

ANDERSON'S CONCEPTION OF A NATION AS "AN IMAGINED POLITICAL COMMUNITY"

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Abstract

In Benedict Anderson's 'Imagined Communities', he explains what a nation is and how its existence came into being. Following Anderson's contention, one can possibly delve into the fundamental question of 'what is a nation?' Despite the various views on the idea of a nation, the inevitable problem lies within the inadequacy of the answer since there is no objective criterion that fulfills to the definition of a nation.³ But generally, by nation, it is understood and interpreted as a political boundary where large number of people is linked by common elements like language, culture, ethnicity, history, religion and so on. Anderson on the other hand, conceptualized a nation as "an imagined political community— and both inherently limited and sovereign".⁴ This imagination as a successful activity was made possible with the advancement of print-capitalism. Print-capitalism, with the enrichment in the field of communication that takes the form of newspaper and novel has inked in the mind of the people filtering an idea of national consciousness. Hence, communication in terms of Anderson's opinion plays a fundamental role in allowing people to picture themselves not as a disparate population but to see themselves in terms of a unified whole. The present paper is an attempt to specify and analyze some of the issues that has been undermined in Anderson's conception of a nation. The issues are articulated on two accounts—

- (1) The importance of spontaneity of individuals in developing the sense of nationalism and
- (2) The problem of hierarchy in the field information and communication.

The paper is structured into two sections and a conclusion. In the first section, the paper examines some of the shortcomings associated with the materialist fashion of articulating the concept of nation. And in the second section, the paper discusses on how communication to certain degree may fail to cause the arousal of nationalism among individuals.

Keywords: Nation, Nationalism, Imagined-Communities, Print-Capitalism.

Introduction

The concept of nation as Anderson understands "is an imagined political community— and both inherently limited and sovereign".⁵ He uses the term 'imagined' in the sense that, it is extremely unlikely for a person to meet every individual inhabiting within the same political boundary. Here, imagination is not to be confused with fictional conception but rather to be understood as the unconstrained thought of individual. Further, for Anderson, the nation is inherently limited of the fact that the imagined political boundary is finite and beyond it there lies other nation.⁶ And finally, Anderson is of the view

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³ Hobsbawm, 1990, p.5.

⁴ Anderson, 2006, p.6.

⁵ Ibid, p.6.

⁶ Ibid, p.7.

that the nation is the product of the Enlightenment. Here, he views that individuals have the potential to reinvent the application of human reason to withdraw themselves from what is unpleasant or which restraint the self from becoming a free spirit. Accordingly the idea of nation sets apart from the rationality that is coercive and other “divinely-ordained hierarchical realm”.⁷ Hence in this regard the nation is said to be sovereign. The notion of sovereignty also promotes the idea of a shared experience among the people belonging to the same territorial boundary. This shared experience at times is often construed as an outcome of nationalism deduced from the unrestrained form of human reasoning.

The idea of nationalism presupposes a sovereign nation and its definition is often associated with the various ideologies determined by its political and social situation. On the contrary, Anderson claims that the root of nationalism lies within one’s culture. He is of the view that historically, there are three fundamental cultures that furnish the concept of nation in the mind of the people⁸—

- (a) The idea which considers that scriptures like the Latin and the Arabic were the source of knowledge and truth
- (b) The disposition that society is governed by absolute monarch and
- (c) The cosmological and historical sense of time

The form of national consciousness as structured by these types of culture often reproduces authority and ends in advancing certain forms of coercion or restraint to individuals and its way of being in the society. According to Anderson, when these three cultural conceptions are repudiated, it paves the way for the development of a nation with a new sense of “fraternity, power and time”.⁹ This idea of shared affinity as described by Anderson is caused with the rise of print-capitalism. The invention of newspaper and novel printed in vernacular languages was conceptualized as occupying the ability to unify people of diverse dialect under a single vernacular. They are by virtue of vernacularly printed communication and information sources, able to imagine themselves as a part of the same political community. Print languages extend the sense of interpersonal engagement or the reach to the otherness that further creates the platform for a shared antiquity. Anderson is of the view that newspaper and novel works as a matter of symbol that extends possibility to corroborate social relationships. Hence, he claims that “the convergence of capitalism and print technology on the fatal diversity of human language created the possibility of a new form of imagined community”.¹⁰ In the next section, the paper explains the equal importance of the spontaneous being in filtering the sense of nationalism towards oneself that Anderson has ignored in this theory of nation.

Section 1

Anderson taking a radical stance argues that print-capitalism provides the avenue for the establishment of a political community. The political community as claimed by Anderson in a materialist fashion is an outcome of communication that has been circulated in the form of newspaper and novel. Therefore, print-capitalism can be taken as the apparatus which has caused the sense of nationalism among individuals. Here, in Anderson’s explanation people of the same territorial unit are construed as a passive receiver that is manipulated and moved by certain communication and information sources. In

⁷ Ibid, p.7.

⁸ Ibid, p.36.

⁹ Ibid, p.36.

¹⁰ Ibid, p.46.

fact, when we speak of a sovereign nation, it is always implied by the concept of solidarity. Then the related question that can be put forth is ‘how do we attain the solidarity within the nation?’ It is truism that communication and language has its distinctive role in the process of nation building. But, to over-emphasize on these concepts invites various shortcomings. The solidarity of the people apart from language and communication is also maintained by other factors such as individual’s decisions, their rights, freedom, autonomy, etc.

If we relate Gandhi in this context, when he speaks of national independence, he refers to two equally important concepts— “political *swaraj* in the sense of home-rule and spiritual *swaraj* in the sense of self-rule”¹¹ By ‘home-rule’, Gandhi means a sovereign nation and ‘self-rule’ refers to more than the political freedom of the individual. For Gandhi *swaraj* is a very comprehensive concept, he considered *swaraj* as spiritual democracy that involves people’s active participation from grassroots level, its attainment could be possible only when there is the collective spirit of nationalism, social justice, communal harmony, self sustained economy, based on the principles of truth and nonviolence. Likewise, the spontaneous feature as stated earlier, like the individual’s autonomy, decisions, choice, actions, rights, freedom and so on also plays its essential part in the process of nation building. Since, nationalism is not a product of “eternal or natural laws”¹² but an outcome of social progress, the active participation of the individual in the process of the establishment of nation should be incorporated.

The concept of nation as a political community should manifest the idea of human rights and liberty in the political decision-making process. It is the consent of the people in decision-making process that exhibits mutual understanding and co-operation to agree or comply with various factors that may intervene in furnishing the idea of a coherent nation. Further, it indicates not only the rights of the people to participate but also promotes the feeling of social ties. Communication for Anderson is the cause of the awareness of the diverse people sharing the same “language-field”.¹³ National consciousness in this sense, for Anderson is conditional and improvised by the materialistic feature such as the newspaper and novel. Hence, through mutual connection derived out of newspaper and novel, people could establish a collective feeling that assimilates the idea of a nation. But on the contrary, national consciousness towards a nation does not absolutely arise out of exchanging of information through mode of communication but also from the part of internal attributes which includes the sense of belonging, the sentiments, affinity, etc, of the people.

As Guibernau defines, a nation is a “human group conscious of forming a community”.¹⁴ A conscious participation from the part of the individual for a national community will foster a plausible concept of a nation. Therefore, a coherent account of a nation can be constructed when certain consideration of the member’s free and fair participation is legitimized. Having said this, giving attention only to the individual’s perspective is to negate the collective will derived from the shared information and communication. Therefore, the main argument is against Anderson’s underpinning of material conditions for the spread of nationalism. This contention has certain limitation in the sense that it fails to incorporate the other aspects of human that builds the sense of nationalism among individuals

¹¹ Parel, 2001, p.154.

¹² Kohn, 1939, p.1107.

¹³ Anderson, 2006, p.44.

¹⁴ Guibernau, 1996, p.47.

besides the extensive role of communication. In the next section, it is examined that the fallibility of the idea of nation has its ground on communication.

Section 2

Anderson views that when communication in vernacular languages takes place, the candidates are connected and further it develops the possible existence of a “nationally imagined community”.¹⁵ This contention of Anderson in claiming that communication acts as the sole criteria for the inducement of the concept of nation to certain extent is misleading. In fact, communication is the source that causes social hierarchy. Here, the idea is that the social reality of human is constructed by various class groups. Accordingly, the accessibility to resources that enlightens our knowledge and belief may differ. Hence, there will be variation in ideas and concepts among participants in the process of communication. Also, it is made obvious and assured of the practice that some individuals or groups of individual will preferably hold some degree of power or authority over other people in society. And this hierarchical event to an extent is caused by language and communication. Anderson’s conception on language for nationalism in today’s context takes the form of social media, mass media and so on. The main ambition in the development of information and communication technology in recent years is to promote equality and to bridge the various socioeconomic problems. Though this has proceeded at the global level, the inevitable problem is that of the ‘digital divide’. Digital Divide is the gulf between the bipolar unit of the privileged and the under-privileged.¹⁶ It is the gap between people who facilitate themselves with abundant knowledge and information through digital media and people who has least access to such.

According to Anderson, communication that is “associated with print technology and the capitalist system of production and productive relations, made nation imaginable and was the central to the formation and spread of nationalism”.¹⁷ Here, the question is ‘can media that circulates information be a legitimate source of nationalism?’ The digital divide as discussed, promotes an unequal socioeconomic atmosphere within individual of the same territorial boundary. Hence, such issues grants less imaginable internal harmony in the presupposition of nation. Nationalism as understood should be a symbol of unity, kinship and equality. It should be the “process of integration of the masses of people into a common political form”.¹⁸ This integration cannot be wholly grounded on communication itself, since communication fails to establish the individual and the collective ties at different economic, social and political domains.

In India the “telecommunication development activities have gained momentum in the past decade or so. Efforts have been made from both governmental and non-governmental platforms to enhance the telecommunication infrastructure”.¹⁹ Though, considerable amount of development has taken place, the huge gap between the urban and rural areas in India is quite noticeable. As a matter of fact, this social dilemma is well pronounced at a wider spectrum of the world. Anderson’s position faces various challenges in associating communication for “spreading and perpetuating national attachments”.²⁰ In fact, it is hard to imagine a political community without a mutual relation and

¹⁵ Anderson, 2006, p.44.

¹⁶ Singh, 2010, p.1.

¹⁷ Meheji, 2007, p.2.

¹⁸ Kohn, 1939, p.1002.

¹⁹ Singh, 2010, p.6.

²⁰ Maheji, 2007, p.3.

unfavorable social condition. Therefore, the relationship between nationalism and communication is only one aspect for the spread of nationalism.

Conclusion

The sense of nationalism is important in building a strong unified nation. This sense of nationalism in constructing a nation should progress from the smaller unit to the larger whole. The spontaneous view and constructive response from the individual towards the idea of nation will prosper only when a pleasant political and social situation prevails and individuals enjoy autonomy, freedom, responsibility and so on. Under these circumstances it is convenient to deduce a well furnished decisions making process whether in a political or social affairs. Nation as a concept seeks to promote the socio, cultural, economic and political situation inhabiting within the geographical area. It aims at integrating all the members to establish a legitimate ground for effective governance. When an effort is made to define what a nation is, the attempt often oscillates in complexity in explicating the notion of shared or commonality that is inevitably tied with the idea of nation. The notion of 'shared' when elaborated corresponds to various attributes in the society. Therefore, nationalism per se cannot itself be determined by a single unifying principle like language or communication. Likewise, Anderson's theory of nation is limited in the sense that he defines language and communication as the objective criteria for nationhood and fails to realize the plural structure of nationalism.

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