

Imagining the Nation: The Notion of Nationalism in Early 20th Century Kerala through works of Sahodaran Ayyappan and Vallathol Narayana Menon

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Abstract

Discourses on nationalism and nationalist movements tend to focus a great deal on the pan-Indian phenomenon. While many authors have acknowledged the apparent drawbacks in such a universalised account of Indian nationalism, along with the identification of the existence of multiple understandings of nationalisms, an effective accommodation of all such distinct experiences is yet to find utterance while discussing 'Indian nationalism' as we know it. This paper seeks to study the idea of nationalism that existed in Malayalam literature. By using textual analysis of Malayalam literature written during the early to mid-20th century, the study addresses the idea of the nation and nationalism that existed in Kerala. Focusing on the works of two authors, namely Sahodaran Ayyappan and Vallathol Narayana Menon, the representation of the idea of nation and nationalism in these texts are critically analysed. The two writers' responses to the socio-economic and cultural situations that prevailed at the time in the country and Kerala, in particular, their ideas of nation and nationalism are examined. It is found that although the two were writing in the same time period characterised by the independence struggle, their responses to key concepts such as freedom, the notion of a nation and nationalism are distinct from each other. While Sahodaran Ayyappan proposes a forward-looking imagination of an ideal nation and

what India's future should look like, he characterises and argues against nationalism as it tends to create hierarchies and divisions. Vallathol Narayana Menon on the other hand presents a conception of nationalism that can be understood at two levels: the pan-Indian version of it at the political level and the Malayalee sub-national identity at the cultural level. However, such a dichotomy is not where one supersedes the other. Rather, it can be understood as a continuum, whereby the Malayalee identity forms a part of the whole Indian identity.

Keywords: sub-nationalism, social reforms, progressive literature, multi-nationalism, Malayalam literature, nationalist movements, nation.

Introduction

India's struggle for independence was a quest for political self-determination from colonial rule along with a struggle for socio-economic justice. The manifestations of such struggles were spread across various parts of the country, these were manifold and each distinct from the other. While there are studies of nationalist movements in different perspectives and aspects of the movement (Bandyopadhyay, 2009) there are fewer studies focusing on regional experiences of Indian nationalism. The prevailing understanding of nationalist movements and nationalism in general, presents itself in an overarching narrative (Das, 1995). Many contemporary scholars studying Indian nationalism have identified and critiqued this mainstream understanding of nationalism in the form of a generalised narrative. They are often critiqued for being elitist and devoting excessive focus and attention to the efforts of a few social elites and thus being partial in their accounts (Guha, 1988). There is a need for a thorough examination of regional experiences of nationalism. Thus, it becomes important to study the specific regional nuances involved in perceiving nationalism as well as the manifestation of nationalist movements in a particular region.

While many authors like Raghurama Raju (1993), Ashutosh Varshney (1993) and others have acknowledged the apparent drawbacks in such a universalised account of Indian nationalism, along with the identification of the existence of multiple nationalisms, an effective acknowledgement of distinct experiences is yet to be accommodated while discussing 'Indian nationalism.' Thus, the nature of the nationalist imagination across different regions, such as Kerala is something that needs further examination.

Literature, as a powerful vehicle of thought, has played a significant role in articulating the national consciousness of the region. In the early 1900s socialist strains of thought developed

alongside the idea of nationalism in Kerala as opposed to ideas that were grounded in religious terms. The press had a major role to play in this, alongside other leaders and social reformers like Sree Narayana Guru and Ayyankali. The Russian Revolution and its ideological mass had a major impact on the people and their imaginations wherein it served as a source of thought and action directed against feudalism.

An exploratory study of essays and articles published during that time can help reveal how there was a general criticism of the dominant nationalist framework where such a revival of the past was characterised by "*jathi-jemni-naduvazhimedavithham*," and caste-aristocratic-feudal dominance was endorsed. Critiquing this, the dominant strain of thought within the state was that the establishment of a unified state should entail a rejection rather than sustenance of such oppressive ancient social set-ups.

Such a distinction from the broader nationalist idea was however not limited to just thoughts but was reflected in the movements as well. Unlike the broader nationalist movement which is often accused of being limited in its efforts to maintain elite leadership and control of the movements, the nationalist movements in the state of Kerala cut across classes and incorporated different groups and sections of the society within it. These movements were spear-headed by the Communist Party of India (Kurup, 1997).

The apparent paucity of regional expressions of nationalism is revealed through a reading of the existing literature on nationalism in India. The question of sub-nationalisms is approached with an essentialist lens wherein they are represented as opposing the version of pan-Indian nationalism. While it is sufficiently clear that not all sub-nationalisms are essentially challenging or opposing Indian nationalism, there is no consensus upon the nature of regional experiences of nationalism. While some are of the opinion that India is an assimilation of multiple nationalisms that came together in mutual consent to form a state (Mishra, 1972), others argue for a homogenous feeling of nationalism that can be extended throughout the country based on factors of a common culture. Another group of scholars are of the opinion that both these ideas of nationalism coexist within groups, wherein the pan-Indian version of it overtakes or supersedes the regional varieties of it (Guha, 1982). Committing to just one of these as a lens to view all varieties of regional sub-nationalisms would mean taking away from the very core of such experiences; the regionality and distinctiveness of each. Maintaining the distinctiveness of regional sub-nationalisms is important in maintaining the supposed 'unity' within 'diversity'. Therefore, it becomes imperative to ground the history of nationalism in a region at a given period of time corresponding to socio-economic and political factors.

This paper addresses the question of how were the ideas of nation and nationalism depicted in writings of prominent social reformers and political leaders of the time: Sahodaran Ayyappan and Vallathol Narayana Menon. While analysing the concept of nationalism in India, both in

theory and practice, mainly two distinct phenomena have been understood – the broad idea of what can be called the secular Indian nationalism that sought independence of the sub-continent and regional sub-nationalisms, or ethnic nationalisms. The study seeks to examine the nature of such regional expressions of Indian nationalism in Kerala. The regional expression of nationalism, here, pertains to the depiction of nationalism by Malayalam authors in their works. It seeks to look at the nature of such a depiction, along with their ideas and perspectives about an ideal nation in general and India's future in particular.

The rest of the paper is divided into four sections: a section that reviews the existing literature on the topic and identifies gaps in the literature, section that discusses the research methods employed in this study, section discussing the idea of a nation and nationalism in Sahodaran Ayyapan's works, and finally a section discussing the idea of nation and nationalism in poems of Vallathol Narayana Menon.

Overview of Existing Literature on Indian Nationalism

While theories of nationalism have been criticised by many owing to its exclusivity to the European experience (Smith, 1983), significant efforts have been put into understanding the concept of nationalism as experienced in the non-Western world. Such efforts have tried to create a singular identity of their country and are not free from criticism either. Discussing the case of Hindu nationalism for instance, Christophe Jaffrelot (2007) notes that, "Reformists, therefore, became revivalists by pretending that, in emulating the West, they were only restoring pristine purity to their own traditions via eliminating later accretions" (2007, p. 7).

Jaffrelot notes an interesting point that, while the Indian intelligentsia admired the West for its social, scientific and legal achievements and wished to reform their traditions along modern lines, they also viewed the West as a threat. At the same time, they sought to retain or 'save' their traditions. Jaffrelot's remarks suggest reform and revival, as terms, to be not coterminous, if not opposing.

This inherent contradictory nature of reform and revival can be read alongside Partha Chatterjee's (1986) conception of Indian nationalism as orientalism in reverse. Here, similar to Jaffrelot's explanation, the reformists recognized the problems with certain customs within Hinduism and sought to change that (indicating the reversal in the problematic where the Orient is no longer non-active or non-participatory). However, instead of doing away with Hinduism and religious practices altogether, they portrayed these traditions as mere layers that were added to the pristine core of Hinduism and thus sought its revival (indicating a retention of the essentialist character of the Orient).

Chatterjee (1986) notes something similar to Jafferlot (2007) in tracing the origins of nationalist thought in India – elitism of the intelligentsia as an essential character. He describes the emergence of such elitism as something inescapable and inevitable as the nationalist movement was led by them and the whole nation followed (Chatterjee, 1986). While the dominant understanding of Indian nationalism follows a similar line of thought, the prevalence and extension of such an elitist leadership in regional experiences needs further examination.

Chatterjee's (1986) attempt at theorizing Indian nationalism tries to challenge what he identifies as a 'modular' understanding of nationalism characterized by objective historical models. However, in doing so, he draws conclusions of nationalism in India as a derivative discourse; limited nature of this argument is pointed out by Raghurama Raju (1993). Chatterjee proceeds to such a conclusion by invoking only one strain of Indian nationalism (the most dominant one): the nationalism of the Indian National Congress. However, the universalisation of this as nationalism in India becomes problematic given the existence of alternate instances of Indian nationalism (Raju, 1993).

Raghurama Raju proposes a shift from derivation or autonomy to incorporation or assimilation while critiquing nationalism in India. However, he leaves behind a clear characterisation of what constitutes an alternate conception of nationalism which needs to be assimilated into the discourse of nationalism in India. The question of regional sub-nationalisms also remains unanswered.

An important point of departure in works on Indian nationalism is the introduction of sub-nationalisms into the mainstream discourse. Amalendu Guha (1984) explains how two kinds of consciousness emerged in India alongside its national process. One, close to what Jafferlot and Chatterjee identify in their works, that is the consciousness among intellectuals that India had enough cultural and geographic unity to be considered a nation. The second was the consciousness about and within religious and linguistic communities, that they too had the cultural and territorial cohesion to be identified and referenced as separate nationalities (Guha, 1984). The context of sub-nationalism, like that of Tamil nationalism, is discussed as a separate case by many scholars. Ashutosh Varshney (1993) follows a similar line of thought in identifying various nationalisms in India rather than nationalism of India. However, he identifies three different types of nationalism: secular nationalism, Hindu nationalism and separatist nationalism. While he succeeds in establishing the effective interplay of the three, his account falls short with respect to sub-nationalisms as he only considers separatist (ones that stands in opposition to the pan-Indian nationalism) varieties of it.

Mishra (1972), on the other hand, presents a different picture of multiple nationalisms. Drawing on E. M. S. Namboodirippad's (1952) remarks regarding people and the emergence of nationalism in India, Mishra suggests that the Indian state should be understood as arising out of

the unity of various nationalities coming together in voluntary consent towards forming a state. However, he notes, “unfortunately, histories of the growth and formation of other nationalities, who together form the Indian nation, are yet to be written from this point of view” (Mishra, 1972, p. 20). Amalendu Guha (1982) adopts a similar point of view. Proposing a union of nationalities, he argues that India’s multiple nationalities attempt to form the Indian nation in its effective convergence. However, he fails to do justice to the idea of regional manifestations of Indian nationalism. By creating an essentialist understanding of regional nationalisms, (as those which are defined in its opposition to the pan-Indian experience), instead of creating a conceptual framework of the multi-national profile of India (as the title suggests), he drives at the construction and development of the pan-Indian nationalism as something that supersedes these. What he suggests is not an effective confluence of various regional experiences, rather the brittle nature of these that crumble at the face of a homogenising pan-Indian nationalism.

There have been however, more recent attempts in studying Indian nationalism that gives importance to specific aspects of it. Bandyopadhyay (2009) for instance, argues for attempts to study nation and nationalism through its diversity rather than a homogenised manner. In his edited volume, the articles included by various authors strongly suggests a pluralist nature of Indian nationalism and touches upon various aspects of the national movement such as the working classes, women and religious identities. There have also been attempts in mapping the regional specificities of the nationalist movement and nationalism in some parts of the country like Semanti Ghosh (2017) and the case presented of Bengal. However, such a comprehensive effort in understanding the idea of nation and nationalism in Kerala is not adequately looked into.

This paper focuses on the idea of nationalism that exists in Malayalam literature and how it may differ from the conventional understanding of Indian nationalism. There are a number of works which examine the reciprocal relationship between the national movement and Malayalam literature in Kerala. Among them, Kurup (1999) discusses the role and significance of Malayalam literature in the freedom struggle of Kerala. He examines how a national consciousness developed among the Malayalis and how it worked as a unifying force against colonialism. P Jinimon (2007) undertakes a similar attempt by studying nationalism through autobiographies of freedom fighters from Kerala. He explains how they provide a robust basis for studies on nationalism, owing to the fact that it situates works in a given time and space. He suggests that such personal accounts that feature in this study hold the potential of reconstructing the history of the nationalist movement in Kerala which goes against the prevailing ‘event based’ or ‘issue based’ accounts (Jinimon, 2007). Although he makes a strong point about the question at hand, Jinimon does not elucidate how it can help reconstruct historical accounts, or arrive at the alternative perspective that he is suggesting. In another work, Kurup explores the class character of Kerala’s national movements. The nationalist movements in the state cut across classes, incorporating different groups from different sections of society and was spear-headed by the Communist Party (Kurup, 1997). James Chiriyankandath explains the relative lack of

success of Hindu nationalism in Kerala. While they made significant political gains in other parts of the country, he argues that their failure to do so followed from their attempt to create a national identity based on religion coupled with their limited idea of Indian culture and society (Chiriyankandath, 2007).

The prevailing understanding of nationalist movements and nationalism presents itself in an overarching narrative. Many contemporary scholars studying the Indian nationalism have identified and critiqued this proposed understanding of nationalism (Varshney, 1993). Even in papers pertaining particularly to the idea of nationalism in Kerala, it is placed broadly within the ambit of anti-colonial movements with emphasis on the communist presence in the state. They mainly study the causes of political and economic freedom; the idea of social freedom as preceding political freedom as an important characteristic of nationalism in Kerala is often left out.

The literature discussed here is a subset of the vast variety that exists. The basic idea represented in most of these studies uses an overarching narrative of nationalism and attempts to point towards, if not achieve, the theorisation of alternate and sub-nationalisms. For a country such as India, studying nationalism, as characterised by diversity (on cultural, linguistic and political grounds) rooted in regional experiences becomes important to pursue. The present paper is also such an effort, with specific reference to the region of Kerala during early to mid-20th century.

Research Design

The examination of existing literature indicates the inadequacy in the representation of regional experiences of Indian nationalism. Mapping histories of nationalism require its contextualisation in a given time period and its prevailing socio-political conditions. Literature produced by regional authors in Kerala presents themselves in response to the prevalent socio-economic and political realities of the region at a given point in history. Involvement in the freedom struggle and mass movements, and political and social causes find expression in the writings of the aforementioned authors. Thus, these writings become a good point of reference for the examination of nationalism in Kerala.

Textual analysis of literature produced in the early to mid-20th century will help examine the nature of nationalism and nationalist movement in Kerala. This includes poetry, prose, novels and essays written by prominent writers. I wish to focus on the works of two authors namely Sahodaran Ayyappan and Vallathol Narayana Menon. An enquiry into their idea of a nation, as well as their view for the future of India will help us gauge the idea of nationalism expressed in their works.

A considerable part of Malayalam literature produced between the early 20th century and independence was written by political leaders and social reformers of the time. Apart from a mode of expression, these writings served as an important facilitator in mobilising masses towards the causes of nationalist and social reform movements and can therefore be used to study the idea of nationalism in the region. The writers chosen have actively engaged in the social reconstruction of Kerala. Vallathol has been a prominent figure in the Indian freedom struggle as well. The two authors have written extensively on their vision for a good nation and their view for the future of India.

Sahodaran Ayyappan, considered to be the first to champion modernity and social reform in Kerala belonged to the Ezhava community, and fought for equality and justice of all sections of the society. A staunch critic of Brahmanical hegemony over social, cultural and spiritual life, Ayyappan sought to fight these factors to enable a complete social upheaval. He wrote on caste issues along with other matters of social relevance in works like *Onapattu* (2001) and *Misram* (2001). He also wrote articles regularly in periodicals like *Mithavadi* and *Sahodaran*.

Vallathol Narayana Menon is considered to be a part of Malayalam literature's triumvirate poets along with Kumaran Asan and Ulloor S Parameswara Iyer. Known as "Desheeyathayude Kavi" or the poet of nationalism, Vallathol wrote extensively on various aspects of the nationalist movement. He was also critical of the oppressive caste system that prevails in the country. He was drawn to the achievements of the Soviet Union and many of his works feature communist ideals like the liberation of the working class (Panikkar, 1957).

Nation and Nationalism in Sahodaran Ayyappan's works

The Ezhava movement or the caste movement in Kerala before Ayyappan's times can be said to be characterised by a religious-reformist form that was championed by his teacher, Sree Narayana Guru. Guru, while criticising the social realities of the caste system, held fast to the metaphysical core of Hinduism, suggesting that a spiritual re-orientation of Hinduism is needed to end the discriminatory practices and ultimately to the inclusion of Ezhavas within Hinduism (Sekhar, 2012).

The more radical strain of this uprising, represented by incidents like the Vaikom Satyagraha, play a central role in the history of the region prior to independence. This stance is largely attributed to Sahodaran Ayyappan who wrote profusely against Brahmanical hegemony, hoping to mobilize the masses against it. Sahodaran Ayyappan was a social reformer and an intellectual who played a vital role in the social reform movement and cultural renaissance in Kerala. A disciple of Sree Narayana Guru, Sahodaran steered the cause of the lower castes away from the broader religious framework to incorporate modern ideals.

“*Onappattu*” (2001) is a poem by Sahodaran Ayyappan that invokes the creation myth of Kerala. The most popular cultural festival, Onam is celebrated for multiple reasons and the manner of celebration differs across communities. Coinciding with the month of Chingam, the first month of the Malayalam calendar, it is considered the celebration of a new year. It is also during Chingam that the paddy fields are harvested, thus it is also observed as the harvest festival. However, another belief is that it’s the occasion of Maveli returning to earth from *patalam* (netherworld). Maveli, is believed to have been a kind and righteous king, who was tricked by a priest, Vamana. Vamana is one of the *dasavatara* or the ten reincarnations of Vishnu, to whom he lost his entire kingdom as he was sent to *patalam* by Vamana. Regional retellings of this mythological story differ significantly. Maveli, the Asura king is often portrayed as acting against the protagonist Vamana whose shrewd and clever actions helped Devas to bring down the Asura king.

The setting of the poem shifts between invoking the glorious past of Maveli’s reign and the poet’s reflection of the miserable conditions of his time.

“When our land was ruled by Maveli

All humans were equal,

A time when everyone was living happily

And no one was faced with any harm”¹

The poet depicts the time of Maveli’s rule as being characterised by social egalitarianism, where differences between women and men or rich and poor did not exist. The first half of the poem is a description of life in this period where social and cultural practices that plagued the early 20th century (when Ayyappan was writing) are absent. Instead, it is described as being characterised by social egalitarianism, an ideal that Ayyappan strongly advocates. Highly political in nature, the poem is a characteristic of the social revolution that was happening in Kerala. Ayyappan, who championed the cause of a complete social upheaval by opposing practices that sustained the Brahmanical hegemony, wrote against discriminatory the practices which prevailed then.

“Theendal and Thodeelu

And other barbaric practices were not present,

There were no meaningless rituals

¹ All the translations of works by Sahodaran Ayyappan included in the section are the work of the author unless otherwise stated.

Or sacrificial killings of animals” (Ayyappan, 2001).

While these examples are used to describe the past, they draw references to the discriminatory and oppressive practices that existed during this time. Staunchly opposed to such practices imposed by Brahmins, he was critical of the oppressive nature of their practices. Theendal was one such ritual which entailed the pollution of upper-caste people who were in the vicinity of those belonging to lower castes than them. Thodeelu is another such practice which entailed the pollution of individuals through physical contact with those in different castes and menstruating women. Ayyapan was highly critical of such discriminatory practices which he expressed through his poems and writings.

One such practice which he criticised through his poems is the Bharani festival in Kodungallur temple. Long before the Temple Entry Proclamation of 1936 was enacted, Dalits could enter the temple during the month of Kumbham. While the origins of the festival are attributed to different reasons, the practices of the festival are symbolic of the untamed rage and energy of oppressed social groups. It is characterised by thousands of devotees dressed in red as ‘*velichappads*’ or oracles who run around the temple premises with sickle headed sabres singing ‘*Bharani pattu*’ – obscene songs hurling expletives at the Goddess. There was also the practice of animal sacrifice where many roosters were killed as a part of the sacrifice. Ayyappan campaigned against this practice.

He identifies a disruption to this social order (characteristic to Maveli’s reign) with the intrusion of Vamana into Maveli’s land. Such an entry of Vamana (a Brahmin priest), he describes, was backed by the jealousy that swept the Brahmins who were determined to hamper the growth and prosperity that the land had achieved under Maveli’s rule. Referring to this moment of defeat of Maveli to Vamana, the Brahmanical priest, Ayyappan (2001) notes,

“It’s this day that marks the beginning of India’s destruction,

Immorality seized the land.”

It is interesting to note how he brings in the idea of India almost suddenly in this stanza. While the first half of the poem almost entirely eulogizes Maveli’s rule, from this point onward Ayyappan makes it clear how the poem is not a simple retelling of history, or invocation of a pride in past glory. Instead, what he presents is a systematic critique of the social issues. The state of India under a Brahmanical hegemony is one where social stratification ushered by *chaturvarnyam* (system of social division based on caste) or the *varna* system divided the people. According to Ayyappan, the times that followed were characterised by the exploitation of the

weaker sections of society and in the face of such deeply entrenched discriminatory practices, the people of India lost their unity and succumbed to colonisation.

Ayyappan then goes on to note that in order to break this cycle of suffering and exploitation we must:

“The evil religion constructed by Brahmins,

Must we drop for our greater good,

Truth and morality are the true religion,

That brings us enlightenment”

“Vamana worship must be put to an end,

We must bring forth the reign of Maveli,

If Onam becomes eternal for us, We will be protected against such plunders”

Maveli’s rule here is symbolic of the ends he wishes to achieve with a social reformation.

Maveli’s rule, described earlier in the poem as:

“There’s no distinction of the poor and wealthy,

Nor the pressure imposed by capital,

Everyone worked to their own capacity,

In a quest to increase the prosperity of the land,

Means for everyone to acquire education,

Was created by Maveli, who was ruling the land,

Men and women enjoyed equal freedom,

How good a fortune is that?”

Ayyappan suggests that in order to undo such discriminatory and exploitative practices we must unite in our struggle against Brahmanical hegemony, only in the toppling of which a society devoid of class, caste and gender differences can emerge. It is in this manner that we can see Ayyappan's vision for the nation is one that is characterised by social justice. In making Onam "eternal" he is suggesting that the values of equality and justice be made eternal. The idea of Onam and Maveli thus become an apt carrier for the imagination of a nation as it is an image which has been invoked through the centuries. Ideas of social justice and nation fused with the idea of Onam in the poem is thoughtful and distinctively marks Ayyappan's attitude towards the idea of a nation.

However, such a revocation of the glorious past is not to be confused with the revivalist tendencies of most cultural nationalisms. In "*Ujjivanam*," Ayyappan (2001) emphasises the human potential to materialise freedom while helping others achieve the same. It is only on achieving this freedom that humans will be able to reach greater heights of knowledge, imagination and creativity. He argues how the "golden time" is not a remanence of past but something humans could strive for.

"The past is not the supreme possibility of humans,

The advancement of humanity would increase in future.

Those who consider that the good old time is past,

*They degrade themselves by having no trust in the future world"*²

In the first half of the poem, he underlines the existence of this potential within everyone in the world and urges the youth to realize this and utilize the same within them to materialize freedom, from both internal and external hindrances. He calls forth the youth of the world to actively work towards helping the enslaved and colonized brothers in attaining freedom.

"Hear the cries of your brothers,

Who are being suppressed by forces of blind power,

You are their only resort,

O brave people,

Free them from that oppressive power"

² Translation by Ajay Sekher. (Sekher, 2012, pp. 207-210).

He continues to express how such an effort for freedom is one that is aligned with a sacrifice, and immense love for mankind. It is interesting to note here that even in the face of colonial powers, his definition of freedom is not limited to merely political freedom, or to that of a group of people. Rather, it is one that is portrayed as common to all people in the world and something for which we have to strive for, not just for ourselves but for others as well. And this, he explains as the ultimate aim of human life. Sahodaran's idea of such an inborn potential within people can be compared to the concept of *atmashakti* as described by Tagore which is evoked by him repeatedly in his nationalist poems and writings and particularly in his 1905 book titled the same. His emphasis on *atmashakti* or self-reliance is crucial to understand his idea of *swaraj* or freedom. And such a definition of *swaraj* for Tagore, akin to Sahodaran's conception of it, is not limited to merely political freedom. Both of them include questions of deprivation, servitude and oppression.

Thus, any sort of social and political hierarchies was seen as impediments to the realisation of freedom for any human or group of humans. Which he discusses further in his poem "*Jatichikitsasangraham*" (2001). In this poem, *jaathi*(caste) is portrayed as an ailment that needs an effective cure.

"Bragging, envy, greed and nationalist rhetoric

Are all symptoms of inwardly drawn caste.

People who bear such symptoms within them,

Are becoming successful by outwardly blaming caste"

He then goes on to explain how in order for the caste disease to be cured, one's faith in caste must be removed. Although the word *jaathi* can be taken to refer to the caste-based discrimination propounded by *chaturvarnyam* within Hinduism, but is not limited to that and can be extended to mean different kinds of human segregation. Thus, voicing against one form of segregation while breeding another within oneself can prove to be counterproductive.

"With the effective removal of belief in caste,

we will for the first time,

see humans as humans,

and be cured of the caste disease"

The essence of Sahodaran's idea in the poem can be understood through the analysis of above lines, to treat humans as humans and not perceive through any classifications. These classifications can be based on caste, class, gender or nationality according to him. Very similar to this is Tagore's conception of nationalism which has the concept of an underlying human unity at its core.

Sahodaran's assertion of it is to highlight the absurdity of divisions created between humans. According to him, anything fostering such hierarchies and segregations needs removal. In his list of such divisions, nationalism also finds a place. Tagore in his critique of nationalism is dismissive of the Western notion of nationalism, with the modern nation-state at its heart. He is critical of the nation state as the facilitator of brotherhood, in place of *samaja* or society where the *prana shakti* or life force of India rests as opposed to the state in the case of the West. Tagore then moves onto the issues on of universal human unity. However, nationalism in the political realm presents itself in stark contradiction to the value of human unity according to Tagore. He presents this contradiction in the idea of "the spirit of the West and the Nation of the West" wherein he emphasises the opposing nature of Europe's humanist tradition and its aggrandising nationalism (Bhattacharya, 2016).

Similarly, in his essay *Bharatvarsh Ithihas* in 1902, Tagore presents the idea of India as being characterised by syncretism, one that accommodates plurality and diversity. However, in the decades that followed, he wrote the contrary as he observed casteism and communalism entrenched in the politics of nationalism in India. Tagore can be seen counterposing this reality against the unifying spirit and syncretism which he associates the Indian civilisation with. (Bhattacharya, 2016).

He believed that although India at one time welcomed all peoples and cultures, from the middle ages when Brahminism acquired a centrality, Hinduism built for itself a system of barriers. Its nature was to forbid and to exclude. (Bhattacharya, 2016, p. 43).

It is interesting to note how Tagore, akin to Sahodaran, stresses the egalitarian nature of society (India in case of Tagore while Kerala in case of Sahodaran), the disruption of which is associated with the increasing importance of Brahminism. Ayyappan, similar to Tagore sees nationalism as something coming in the way of realising the human unity wherein, the realisation of a larger picture of human unity is blocked out by the creation of categorisations and distinctions ushered in by ideas such as nationalism.

Sahodaran's idea of a nation is largely described along the terms of a vision of an egalitarian society. Implicit in his idea of such a nation is the toppling of the Brahmanical hegemony and the

doing away of social and cultural practices that impose serious impediments to such equality. In his poem “*Mishram*” (Ayyappan, 2001), castes in India are conceptualised as different colours that got intermixed to form different hues, but now seek to maintain their distinctiveness. However, it is imperative that these colours, will interact with each other to form newer shades. This concept of *mishram* needs to be read alongside his endeavour of *mishrabhojanam* (inter dining), in which the Namboodiri, Pulaya and all other castes were to come forth to have a meal together.

He received much criticism for proposing the same. It was believed that by dining together with the lower caste Pulaya, the upper caste Namboodiri would be socially polluting. It was also held that instead of bringing the latter down to the level of the other, the lower castes are ought to be empowered to reach the level of the upper castes. In “*mishrabhojanam*” (as cited in Sheeja, 2010) an article addressing the concerns over the same, Sahodaran explains how it is never the intention of *mishrabhojanam* to elevate the educational or financial conditions of a certain group of people, nor is it meant to lower the same for the other group. Rather, it was posed as an unassuming method whereby India’s social relationships could be mended. He argued that the oppositions posed to such an idea present itself under the concepts of purity and pollution, whereby the pure Namboodiri would be corrupted by being near and dining with the impure Pulaya. In reality, it has never been a matter of what is pure or impure rather, that of the upper castes and the lower castes. The two will be pitted against each other in these dichotomies of clean or unhygienic, good or bad, merely based on the caste they were born into. It is this conceived notion of duality that Sahodaran is challenging in this poem.

“We can see in each caste, the presence of varying hues,

Hybrid is the ultimate truth, unmixed or pure is a myth”

This is the idea that flows forth through the poem as well. By dismissing the very concept of something or some group being pure as opposed to another, Ayyappan tries to elucidate that such intermixing and social interactions of humans is imperative and inevitable. It is only due to the presence of social constructs, such as purity and pollution of upper and lower castes, which hinder such an interaction. Thus concluding, that the very concepts that bring in categorisations into upper and lower castes, are in itself a myth. He goes on to explain how *mishram* will decide the unity of India as a country.

“Mishram will triumph everywhere,

And it will also decide the unity of India

Those who oppose mishram

Are opponents of the order of the times”

In the last line of the above stanza, he uses the term ‘*yugadharmā*’ which can be translated to the spirit of the time. However, Ajay Sekher (2012, p. 234), translates this to mean democracy. Considering the time during which Sahodaran was writing was when countries were striving for self-rule. Also considering his championing of the cause of equality, it can be interpreted that democracy is the order of the times that one needed to strive for, in order to ensure the equality Sahodaran envisioned.

In his article “Socialist Party” (as cited in Suresh, 2018) Sahodaran deals with the question of the most desirable form of government. He begins by stating that the basic goal of any nation is the enhancement of the welfare of its people. He further explains a nation that can provide food, shelter, education, employment, recreation and health to most of its citizens is the most desirable. However, he goes on to argue that such an enhancement of the public welfare is not possible under a capitalist government given its inherent desire for accumulation of profits and as a result, is concerned with the betterment of only a few at the cost of everyone else. It is the absence of this very tenet of desire of profits that makes socialism a more fitting system of governance according to him.

He further remarks how for nations, wherein the poor and oppressed make up a majority of its population, socialism is the only solution. Although he commends Russia for what it achieved through revolution, he argues that it is not imperative that socialism can be attained only through a revolution. He suggests that a first step to establish a socialist government will be to form a political party that is based on the ideals of socialism which can further emerge as the majority party in the parliament by gaining the confidence of people. Although this piece was written by him with respect to the possibility of Cochin being granted responsible governance, and does not refer to India as such, it is instrumental in understanding his idea of a nation.

To conclude, Sahodaran Ayyappan’s view on nationalism, similar to his approach to caste, is that of condemnation. He expresses strong disapproval of any sort of stratifications among humans that tend to create hierarchies and result in the consolidation of power within a few people who use that to oppress others. There is a strong presence of humanism in all ideas expressed by him and consequentially, it evokes the universality of that human spirit and deems all classifications that tend to subvert the same as being constructed and maintained for the benefit of those in power; caste, class, religion and nationalism all fall within this spectrum in Sahodaran’s works.

However, although Sahodaran dismisses the idea of nationalism it is not to suggest a utopia where humans govern themselves. Rather, he has expressed his idea of an ideal nation extensively through his works. A good nation, according to him, is one that is committed to the

enlargement of the welfare of its citizens. And this, he believes is possible only under a socialist government.

Nation and Nationalism in the Works of Vallathol Narayana Menon

Vallathol Narayana Menon was one of the triumvirate poets of modern Malayalam literature along with Kumaran Asan and Ulloor S. Parameswara Iyer. He played a pivotal role in the Indian nationalist movement as well as the cultural reformation in Kerala. Vallathol's poems are believed to have created a sense of nationalism within the Malayalam speaking community. He also attributed great importance to the preservation and the upliftment of the language, culture and art forms of Kerala. Consequently, he became the founder of the Kerala Kalamandalam which continues to be a pioneer institute in promoting and disseminating the culture of Kerala (Anandan, 2010).

Vallathol's poems are laden with nationalist imageries whereby the nationalist feeling is invoked by the use of symbols such as the *Bharatmata* (Mother India) and the national flag. The nation is personified as our mother to whom we are indebted and possess the duty to protect. The tone in these poems is idolatry. Written in 1917, "*Mathrubhoomiyodu*" (Menon, 2003a) is addressed to India and urges all Indians to realise their duty in helping other countries who are a part of the World War I. Mother India is pictured as grieving for her sisters: which are the other nations of the world struggling because of the war. It progresses as a monologue that the children (the people of India) address to their mother (India). It highlights the willingness and mentality of Indians to help not only their own country, but also the other nations in the world, despite their state of poverty. With this, he expresses the ideal of sacrifice as something inherent to all Indians.

He claims that the virtues of truth and sacrifice are imbibed in all of us since our childhood, as we grow up listening to the stories of great men who demonstrate the value of these ideals. The culture and history of the people of India is represented as something homogenous, and this sense of shared history makes us similar, and unites our causes according to him.

However, an important thing to be noted is that even while invoking elements of nation and nationalism, the exclusionist tendencies of nationalism are absent in Vallathol's writings. Instead, there is a strong presence of a universal human unity. The national flag is another constant symbol invoked by the poet. Written in 1921, in "*PoraPora*" (Menon, 2003a), Vallathol portrays the swaraj flag conceptualised by Gandhi. The flag was an important part of the nationalist symbols used to mobilise the masses. Though the flag was adopted only in 1931 by the Indian National Congress, it had already become the face of colonial resistance starting from the 1920s (Roy, 2006).

"Made from the yarn we spinned,

And the cloth we weaved,

It is a shroud to the prevailing injustice”

“From huts to mansions,

Let the flag flutter in front of all houses,

May the flag fluttering with vibrant colours,

Invite the liberation we seek”³

His poems eulogise nationalist leaders and the broader nationalist movement. Through these, he urged people of Kerala to come forth and unite in the struggle for the liberation of India.

“*NammudeMarupadi*” (Menon, 2003a), written in 1926, is presented as a reply to people who highlight the various hurdles in realising India’s freedom. Acknowledging the various internal issues that might exist in India, he argues working towards freedom of the country assumes foremost importance.

“Can fights based on religion and caste,

Make a nation not worthy of freedom?”

“Fights amongst brothers is not a fight,

Its just the clearing and mixing up of turbid friendships”

The poem is written in the first person, and expresses the poet’s opinion as to how we should respond if someone tries to wander off from the cause of India’s independence. He asserts regardless of whether one reaches the goal, or succumbs to death midway, one has to always keep going. Any other issues in society such as religious fights amongst the people are merely internal issues that will be resolved by them. These should not be reasons to stray away from the pursuit of the greater goal of independence.

Published in 1931, the poem “*Ettupaduka*” (Menon, 2003b) is a call to action for the people to boycott foreign goods. It highlights the dedication of two people assigned with the duty of creating awareness against the use of foreign clothes. “*Khadi vasanangalkaikkollinevarum*” (Menon, 2003a) is addressed to the people of Kerala and urges them to wear khadi clothes. He

³ All the translations of works by Vallathol Narayana Menon included in the section are the work of the author.

critiques the use of foreign imported cloth and questions why we no longer weave our clothes ourselves.

“Do we not have ten fingers in our hands today,

Are the cotton flowers not blooming habitually?

Isn't spinning yarn in the charka,

As simple an activity as playing with children?

Why then, are we depending on,

These greedy machines for our clothes? □

The time during which he is writing these poems was characterised by the *swadeshi* movement. Imported clothes were central to the swadeshi movement and were targeted heavily by the nationalists as something impure that needed to be boycotted. However, what needs to be noted here is that Vallathol was not arguing against imports, but the economic distress that colonialism was leading the country towards.

Another characteristic feature of the *swadeshi* movement was the adoption of home-spun khadi which symbolised resistance and the national identity. Khadi played an important role in spreading a sense of nationalism. (Baruah, 2001). Vallathol's critique of foreign goods and urge to use khadi made by Indians needs to be understood with respect to his high regard for Gandhi and his philosophy. Khadi is understood as Gandhi's attempt to topple the colonial control of Indian economy and culture. The use of cotton produced in mills was tied to the modern civilisation which was highly critiqued by Gandhi for its industrial capitalism which “valued machines more than humans, where automation is preferred to humanism” (Heredia, 1999).

This, however, is in great contrast to Ayyappan's views on the same. In “*Yuktikalam Onapattu*” (Ayyappan, 2001) he writes:

“As the machines are employed in work, humans are having leisure,

Explorations and education are improving their intellectual caliber.

They realize the fact that spinning the wheel and charka only increases hardship,

And in the name of the poor the elites are seeking their selfish interests”

While both authors address the socio-economic exploitation of the people of India, their views on the same are starkly contradictory. This paradox can be resolved by looking at their principal causes. For Ayyappan, socio-economic betterment of the lower castes assumed greatest importance and thus, mechanisation was seen as desirable as it can enable them to seek education. Vallathol, on the other hand, was threatened by the increasing economic distress perpetuated through the lack of economic activity in India, which was a result of colonial control. The charka, thus symbolised the toppling of such hegemonic control and a boost for economic activities within India.

Although he was as strong advocate of a pan-Indian version of national identity, he was also a strong proponent of the Malayalee identity. His poems invoke a Malayalee identity characterised by elements of language, a common history and its rich cultural and geographical features. Through "*Ente Bhasha*" (Menon, 2003a), written in 1927, Vallathol tries to capture the greatness and immense potential of the Malayalam language. Having close contact with languages like Sanskrit and Tamil, Malayalam is portrayed as having imbibed the features of both languages.

"Other languages are merely dhathris (foster mother),

For man, only his own language is equivalent to the mother who birthed him"

According to him, the role played by one's mother tongue in their intellectual development is as pivotal as the role of mother's milk for a new-born. He argues against the adoption of foreign languages overriding one's mother tongue. According to him, if one were to make actual progress, one needs to gain knowledge in one's mother tongue. If one fails to do this, it is as if we are going back on our duty as children towards our mother tongue: Malayalam. He further urges people who strayed away from their mother tongue to come back to learn their language.

"O intelligent people, work hard for increasing the prosperity,

Of your ancestral house that is your language" □

According to him, it is the vastness, popularity and capability of a native language that decides its people's intellectual and emotional development as well as their progress in other fields.

"*Keralam*", written in 1920 (Menon, 2003a), describes the geographical and cultural features of the region. In "*Mathruvandanam*," (2003a) Menon personifies Kerala as the mother to whom we owe a duty and opines how the various divisions that poses hurdles to the unity of our motherland are terribly transient. Invoking a common and glorious past of the region, he argues

how it is by virtue of being descendants to great warriors and scholars that we have realised our duty to obliterate the factors that divide us and strive for unifying our homeland.

He urges the people of Kerala, to move ahead with these goals set in mind. However, for him, the result of the removal of such negative factors that plague the land is not a novel future, but rather going back to the glorious past

“The ship of time, that always progresses forward,

Will take its travelers, back to the point where they departed from“ □

Vallathol’s revivalist invoking can be seen in the above lines, where he characterises progress as something that takes us back to a glorious past rather than a new future. Writing at a time where the present-day Kerala existed as the erstwhile kingdoms of Kochi, Travancore and the Malabar District of the Madras Presidency, the geo-political space of Kerala was not a concrete one. Vallathol invokes the idea of Kerala from the mythical story of Parashurama creating the land with an axe. By highlighting the geographical features and cultural practices that distinguish the region, he invokes the idea of a distinct cultural identity of Kerala.

Thus, Vallathol succeeded not only in invoking the feeling of being an Indian within the Malayalam speaking community, but also in creating a solid ground for the Malayalee sub-national identity is imagined upon. His poems stresses upon the importance of such an identity and urges the Malayalam speaking community to realise, embrace, and enhance the distinct cultural features of their community.


However, such a sub-national identity was never in opposition to, or challenging the pan-Indian national identity. Rather, it is always represented as one which is a part of the whole. In *“Chora Thilaykkanam”* (Menon, 2003b), he describes the distinct features that characterize Kerala in great detail. He stresses on the centrality that Kerala assumes in the minds of all Malayalees that makes them always gravitate back to their homeland. However, such an importance rendered to Kerala is not something that overrides our identities as Indians. Rather, it is a call to Malayalees to realise their duty in devoting their knowledge, power and goods owned towards the progress and liberation of India.

“That pure entity, whom the southern sea washes with devotion,

The land we are born to is the holy feet of that great country,

We are the ones worshipping the feet of the pure land of Bharatam“ □

“Our soul should fill with pride when we hear the name of India

And our blood should boil inside our veins when we hear the name of Keralam“ 

Thus, one can situate two distinct strains of nationalism within Vallathol’s works. While in the political and civic realm, the aim of nationalism as portrayed by Vallathol pertains to our nation gaining independence, and the preserving of our sovereignty, at the sub-national cultural level, Vallathol’s poems create a Malayalee identity based on language, and culture. However, such a dual conception of nationality does not proceed as one assuming more importance than the other. Rather, it is conceptualised as a continuum, where by virtue of being Malayalees and indebted to the protection and progress of Kerala, one is also identified as an Indian.

Analysis

Many scholars have pursued the concept of nationalism in multi-national contexts. While nationalism, in a general sense of the term, is understood as something that progresses with the telos of establishing a sovereign nation state. Nanda (2006) advocates that this is not the case in a multi-national context. In multi-national states such as India, nationalism assumes two levels: the first is the macro level which bears the political connotation and second, the regional level which assumes a more cultural connotation. The concept of nationalism as revealed by Vallathol can be understood at these two levels where, the macro level is characterised by the political nationalism that voices the cause of Indian independence and sovereignty, and the sub-nationalism at the cultural level that seeks to create a Malayalee identity.

It is interesting to note that although Sahodaran and Vallathol as contemporaries, writing almost in the same time period in Kerala, they had their priorities set differently. In approaching the question of freedom, Vallathol gave foremost importance to working towards achieving political freedom of the country and urged everyone and the Malayalee community in particular to partake in the freedom struggle. Sahodaran on the other hand subscribed to a more inclusive notion of freedom and argued for the realisation of social freedom before political freedom.

In his poem *“JatiBharatam”* (as cited in Sekher, 2012), for instance, he expresses how under colonial rule, the lower castes found freedom as it provided respite from the oppressive caste system that proved as a hindrance to their intellectual and socio-economic development.

“The people who were crushed under by Arsha Hindu order,

*Found their freedom in the unfree India under colonialism”*⁴

⁴ Translation by Ajay Sekher. (Sekher, 2012, pp. 242-245).

However, this is not to say he did not consider political freedom as unimportant. He urged people to come forth and struggle to free India from the shackles of oppressive colonial rule. However, such a call to action was not fuelled by the motive of nationalism, but because he accorded great importance to freedom and believed it as a pre-requisite for human development. On the other hand, Vallathol believed that internal inconsistencies are not to be considered as hurdles preventing us from achieving freedom. Rather, these were just problems among brothers that should not divide us or make us stray away from realising the common and greater cause of Indian independence. While analysing the difference in perspective of the two authors, one must also take cognisance of their individual social realities. Belonging to the lower caste himself, and having witnessed injustices of the caste system, it is only justified that Sahodaran gave importance to these concepts and argued against others.

In their vision for a nation and for India's future, Sahodaran represents a forward-looking vision for India that will be void of all the evils. He also argues that one's past is not the supreme possibility of humans. Vallathol on the other hand, is reminiscent of a glorious past and vouches for going back to it. He highlights the achievements of our ancestors and stresses on our capability to reach the same.

Even in these differences, being Malayalees themselves, both Sahodaran and Vallathol invoke the reign of *Mahabali*. However, the nature of such an invoking is also different. While Ayyappan equates the comeback of Maveli's reign with the resurfacing of the kind of social egalitarianism that existed then, Vallathol metaphorically signifies the arrival of Gandhi as that of the arrival of *Mahabali* and thus, being as important to us as the arrival of Onam. Sahodaran, on the other hand, would not approve of such an equation as Gandhi, for him, upheld the *varna* system and represented the Brahmanical imagination of the nation following Hindu religious revivalism. These were all things Sahodaran argued against (Sekher, 2012).

Such a distinction is maintained in their approach to nationalism as well. Kumar (2010) proposes a dialectical quality of nationalism whereby it is simultaneously constructive and destructive. Similarly, it is also described as being inclusionary and exclusionary at the same time. Vallathol's and Sahodaran's invoking of the idea of nationalism can be understood along this dialectic. While Vallathol's works highlight the inclusionary aspects of both the political nationalism at the pan-India level as people who share the same culture along with that of the sub-national Malayalee identity on the basis of language and culture, Sahodaran highlights the exclusionary aspect of it which tends to override the universal unity of humans that he proposes.

Conclusion

Even amidst the differences between the two authors, the underlying point to be noted is the presence of a regional expression of nationalism that is distinct from the pan-Indian nationalism.

There have been many efforts to study the nature of nationalism in India and numerous works highlight the existence of multiple perspectives in understanding nationalism in India. Analysing the work of two prominent authors of the time Sahodaran Ayyappan and Vallathol Narayana Menon, the aim of this study was to undertake an effort to try and understand how authors in Malayalam, imagine and represent a distinct idea of nation and nationalism that is shaped by cultural and social factors of their region as well as their own realities. In particular, it focuses on the depiction of the same through literary works written in the early to mid-20th century at the face of colonialism. Thus, for a country like India, considering its diversity in cultural, linguistic and political grounds, it becomes important to discuss nationalism as characterised by diversity in regional experiences and expressions of it. While the plausibility of arriving at an account of nationalism that incorporates all regional nuances is difficult, it is certainly a good starting point to acknowledge the distinctiveness of each regional expression and can possibly encourage more scholarship on the same.

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