

Becoming a Nation and a People: B. R. Ambedkar on the Postcolonial State Formation in India

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With “caste” being increasingly recognized as an international phenomenon rather than merely a national practice, the political thought emerging from the caste system deserves attention, for what is at stake is the experience of inequality as such. My research examines the conceptualizations of caste in Indian nationalist historiography. It critically engages with two main aspects of thinking about “the nation” and “the people”: (1) the sociological and normative claims about nation in nationalist historiography and (2) how these claims (re)configure nation–people dynamics. The study aims to revisit the foundational debates that ensued in the backdrop of the Partition of British India with the formation of the two sovereign nation-states of India and Pakistan to study how caste has been understood in the competing narratives of the nation. In mapping the colonial, nationalist, postcolonial, and subaltern historiographies, the study argues that their insufficient engagement with caste and a failure to treat caste as a political category has generated exclusionary ideas of the nation. Thus, in considering caste as a primary unit of analysis and borrowing from the works of Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, my research explores how counter-hegemonic frameworks can provide a better decolonial vocabulary to understand, reflect, and address issues of inequality. In the process, I also study how the various ecology movements or ecological nationalisms in India have a social basis in peasant and farming communities and tribal and labor populations.

My research, therefore, seeks to problematize the concept of the nation and the language of civilizational antiquity that are often invoked in the dominant narratives in India today. It observes the ideology that drove the anticolonial nationalist movement in India (of the likes of Jawaharlal Nehru, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, Aurobindo Ghosh, and Vinayak Damodar Savarkar) and was marked by a logic of civilizational antiquity: that India as a nation existed since ancient times. In contrast, the voices of marginalized communities like that of Ambedkar (and thinkers like Jyotiba Phule, and Erode Venkatappa Ramasamy among others) differed from such conceptions. Instead of readily accepting the nation as an already existing entity, they emphasized the process of its political becoming. My research explores what this normative process of “becoming” entails.

Situating the debates around projects of decolonization across the Global South in the post-Second World War era, I address the core concerns shared by constitution-makers of India at the time—building institutions that could equally address the domestic and international structures of inequalities and racial hierarchy. In this process, nationalist leaders who were involved in framing the Constitution had to confront the contesting ideas of the nation, often defined contradictorily to other modern, political categories like state, democracy, and the people. Though the meanings of these categories have been the subject of a long debate in political theory, I take recent socio-political movements in India like the Citizenship Amendment Act protests (anti-CAA protests) as a point of departure which renewed the debates on who forms a nation or a people. My research thus focuses on the debates surrounding the nation–people dynamics. In approaching either concepts as not only the spatial and temporal experience of the subject but as carrying contesting worldviews, my research aims to study the processes of formation of the “Dalit-Adivasi-Muslim-Tribal” subjectivities, or minority political identities in general, or “the people” in the present context.