



Research Paper

The Element called Nationalism

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ABSTRACT: Nationalism and patriotism are virtues only when the meanings are properly understood and held without crossing the line. These should not become weapons in the wrong hands like the Nazis'. Also, the concept of nationalism should accept the ground reality that for most people nationalism matters no more than their daily bread and butter and it should have an inclusive policy towards this vast majority. To drive home the point, we have taken up two short stories - "Soaba" by the Indian Naga writer Temsula Ao and "Toba Tek Singh" by the Pakistani writer Saadat Hasan Manto.

KEYWORDS: Nationalism, Partition, Insurgency

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I. INTRODUCTION

Recently there was a news report of the Australian Senator for New South Wales Ms. Mehreen Faruqi condemning the Australian government for maintaining a cosy friendship with the Indian government by not registering its protest for India's 'dangerous' nationalist politics targeting civilians who stand against the government policies. There are many quotes against abusing patriotism or nationalism as the Nazis did to perpetrate torture and violence on Jews and others. One such that comes to mind is Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles* where the demigod character Chiron is quoted as saying, "Nations are the most foolish of mortal inventions. No man is worth more than another wherever he is from" (Miller 283). The reason behind quoting it, leaving out so many modern quotes, is to say that the concept is at least as old as Homer's *Iliad* (even if it is retold in a modern version).

We discuss the topic in the backdrop of two short stories. One is "Soaba" by the Indian Naga writer Temsula Ao and the other is "Toba Tek Singh" by the Pakistani writer Saadat Hasan Manto.

Soaba :

As anywhere in the world lack of development, migration, intrusion by others into their land are some reasons leading the Naga world into a Naga insurgency and the counter insurgency by armed forces from the mainland. Both the sides stand for "Nationalism" with their own interpretations of the term. It is in this background that the story Soaba happens in the late fifties.

Intimoa was an innocent guy of a village who wandered from household to household for food and shelter doing menial jobs in return. His name had been forgotten long back and people of the village referred to him as Soaba meaning 'idiot' in the native Ao language. The government forces roped in a band of die-hards as their extra arms to guide them in the difficult unknown terrains and also to provide information about the possible insurgents. These extra arms were called 'Home guards'. In the village there was a leader of this squad by name Imlichuba who preferred to be called 'Boss'. These squads were equipped with vehicles and guns by the government forces and even free rations of liquor. They were running terror, harassing the public at will, often settling old scores. Soaba was fascinated by the speeding vehicles of the squad so much so that he started hovering near the house of the Boss where these vehicles were frequently cited. When this went on for a few

days, the Boss's wife Imtila took pity on him and offered him food and thus Soaba gained entry into their household. Besides running their errands he also had to witness tortures meted out to detainees undergoing 'interrogation' carried out by the drunken henchmen of the Boss. Even Imtila couldn't put up with all this savagery happening in her own home.

On a party night, the party was running wild with even gunshots being fired in the air and so the softhearted Imtila provided Soaba a safe shelter in her room itself. Earlier that day someone from the army headquarters had warned the Boss of a possible attempt on his life by people in his own squad. This was done intentionally by his paymasters to put fear in his mind and hence bring him under control, since they were irked by his wild behaviour of late. The drunken Boss mistook Soaba for a traitor and shot him dead. There ends the story of Soaba.

Toba Tek Singh :

Just after the partition of the country, it occurred to both India and Pakistan that they should exchange inmates of lunatic asylums like they did for prisoners. Bishen Singh was an old inmate confined in the asylum for 15 years. He hailed from a place called 'Toba Tek Singh' and so he came to be called by people as Toba Tek Singh rather than by his original name. His only worry was to know where Toba Tek Singh would go - India or Pakistan, for which no one had an answer. On the day the inmates were being moved, it turned chaotic on the border as many of the inmates were dead set against the entire operation and hence refused to leave their buses for transfer to another. Some of them started running pell-mell in all directions, some of them even stark naked tearing off their garments. Bishen Singh continued with his fundamental question, "Where is Toba Tek Singh - India or Pakistan?" for which still no one gave a decisive answer. The Pakistani guards tried to push him across the dividing line towards India. But he would not move forward or backward without knowing where Toba Tek Singh lay. He stood in the no-man's land on his swollen legs the full night. Early morning hearing him scream, officials on both sides rushed towards him as he collapsed to the ground. There lay Toba Tek Singh between India and Pakistan.

II. THE DISCUSSION :

For the time being, let us reserve the term 'Nationalism' for the overzealous version of it. Both the above-mentioned stories present this nationalism from different angles. In "Soaba" it is presented in a serious mode whereas in "Toba Tek Singh", it is a satirical expression. "Soaba" carries with it the villain element in the form of the Boss and partly his paymasters. In "Toba Tek Singh", circumstance, particularly the partition, plays the role of a villain. The main characters Soaba and Toba Tek Singh personify the common man in the respective stories for whom nationalism makes no sense at all and hence they do not stand for or against such a notion. For Soaba, the speeding vehicles are more exciting than anything else. In a sense, it is his misfortune to be caught in the crossfire between the two 'nationalist' warring groups, each one having its own interpretation of the term. The Boss's wife Imtila symbolises the noble citizens whose hearts bleed for the innocent victims of 'nationalism'. In "Toba Tek Singh", the story being set in a lunatic asylum figuratively carries the critical viewpoint that partition itself is an outcome of lunacy in people's minds. Bishen Singh, though an inmate of the lunatic asylum, does not seem to exhibit an eccentric character but that of an innocent civilian for whom nationalism matters no more than his native surrounding Toba Tek Singh. Finally he stands against 'nationalism' on the no-man's land and then lies dead. In the course of the story, making 'nationalism' a laughing stock with a touch of sarcasm is the highlight. For instance, some of the inmates declaring themselves in the names of some prominent leaders of the time is a subtle way of taking a dig at those responsible for the Partition; two AngloIndian lunatics in the European ward getting worried if a European ward would exist after getting transferred to an Indian Asylum providing breakfast or would they have to be content with the bloody Indian chapathis is a great ridicule of the Partition itself.

III. CONCLUSION

The story lines of these two stories run on different terrains. However both the stories make us reflect on the need of the hour that governments and people have to be enthusiastic about taking nations forward with real progress and not to be over enthusiastic nationalists.

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