed by a Brahmanical, pre-modern, and exclusionist ideology.

It is no surprise that many find themselves at odds with this system, whether among non-savarna communities of former British India, or in places like Goa, with our different history and culture. Goans have to locate themselves in their own context and reality, concluded Aloysius, to continue the fight against cultural nationalism and anti-national *varnashrama dharma* today, and for a rationalist, socially inclusive, and egalitarian modernism.

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