

Independence Day Essay

Corporate Nationalism in the Age of Dystopian Democracy

Pramod K. Nayar*

The intersection of state and corporate interests, rather than the intersection of the state and the public good characterizes the new nationalism. 'Make in India' enables local corporates and industries, rather than public enterprises, to flourish.

*Department of English, University of Hyderabad. Email: pramodknayar@gmail.com

To say, as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000) do, that national sovereignty, especially in the case of newly independent nations in Africa and Asia, is undermined by global forces of capital is to articulate one side of the equation. We also live in the age of compulsory and affected, even if not affective, nationalism. National symbols, anthems and military apparatus are now deemed to be integral to how we *feel* about the nation. This odd contradiction of amplified, compulsory nationalism and an eroded national sovereignty generates variants of the national itself.

What is the 'national' today?

The nation's formal organizational expression, the state, incrementally withdraws from the domain of the public good. The *demos* that is the basis of democracy is more a burden than a duty. The shortfall in terms of budgeting for public services – think of the falling education budget every year – indicates a loss of state interest in the *demos* itself. Instead, the state organizes itself as a facilitator – and this is a truism in the age of neoliberal lives – for the corporations. In such a context, the nation itself, one begins to suspect, reproduces, brands and constructs itself along lines determined by global forces, trends and ideologies. Commentators have termed this corporate nationalism, wherein 'the politico-cultural nation of the nineteenth century has been replaced by the corporate-cultural nation of the twenty-first century'. Corporate nationalism, first and foremost, may be conceived of as a new variant in the representations and practices of the nation. The intersection of state and corporate interests, rather than the intersection of the state and the public good – there was once an Indian Chief Minister who called himself a CEO, marking the merger of two entities – characterizes the new nationalism. Data collected by the state for instance, can be easily sold to private interests. 'Make in India' enables local corporates and industries, rather than public enterprises, to flourish. We then have a category of 'business-friendly' governments thus proving the existence of corporate nationalism (we do not hear of 'people-friendly' governments, do we?).

The Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Government of India seeks to build Brand India, orchestrated by the India Brand Equity Foundation. Although one ostensible task is to ‘promote and create international awareness of the Made in India label in markets overseas and to facilitate dissemination of knowledge of Indian products and services’, it also serves as an instance of the nation-branding exercise built around corporate and business interests. When there is such an insistence on the nation-as-brand, corporate nationalism ensures that any critique of corporate culture or state-corporate relations – witness the recent *EPW* crisis over its reports on the latter – can immediately be termed ‘anti-national.’ This is because the operational logic of corporate nationalism is: what is good for business is good for the nation. War – which maximizes profit for the arms industry – is nationalist and protests against deforestation by corporates, anti-national. University campuses require battle tanks and war memorials to instill patriotism, but their campaigns against corporatization, removal of subsidies and questionable development models that damage the ecosystem – far more rooted, literally, or so one would think – or displace the poor are anti-national.

The privatization of education, health, social services and even the military in the name of the nation’s progress is a feature of corporate nationalism. Support for the nation is no longer coded as the forgotten and mythic meanings of the freedom struggle, the constitutional and political commitment to equality and rights, but rather as support for corporate driven and uneven development, often purchased at the cost of foundational freedoms.

Corporate nationalism extends its power of branding into other political and cultural realms as well. For instance, the attempt to ‘brand’ BR Ambedkar and the Dalit as ‘their’ icon by various political parties demonstrates the leveraging of identities for national (but not necessarily nationalist) purposes. Cultural critic [Lauren Berlant](#) points out:

when the national stereotype represents a "minority" person, the ambivalences of the culture that circulates the form are brought to the fore, for the national minority stereotype makes exceptional the very person whose marginality, whose individual experience of collective cultural discrimination or difference, is the motive for his/her circulation as a collective icon in the first place.

The appropriation of marginalized identities into national iconicity is surely, then, savagely ironic given how national symbolisms and national histories have excluded certain segments from their narratives and it is precisely this iconic exclusion that makes the subaltern and ‘internal other’ appropriable for the national symbolic.

With the rise of corporate nationalism, national identity hinges upon and occasionally thrives on demonstrating its ‘fit’ into global corporatized regimes of value - economic, political and cultural. This could be instantiated in seriously frightening projects such as disinvestment, the withdrawal of subsidies and reduction of investment in public goods and services – policies and measures in line with recommendations by global powers such as the IMF or the WTO, the structural scaffolding of global capitalism. In terms of an insertion into the international regime of values, we see the advent of ‘international’ and ‘global’ schools, hospitals and organizations,

whatever their pedagogic and curricular practices, working conditions, demographics or their origins might be. These, over time, accrue an image of being in tune with the global. From a different domain, the IPL as a ‘global Indian’ brand can be readily interpreted as a spectacle that embodies corporate nationalism. The global standard, from emission norms to institutional ranking, is what sells the nation’s many organizations, services and products to its own citizens.

Conversely, the MNCs localize themselves more than the home-grown corporate bodies. Whether it is through décor or local festivities or that radical concept, Corporate Social Responsibility, the global writes itself across and into the local. National and local specificities do continue to shape global production and consumption processes, from labour to pricing.

The state apparatus expends a considerable amount of time and energy to attract global investors. There is rivalry within the nation to attract such investors through, say, SEZs, tax sops, promises of greater flexibility in corporate policies, etc. National identity, it would appear, is contingent upon global corporate presence within its territorial boundaries for the sake of economic benefits to its citizenry. True nationalism for the state, then, would be to attract global investment for the advantage of its citizenry. When, for instance, successive governments of various ideological hues seek disinvestment of public corporations, or approve the setting up for *foreign* educational institutions with the laughable aim of improving *local* education quality, we see the practice of corporate nationalism. In terms of tertiary educational institutions, a major factor in institutional ranking for Indian institutions is the extent of internationalization of the campus – in terms of foreign students and foreign faculty, but also collaborative projects.

Novels that win, or are shortlisted for, global prizes such as the Booker acquire instant local celebrity status. The author-as-national-pride becomes precisely that because of a publication with, say, Bloomsbury, which distributes her/his books globally. S/he is corporatized by publishing houses, literary festivals, promotional tours across the globe and becomes a national hero ‘back home’. Indian students in various institutions overseas are interviewed, and their institutions indirectly marketed, in educational supplements in, for instance, *The Hindu*. Their interests, track record and successes are instantiations of the global Indian’s success, albeit fueled by foreign scholarships, aided by foreign institutional placements and structures and even foreign pedagogy. We can, then, justly take national pride in them.

In corporate nationalism the symbolic boundaries of the nation-state lie rather messily inside and outside. For one, national identity is also referenced in terms of the Indian migrant success story. From children of migrants winning Spelling Bee contests to Indian-origin senators and parliamentarians who make it to the echelons of First World governments, the Indian migrant is a matter of national pride too for extending the ‘idea of India’ to beyond the territorial borders. Their stories get woven into the national success story.

A national brand, then, is one that includes elements of the global and the transnational, whether it is in the domain of education or sports. That this branding is both state-sponsored and corporate-sponsored is what enables the making of a corporate nationalism. Increasingly, IPL and the various sporting Premier Leagues, co-owned and co-managed by Indian and foreign

corporates, are absorbed into the ‘national symbolic’ and become as branded as the already existing set of national symbols.

Corporate nationalism also furthers something else. In the place of mythic national codes – of, say, patriotism, belief in abstract ideas of cultural heritage or memories of the freedom struggle – it corporatizes these same abstractions into visible products of consumption. The amplified nationalist rhetoric espoused by corporate bodies, national projects sponsored by corporate bodies and national symbols displayed by corporate bodies, whether this is the ‘Make in India’ campaign or flashing the national symbols on their logos. The collective availability and appropriation of the extant national symbols now expands to include, one could say, corporate symbols such as KFC and McD, the IPL and Bollywood, all of which have the global localized and the local internationalized *through* the merger of state apparatuses and corporate interests.

This does not imply a rejection of the new model of nationalism or the internationalization of India. However, it is the nexus of the new nationalism with corporate interests and the withdrawal of the former from the essential strengthening of public institutions that places an interrogative over the corporate nationalism of the 21st century.

References

Berlant, Lauren. 1994. ‘America, “Fat”, the Fetus’, *boundary 2* 21.3 (1994): 145-195.

Hardt, Michael and Antonio Negri. 2000. *Empire*. Harvard UP.

Silk, Michael L, David L. Andrews and C.L. Cole. Ed. 2005. *Sport and Corporate Nationalisms*. Oxford: Berg, 2005.