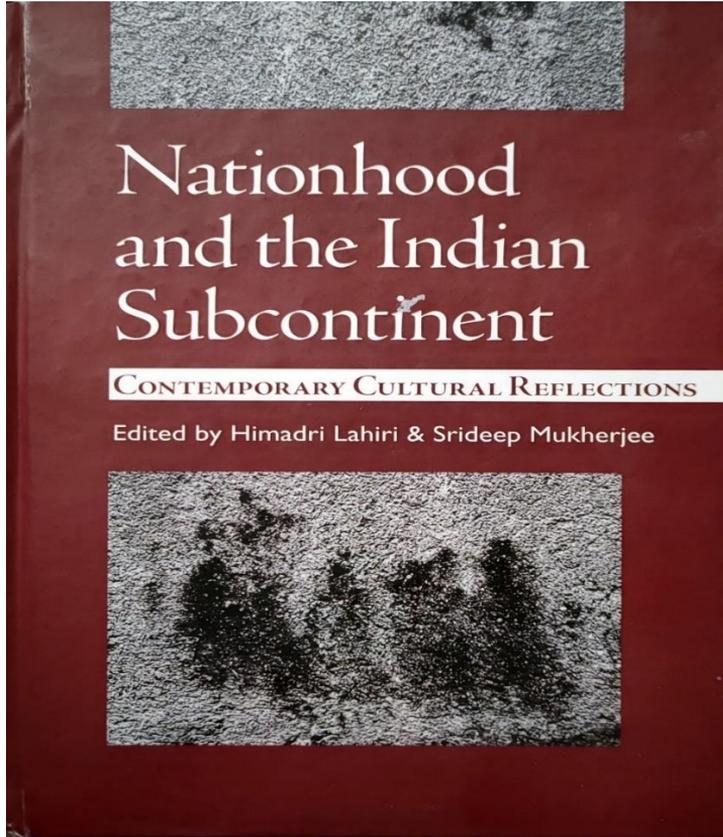


Himadri Lahiri and Srideep Mukherjee (eds), *Nationhood and the Indian Subcontinent: Contemporary Cultural Reflections*, Kolkata: Centre for Language, Translation & Cultural Studies, Netaji Subhas Open University, 2025, 349 pp. ISBN: 978-81-968283-6-3.



The idea of the nation in the Indian imagination, as a subject, continues to provoke interesting and engaging deliberations, and it is no exception that the book under review, *Nationhood and the Indian Subcontinent: Contemporary Cultural Reflections*, brings together a total of fifteen chapters and three conversations variously dealing with the conceptual, spatial-temporal, structural, ideological, and expressive dimensions of nationalism(s) in the larger context of the Indian subcontinent. However, what makes this book possibly stand out from others is its engagement with the various manifestations of cultural nationalism thereby exploring the more problematic and unresolved issues swerving towards the extreme ends—exclusivist and hegemonic—of nationalism. Therefore, given the fact that, like democracy, nationalism too has its own share of undesirabilities, it

is crucial to dissect its ever-new presences in global and local scenarios, and explore the often-conflicting and contradictory aspects associated with it. With these aims in view, the book undertakes a near-detailed analysis of cultural nationalism in six sections, with each one focussing on a particular aspect of its many manifestations within the Indian subcontinent.

The first section “Nationalisms: Trajectories” contains two chapters: Himadri Lahiri’s “Cartography of Nationalism in India: A Study through Cultural Tropes” and Syed Badrul Ahsan’s “History, States, Politics: The Nationalism Question.” Lahiri’s chapter discusses three generic tropes associated with the proliferation of nationalism across modern-day India, namely, Bharatmata, Ramrajya, and the figure of Mahatma Gandhi. The conflation of patriotism with the sacred benignity of motherhood began as a trope in Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay’s novel *Anandamath* (1882) and has since then constituted a long tradition of visualising the nation as the mother goddess, as expressed through the works of Indian poets across languages. In a similar vein, the figure of Mahatma Gandhi was invested, in the early years of the twentieth century, with a divine aura signifying suggestive associations with Rama and Shiva. These configurations, however, underwent significant transformation, as explored by the chapter, in post-Independent India. The other chapter, by Ahsan, explores the complex interweaving of religion and language towards the fashioning of various nationalism(s) within the Indian subcontinent. It explores the multiple articulations of nationalism—Bengali, Baloch, Pakistan, and Indian—to drive home its continuing relevance and pervasiveness across space and time.

The second section “The Indian Subcontinent: Space and History” features three important chapters. “Indianisation of Southeast Asia and Bengali Travel Narratives: Towards a Creation of New South-South Paradigm” by Pratim Das, “Statelessness and Border-crossing in Chitmahal Narratives” by Koushik Goswami and Mili Das, and “Fractured Lives, Fractured Lands: Bioregional Issues in Select Texts of Amitav Ghosh” by Vidya Merlin Varghese. In his chapter, Pratim Das brings about a renewed understanding of “Indianisation” through a historical exploration of various factors, most notably, trade and the expansion of Hinduism and Buddhism, that led to vigorous cultural exchange within and across the Asian continent. The author elaborates upon this newly envisioned South-South paradigm with reference to the revisionary outlook of the Bengali travelogues and thereby emphasises the symbiotic patterns of cultural relations, as existed through the connected histories of the two regions. The chapter by Goswami and Das shifts readers’ attention from the wider theatre of intercultural dialogue to a more entrenched phenomenon of “chitmahals,” which are enclaves inhabited by “stateless people” living along the India–Bangladesh border. The narratives delineating their identitarian struggles form the point of discussion in the chapter where the authors attempt to map their position of statelessness through the lens of “trans-territoriality” and “proxy citizenship.”

The third chapter of the section, by Varghese, focuses on the Sundarbans and explores its position as a “bioregion” threatened by a host of natural and human-induced factors. It bases its arguments on an analysis of three Sundarbans-centric novels of Amitav Ghosh, namely, *The Hungry Tide* (2004), *Gun Island* (2019), and *Jungle Nama* (2021).

Entitled “The Indian Subcontinent: Nations and Their Fragments,” the third section comprises three chapters that explore the structural fissures and dissonances within the imagined entity of nationhood through sustained engagements with selected genres of contemporary poetry from the Indian subcontinent. In her chapter “The ‘Invisible’ Net: Resistance in Post-Abrogation Kashmiri Poetry,” Debamitra Kar explores how the act of writing poetry could be an effective medium of resisting the hegemonic imposition of “invisibility” and “precarity” under ultra-rightist forces. She particularly draws attention to the growing popularity of the virtual mode as the medium for propagating what she calls the “post-Abrogation writings of the Kashmiri poets.” Sravani Biswas moves eastwards in her chapter “Post Partition Identity Politics of Assam and a Literary Mode of Resistance” and interrogates the complex web of semantic entanglements associated with the term “Bangladeshi” in Assam and, by extension, with the group of people signified by the appellation. She further analyses the emergence of a new genre of protest poetry written in the dialect spoken by the East-Bengal-origin-Muslims settled in Assam, and explores its significance as a counternarrative enabling the community to carve a space of their own. Srideep Mukherjee, in his chapter “Of Sullied River(s): Resistant Notes in Contemporary Indian Poetry,” captures a moment in history—the recent worldwide pandemic COVID-19—and the spatial thematic of the river to depict how cultural expressions of the people have the power to transcend the extent of governmental indifference and articulate narratives of pain and disconcertment arising out of sanctioned isolation and deprivation from the necessities of life during the pandemic.

The fourth section, “The Indian Subcontinent: Nation and the Gender Question,” comprising four chapters, documents the continuing relevance of the female-principle within the overarching narrative of nationhood in South Asia. In her chapter on “Gender, Disability and Nation: Conflations and Negotiations in the Indian English Novel,” Rimjhim Bhattacharjee conflates the notions of gender and disability as experiential dimensions to show how they are conceived and perpetuated under the dictates of an ableist and patriarchal authority defining and delimiting the nature of the Indian body politic. Using insights from Critical Disability Studies, the author discusses selected Indian English novels to locate and map the twin trajectories of gender and disability navigating through the troubled history of the postcolonial Indian nation. The second chapter of the section, “Nationalism and Gender: Ascetic Masculinity, Hindutva and Female Political Participation in Indian Nationhood,” by Bisweswar Chakraborty,

explores the contentious engagement with the aspect of gender as a component of nationhood, and how specific notions of masculinity and femininity were coopted within the nationalist discourse—with the attendant demarcations of space and codes of conduct—across the successive periods of anticolonial struggle and post-Independence consolidation of majoritarian politics under Hindu nationalism.

Moving beyond the borders of India, the chapter by Sharmistha Chatterjee titled “Her Story: Scripting the Nation in the Works of Contemporary Women from Bangladesh and Pakistan” studies a few selected short stories by women writers from the two countries to show how these works have exposed the binary entrapments of gender discourse to situate the agentive participation of women as independent stakeholders of the postcolonial nation-building process. Oindri Roy’s chapter “The ‘Intimate’ Contours of a Nation: Tracing the ‘Ghare-Baire’ Conundrum across a Century” takes the aspect of “love-triangle” for analysis vis-à-vis the novel and two film adaptations of Tagore’s novel, and examines its progression within the interface of nationalism and physical intimacy—both mediated by changing perception towards women inhabiting the liminal space between the home and the world.

The fifth section on “The Indian Subcontinent: Nation in Media and Performance” contains three chapters respectively engaging with the multimedial representations of nationhood through theatre, film, and journalism. M. Shakhaawat Hossain and Tusar Talukder’s “Syed Shamsul Haque’s *Payer Awaj Pawa Jay*: The Quest for Bengali Nationhood” situates the role of theatre in exposing the dangers of religious fundamentalism in a country like Bangladesh founded on the secular ideals of culture and language. The chapter by Zenith Roy, “*Main Hoon Kaur*: The Hero and the Mirror of the Nation in Hindi Film Songs,” documents the shifting representative dynamics of the Hindi film hero as represented in songs attributed to him, which in turn reflect the changing sensibilities of the ruler and the ruled across the history of the Indian nation. The last chapter of the section, “The Menace of Fake News in India: Some Case Studies” by Arijit Ghosh, dissects a crucial malaise in the world of journalism through an analysis of selected stories of recent times, and presents a panoramic view of the ways and means to detect and counter the evil effects of misinformation and misrepresentation of facts. The final section of the book comprises three “Conversations” with three cultural personalities from the theatre and film world. They talk about their on-ground experiences of negotiating through the complex contours of nation and nationalism in Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan.

To sum up, the edited book *Nationhood and the Indian Subcontinent: Contemporary Cultural Reflections* is a courageous endeavour to locate, map, and understand the complex entanglements of nationalism and cultural politics across the troubled histories of the region. Marked by penetrative insights, the chapters

in the book have touched upon the major areas of engagement within the broader domain(s) of studies on nationalism, and thus it has made a significant contribution to the already-thriving critical-academic discourse on the subject.

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