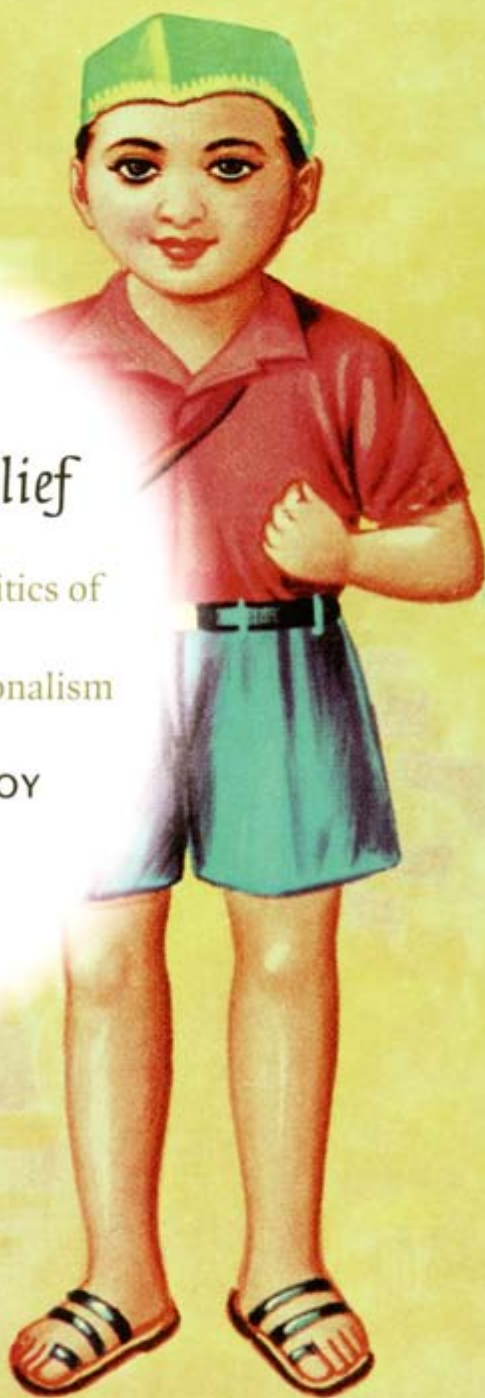




Beyond Belief

India and the Politics of
Postcolonial Nationalism

SRIRUPA ROY



BEYOND BELIEF



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Beyond Belief

India and the Politics of
Postcolonial Nationalism

SRIRUPA ROY

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PREFACE AND
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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This is a book about history “from above.” The narrative unfolds in the center of a capital city. Its protagonists are powerful elites and dominant institutions. Its inspirations are boredom and dust; the boredom that is associated with listening to official speeches, signing forms in triplicate, reading ponderous slogans and incomprehensible bureaucratic jargon, and wondering why anyone bothers in the first place. The dust that, months after a trip to the National Archives of India, spills out of my notebook in a sleepy Massachusetts town and reminds me of all the files that I eagerly waited for, only to receive a crumpled slip of paper with the terse notation “NT”: not transferred.

This is a decidedly unfashionable book to write at a time when we know that if history is made from above, then it is undone from below; that for every dominating center, there is a subversive margin. It is written with the conviction that if we want to breathe new life into these tired clichés, then we cannot look away from the how and why of the making and the centering. And so this book is an exploration of the project of nation-state formation in postcolonial India; about how the state worked to define the meaning of India and Indianness, and in the process constituted a distinctive and authoritative identity for itself; about how, why, and if it succeeded; and about how it is only through understanding the complex modalities of this past making that we can begin to understand the present unmaking and envision a future remaking.

The historical institutional questions of nation-state formation were far from my mind when I began the field research for my doctoral dissertation in 1997. Rather, I was interested in understanding the contemporary rise of Hindu nationalism and in evaluating the nature and significance of its challenge to established patterns of political authority, social structure, and national identity in India. What did the ascendancy of an ethnic nationalist movement that sought to recast national identity along religious majori-

tarian and monocultural lines mean for the future of Indian secularism and democracy? The research questions reflected my disciplinary location in political science, where the task of the researcher is to find causal explanations for novel and disjunctive sets of “current events.”

The research questions also reflected a personal curiosity. Although I grew up in India I had been living in the United States since 1988. The significant political, economic, and social transformations that had taken place in India over the decade of the 1990s—the liberalization of the socialist economy, the shift from a one-party dominant political system to an era of unstable coalition governments, the increasing assertiveness of lower-caste and regional political parties, and of course the emergence of new vocabularies and practices of national identity—had for me occurred at a distance, and I was eager to make sense of the unfamiliar now of India.

Although my research focused on one particular aspect of change, namely the replacement of the secular and pluralist formulation of nationhood by a new understanding of India as a Hindu nation, I was equally interested in the broader political, social, and economic realignments that had variously played a role in the emergence and consolidation of Hindu nationalism over the past decade. The theorization of national disjuncture and transformation was thus the central concern of my research project: as I initially understood it, to explain how we got from “there” to “here” would be the primary burden of my fieldwork.

I soon ran up against a problem of benchmarking. To substantiate the thesis of Hindu nationalism (and the “new India” in a more general sense) as disjuncture, an engagement with the preexisting national project was in order. The inquiry into national identity transformation in late-twentieth-century India begged a prior question: transformation of and from what? The answers to this question were surprisingly elusive. There is a rich body of historical scholarship on the Indian nationalist movement in the colonial period. However, most studies end at or around the moment of Indian independence in 1947, and thus do not take forward the story of nationalism “after midnight”—the production of national identity in the newly sovereign nation-state of India. Although many other aspects of order and change in postcolonial India have received sustained attention, the realignments of national identity and the transformations of nationalist discourses and practices that attended the imagination of India as a sovereign nation-state after 1947 are conspicuously understudied. There is a profusion of sharply defined and fiercely defended normative opinions on Indian nationalism in the postcolonial period: the “Nehruvian national project” as it is commonly

glossed in reference to the distinctive ideological vision of the first prime minister of the independent nation-state (1947–1964). The existing discussions reproduce either a nostalgic lament for a prelapsarian, “golden age” of pluralist and inclusive national identity, or its polar opposite of a sweeping condemnation of the state-dominated, centralized, and “top down” project of nation building that took place during this period. In both cases, normative evaluations take precedence over a systematic exploration of the project itself.

For the most part, questions of nationhood, nationalism, and national identity have emerged as topics of sustained scholarship only in the 1980s and after, as scholars have turned their attention to the Hindu nationalist movement. There are several reasons for this gap in knowledge. Arguably the main reason why the story of nationalism after midnight resists analytical telling has to do with the perception that it is a story that is only too well known and understood; that is, simply put, the view that there is nothing new or interesting that can be said about the Nehruvian national project, except as the contrastive backdrop or “lineage” of the present.

The timeliness of such an inquiry is another concern. In India, as in other parts of the world, the authoritative role of the nation-state as a determinant and coordinate of individual and group identity is presently being called into question by ongoing global transformations in economic and political structures and relations. In such a context, a study of the mid-twentieth-century project of state-centric nationalism runs the risk of irrelevance: scholarly attention is mostly directed to the unmaking rather than the making of nation and state.

The problem of conceptual fit is another deterrent. Like its counterparts in other national contexts, accounts of Indian nationalism focus primarily on the mobilizational energies and impact of mass-popular social movements that have contested the state such as the anticolonial nationalist movement prior to 1947 or Sikh nationalism, Tamil nationalism, and Hindu nationalism in the postcolonial period. The study of the postcolonial national identity project, where state institutions, structures, and agents played a key role in elaborating and consolidating the understandings and practices of nationhood, cannot easily or readily be accommodated within this conceptual terrain of nationalism qua social movement.

Finally, there are also the significant empirical obstacles to this line of inquiry. Although the postcolonial state exhibits the same frenzy for record keeping as did its colonial predecessor, it is another matter altogether when it comes to the actual practice of collection, preservation, systematization,

and archiving. Official secrecy, bureaucratic neglect, the lack of a centralized record-transfer policy, and scarce resources have all combined to ensure that the experience of archival research on postcolonial state policies is a particularly bewildering and frustrating experience. From this perspective, the reason why the project of postcolonial national identity has been understudied has to do with the paucity of systematic records and information available to the contemporary researcher.

The missing archives soon became the main preoccupation of my research. I found myself spending most of my time devising elaborate strategies to prise records out of the steely grip of the state. I defined a successful day of research by physical rather than cognitive discovery: Would I be able to get my hands on that file? Apart from these pragmatic concerns, the information that I did locate on the processes and practices of the Nehruvian national project gave me considerable room for pause. The postcolonial imagination of nationhood in pluralist and state-centric terms—the distinctive means by which it was reproduced along with the political costs and opportunities of the pluralist, state-centric national imagination—pushed to be considered not as a causal prehistory of the present but as an active making in its own right. What had started out as a temporary detour to collect background information thus took on a life of its own. The result is the book that follows, the story of what happened to Indian nationalism after midnight.

In telling this story I engage with several questions of general theoretical and practical importance. First, what distinguishes the world of nation-states from other possible worlds? The nation-state has been the primary and constitutive unit of the “world polity” for more than half a century, ever since the international system was reconstituted under the sign of the United Nations (and its economic counterpart of the Bretton Woods system) in the aftermath of World War II. The normative exemplar of this age was the discretely bounded nation-state, the territorially delimited expression of the coincidence of political authority and cultural essence. I take seriously this issue of coincidence or the hyphenated structure of the nation-state; accordingly, I answer the question about the nation-state’s distinctiveness by delineating the practices of “nationalizing the state” and “institutionalizing the nation” through which nation and state have been conjoined: practices that entail placing the state at the center of definitions of the nation and that emphasize the intrinsic diversity rather than the homogeneity of the nation.

Second, what makes this manifestly produced entity stick? That is, what are the means by which the made world of nation-states comes to be seen as

a found or a natural world? I answer this question not through the familiar route of investigating the internalization and reception of nationalist meaning but instead by documenting how nation-statist practices frame or structure the political and cultural domain. As I establish in this book, the investments and belief of people in the nation-state are less important than how their lived environments and interested actions draw upon and reproduce its categories and logic.

Finally, what does it mean to speak of domination and resistance; the freedom and the unfreedom of identity practices in the world of nation-states? I answer this question by moving beyond the state versus society dichotomy that addresses such questions through determinations of who or what is exercising power and according to which the state is invariably the agent of domination, while resistance can stem only from spaces outside the state's reach. I argue that the state is not as monolithic or coherent as accounts of its omnipotent reach make it out to be. The dominant ideologies of nationhood are reproduced and sustained not just by state officials and institutional fiat but also through the "coproductions," strategic appropriations, and contestations of nonstate actors. Moreover, as I endeavor here to establish, the inclusive embrace of cultural diversity—through policies of multiculturalism and other institutionalist attempts at recognizing and tolerating the differences of group identity—can equally perpetuate inequities in relations and structures of power.

Although the intellectual enterprise is usually characterized as a long and lonely individual effort, in the case of this book only the former holds true. I have had the luxury of writing this book in amazingly good company, and I have benefited from the unstinting intellectual generosity, friendship, and inspiration of many individuals.

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It is my deepest regret that my words will not be read by Nirmal Roy, my grandfather, and Siddhartha Roy, my father. This book is for Dadu and Baba, who lived the history that I tell.

INTRODUCTION

Imagining Institutions, Instituting Diversity

Toward a Theory of Nation-State

Formation

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In March 2002 the western Indian state of Gujarat was the site of an organized pogrom against the Muslim residents of the state.¹ Following the news reports about how a group of “Muslim miscreants” had set fire to a train carriage filled with sympathizers of Hindu nationalism—the ascendant political-cultural movement in India that seeks to reconstitute the nation along Hindu majoritarian lines—a wave of “revenge killings” against Muslims engulfed the state. Approximately two thousand people lost their lives; women were subjected to unimaginable acts of sexual brutality; nearly two hundred thousand were displaced from their homes; and the loss to property has since been estimated to be in the range of 280 million dollars.² Despite the efforts of the state and national governments to depict this event as a spontaneous popular upsurge of Hindus seeking revenge, there is overwhelming evidence that government agencies, law enforcement officials, and political leaders from the ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) were directly involved in enabling and perpetuating the violence. The unforgettable photograph of the terror-stricken face of a Muslim man looking directly into the camera, his hands folded in a desperate gesture of pleading for his life, conveyed to the world beyond Gujarat the intensity of the violence and the fear that defined the experience of being Muslim in twenty-first-century India.

At the time of this writing, four years and one general election after the events of 2002, it would appear that the juggernaut of Hindu nationalism has been halted, or at the very least that attempts to foster and exacerbate ethno-religious divisions among the citizenry—what in India is referred to as the

“communalization” of the body politic—have not reaped any electoral dividends. The Hindu-nationalist dominated coalition government was voted out of power in the elections of 2004.³ The new regime, the United Progressive Alliance coalition government formed by the Congress Party, has explicitly committed itself to a restoration of India’s secular ethos and the “composite culture” of ethnic diversity, promising to “detoxify” educational curricula and replace the Hindu nationalist ideologues who currently occupy leadership positions in a range of state agencies.⁴ Qutubuddin Ansari, the man whose face haunted newspaper headlines four years ago, is today alive and well and living in Calcutta, two thousand kilometers away from Gujarat.

Since summer 2004 a new Kodachrome representation of Indian life has structured the media imaginary. As the exuberant opinion-editorial commentaries accompanying the photograph repeatedly tell us, it signifies the restoration of the “real” idea of India. The photograph is of the swearing-in ceremony of the new national government. A Muslim president from the southern state of Tamil Nadu administers the oath of office to a Sikh prime minister from Punjab, as the leader of his party, an Italian-born Catholic woman, looks on with a gracious smile. The rainbow of diversity couldn’t shine any brighter.

How do we tell the story of the conceptual—and also the political and ethical—distance between these two Indian images and the larger social-ideological formations that they index?⁵ Two opposing explanations have been proposed in recent years, which transpose to the Indian context a general and long-standing debate about the management and accommodation of ethnic diversity by nation-states. The first explanation is an optimistic tale of how the institutional and ideational configuration of India’s “unity in diversity” is strong enough to withstand wear and tear. The argument is that the patchwork of subnational identities that make up Indian culture and society cannot quite so easily be transformed by majoritarian ideological maneuvers. Although the violence of Gujarat constituted a significant rupture in the existing pattern of ethnocultural accommodation in India, the temporal and spatial isolation of the events—the fact that the violence did not spill over beyond the confines of March 2002 and Gujarat—is taken as evidence of the resilience of the institutional and cultural commitments to religious diversity in India, and of the exceptionalism of the Gujarat violence.⁶

Similar observations about the “holding together” of India have been applied to other instances of ethnic mobilization that have challenged the existing configuration of India as a multiethnic nation-state.⁷ For instance, over the six decades of its existence, the postcolonial polity has witnessed the

emergence of numerous ethnonationalist movements, whose demands have ranged from augmenting the exercise of subnational autonomy within the existing federal structure to outright secession as in the case of the Khalistan movement in the late 1980s.⁸ Nevertheless, the territorial-national integrity of India still survives. Moreover, the Indian polity continues to exist as an active and functioning democracy, held together by mechanisms other than force or authoritarian dominance. From this perspective, India represents a success story of diversity management. The complex mosaic of subnational identities constituted along a multiplicity of axes—region, religion, language, caste—has been granted constitutional and ideational recognition without compromising the authority and effectiveness of the centralized state system, and without abrogating democratic rules and practices.

In sharp contrast, the second explanation dispenses with the cyclical logic of the suspension and subsequent restoration of the idea of secular-diverse India, or the view that the violence of Gujarat was an aberrant moment in postcolonial history. The argument here, resembling those offered by Zygmunt Baumann and others in the context of the Jewish holocaust,⁹ is that such events of unspeakable horror do not represent a departure from the norm but instead a confirmation of it. The quick return of the rainbow spectrum attests not to the strength but rather the hollowness of the unity-in-diversity formula of nationhood. In simpler terms, the argument is that India has always been a proto-Hindu nation constituted around an ethno-majoritarian core,¹⁰ and that it uses the rhetoric of diversity as a window dressing. Needless to say, the diversity mosaic presently on display leaves these commentators cold.¹¹

Despite their many differences, both perspectives are grounded in a common set of assumptions—namely that of the endurance of the diversity-embracing idea of India and the considerable influence that it has had on the field of postcolonial culture and politics. Equally, both perspectives share a common silence about the means or mechanisms for the reproduction of such an imagination. For the most part, they assert the contemporary existence of the national imagination without offering any insights into its origins and spread. The proposition that unity in diversity is a central organizing principle of the Indian national imagination is the “negative heuristic” of both sets of explanations;¹² that is, the unquestioned starting point from which assessments of India’s “mosaic nationalism” develop their positive programmatic agendas. The reasons why this imagination has been successful in promoting a tolerant cultural ethos and serving as a bulwark against monocultural nationalist projects—or alternatively, why it has failed to se-

cure substantive equality for individuals and groups and has in fact laid the groundwork for the emergence of Hindu nationalism—are not addressed.

It is this uncharted terrain that I seek to explore by investigating the nation-state formation project in postcolonial India, notably the ways in which the distinctive entity of the nation-state assumed its form, authority, and meaning through the “imagination of institutions” and the “institution of diversity.” The story I tell moves beyond the rigid dichotomies of the “success” and “failure” narratives of the Indian national imagination described above, or the assertion of an absolute difference versus an absolute identity between the secular-diverse and the monocultural imagination of India. I engage instead with the dynamic and fissured political field—along with the political openings as well as the closures, and the structures of domination as well as the emancipatory possibilities—that has been constituted by the postcolonial imagination of India as a diverse nation unified by the labors of a transcendent state.

Things Do Not Fall Apart: Divided Societies and Durable Polities

How, and why, has the ethnically diverse society of India been able to endure as a unitary polity for more than half a century? This question is of considerable relevance in the present global context, where discussions on how best to accommodate, recognize, tolerate, and otherwise manage subnational diversity have assumed renewed urgency.¹³ One strand of scholarship seeks answers in institutional arrangements by focusing on the kinds of institutional-legal-constitutional mechanisms that can best respond to ethnic and cultural diversity without destabilizing the political order. Measures that are seen to protect and nurture the intricate mosaic of subnational diversity with which all nation-states are endowed include constitutional commitments to individual rights along with substantive provisions for the protection of minority rights; the institution of consociational, federal, and other power-sharing mechanisms; electoral-system designs that facilitate the political representation of different subnational groups; and policies of affirmative action or “compensatory discrimination” that redress economic inequalities experienced by members of historically discriminated groups. At the same time, the argument goes, institutional safeguards have to be in place to ensure that an “excess” of subnational identity does not disintegrate the political system, whether through secession or civil war, and that a center can be preserved even as diversity is accommodated.¹⁴

Institutional-procedural arguments, premised as they are on an interest-

based view of individual and group behavior, do not take into account issues of subjectivity, history, and lived meaning: that is, the very stuff of ethnic identity.¹⁵ Instead, they reproduce a thin and hollow understanding of institutions as procedural mechanisms or policy complexes that respond to social and cultural identities. Moreover, the recipe for success appears to be longevity, or the fact that it is only through long-standing and iterated patterns of interaction with these institutional-legal mechanisms that ethnic identities can be “tamed.” Given this conclusion, it would appear that nation-states of recent provenance are condemned to living with endemic conflict and instability. This conclusion seems especially bleak when we add up the numbers of “new” nation-states in the world (those that were established in the mid-twentieth century and beyond): a category that includes vast areas of the Asian and African continents, along with significant areas of Europe that were constituted as sovereign nation-states following the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the reconfiguration of the cold war geopolitical map in the 1990s.¹⁶

Moreover, the thesis of habituation meets its limits in the context of India. The institutional-legal mechanisms for the accommodation of diversity have been in place for only fifty-odd years, and have been so with a considerable gap between “paper-truths” and lived realities, or between procedural commitments and their actual implementation. And in a further repudiation of the requirement of historical distance between episodes of violence and peace that enables the institutional embrace of diversity to function as the taken-for-granted status quo,¹⁷ memories of the protracted religious violence of partition—the “communal frenzy” that accompanied the imperial division of territory along religious lines to create the two sovereign states of India and Pakistan in 1947 that led to the loss of almost a million lives—live on in public culture, albeit in displaced or disguised forms.¹⁸ In short, the case of India poses an empirical anomaly for institutionalist-proceduralist arguments. The question of why things have not fallen apart in India cannot be explained by accounts that focus on constitutional provisions, legal instruments, and institutional innovations alone.

An alternative line of inquiry addresses issues of ideology and belief in recognition of the fact that instrumental rationality and cost-benefit calculations do not determine expressions of group identity. In terms of the “diversity yet durability” puzzle, or the question of how it is that ethnically and culturally fragmented societies are able to generate resilient political orders, the answer is seen to lie in the ideological lineaments of social formations. Instead of the mechanical workings of institutional structures, the “thick”

motivations of human belief, desire, and sentiment are here the focus of analytical attention. The explanatory task at hand becomes one of how an appropriate national identity framework that is inclusive of diversity can be fostered, or what Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, following Habermas, have described as the successful inculcation of a “we-feeling” or a “constitutional patriotism” at the level of the general polis rather than a particular ethnos.¹⁹

However, once again the Indian case presents a significant anomaly. The postcolonial Indian state does not appear to have undertaken a national identity project comparable to the deliberate and centralized project of nationalization undertaken in France that effected the transformation of “peasants into Frenchmen”;²⁰ the concerted propaganda around the figure of the “New Soviet Man” in the USSR;²¹ the heavy investment in ideological resources by the National Socialist regime in Germany;²² or the orchestration of national leadership cults in Syria and Iraq.²³

In India, educational curricula are determined by regional state governments rather than by a centralized national agency. Although until the late 1980s the state monopolized radio and television broadcasts, the pervasive socio-economic inequalities limited considerably their national reach or coverage. Low levels of literacy have militated against the dissemination of national ideologies through “print capitalism.”²⁴ Mostly absent in India is the proliferation of civic-republican images and icons along the lines of those in the United States, where the ubiquitous presence of the Stars and Stripes reproduces “banal nationalism” through everyday encounters with “unmindful flagging,”²⁵ or those in Turkey, where statues of the founding father Kemal Atatürk abound in public spaces.²⁶ Thus it was only as recently as 2002 that the fifty-year-old Flag Code of India was amended to allow citizens the right to display their national flag.²⁷ And while most Indian cities have a statue of Gandhi somewhere in their midst, it is instead the stone testimonies to imperial pasts and regional histories (Victoria in Calcutta; Chhatrapati Shivaji in Bombay) and the giant billboard representations of individual and collective desire (posters of Tamil film stars in Chennai; billboards advertising Nokia cellular phones in Chandigarh) that define the urban landscape.

What, then, explains the cohesiveness of India? What enables the Indian nation-state to endure as a single political unit despite the persistence, and even the proliferation, of subnational diversity? Answering these questions requires a critical engagement with the existing terms of inquiry. To ask about “durability despite diversity” is to reproduce a depoliticized and static understanding of diversity as a pregiven natural reality to which a state can

respond in better or worse ways: a ready-at-hand, self-evident problem that requires a solution. But a problem for whom, and how and why? And whose solution is it anyway? Such questions remain unanswered within the naturalizing paradigm of “diversity accommodation.” Moreover, the modular and isomorphic terms of the paradigm are limiting as well. The problem of racial diversity in Brazil is regarded as a serial replica of the problem of racial diversity in the United States;²⁸ the Indian state’s recognition of religious difference and its recognition of linguistic identity are treated as equivalent, even identical, cases.²⁹ In this manner, the complex, dynamic, and often-incommensurable experiences of identity and difference are relocated within a singular and aggregated matrix of “natural” diversity. The interested origins and power effects of this matrix—the fact that diversity is as much of a “made” as it is a “found” formation—are removed from our line of sight.

Taking a different approach, in this book I advance the hypothesis of durability *because of or through* diversity.³⁰ I show how the naturalization of diversity—the reproduction of a particular imagination of India as naturally diverse—has consolidated state authority in postcolonial India. Ranging from the annual pageantry of Republic Day parades to the documentary films produced by the state-owned Films Division of India, and from the constitutional decision to adopt a particular design for the Indian national flag and a particular song as the national anthem to the texts, speeches, and policy frameworks addressing various aspects of national existence, India since its foundation as a sovereign nation-state in 1947 has been represented in terms of its intrinsic and inalienable subnational diversity—nationhood called up as a mosaic of ethnocultural fragments.

This embrace of diversity was not just a reflection of or a response to a natural or preexisting order. Instead, it entailed the active production of an “institutional pluralism” or the selective inclusion and transformation of group identities into a particular state-supporting matrix of diversity in which only certain kinds of group identities were recognized.³¹ Accompanying this depiction of Indian diversity was the presentation of the state as the successful manager of diversity—the legitimate institutional authority under whose helpful guidance individuals could enjoy security, groups could enjoy freedoms and recognition, and the nation as a whole could enjoy unity and stability. My primary task in this book is to explore the contours of this institutional pluralist imagination in postcolonial India whereby subnational diversity and state authority exist not in opposition but instead as complementary and co-constituted formations.³²

To address this task I document the distinctive modes of reproduction of

the institutional pluralist imagination, or the symbolic, discursive, and material processes through which these understandings of the nation's essential and inalienable diversity, and of the state as the problem solver of the diverse nation, have been consolidated. As noted earlier, many of the familiar techniques and strategies of nationalization are less prevalent in the Indian context, and yet the institutional pluralist, unity-in-diversity imagination has an enduring presence. Explaining this paradox calls for a fresh look at the distinctive project of nation-state formation, or the ways in which a nation-statist identity, as opposed to a national identity, is produced. In fact, an explanation entails supplementing the "national identity" paradigm,³³ and the understanding of the internalized psychological and cognitive workings of ideology that it endorses, with an examination of the externalized effects of nation-statist ideologies—the ways in which presumptive understandings about state, nation, and citizen are reproduced through routine or everyday as well as momentous or extraordinary forms of political discourse and practice on the part of a wide range of state as well as nonstate actors. As Étienne Balibar has argued, "a social formation only reproduces itself as a nation to the extent that through a network of apparatuses and daily practices, the individual is instituted as *homo nationalis* from cradle to grave, at the same time that he or she is instituted as *homo oeconomicus*, *politicus*, *religious*."³⁴ In the chapters that follow, I draw attention to the constitution and working of these networks and practices, and I argue that it is their iteration rather than their credibility, their ability to elicit recognition rather than inspire passion, that consolidate the dominant ideologies of the post-colonial nation-state. In sum, this volume, as its title indicates, is an attempt to retheorize the formation and consolidation of nation-statist ideologies without making the (impossible) claim to know the content and workings of individual belief, or "what is actually going on inside people's heads"; that is, the unstated assumption that informs much of the existing literature on nations and nationalism. To illuminate this issue, in the following section I look at this body of work in closer detail.

Nation, State, and Nation-State

There are varied accounts of the origins of the nation as a distinctive social-political and cultural formation. While some locate the nation in a pre-modern era, others place causal emphasis on modernity, variously defined as a set of social, political, economic, cultural, or ideational changes that took place in Europe between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries. Each of

these perspectives is anchored in a different understanding of national ontology. For those who locate nations in the mists of antiquity, the mytho-psychic character of the nation is key. Thus, for Anthony Smith the nation is primarily an expression of the human need to “bond and cleave,” interwoven with the equally basic and universal human propensity toward desire, fantasy, and emotion.³⁵ The existence of premodern *ethnies*—human groups cemented together by emotions and experiences of shared kinship—laid the groundwork for modern nations, which are seen to represent a reworking and recasting of these premodern formations rather than an entirely new invention.

In Smith’s account, while the difference between the premodern *ethnie* and the modern nation does indeed amount to a significant transformation, it is one of degree rather than of kind. In other less-nuanced accounts, such as those offered by socio-biologists, the nation is similarly conceptualized as an expression or outcome of human psychic and biological urges and drives.³⁶ Although political structure and agency are accorded a role to play,³⁷ the “primordialist” derivation of nations in human biological and psychological impulses (i.e., the formation of kin groups as a response to natural selection, or the deep attachment that kinship and maternal metaphors invariably evoke in all human beings) remains the primary explanation for national provenance, with the nation itself defined in similarly essentialist terms as a basic form of human communal expression.

In marked contrast to this portrait of the ineluctable mytho-psychic or socio-biological nation is the view of the nation as a structural shell that dominates the work of “modernist” scholars, or those who argue for a distinctively modern provenance for the nation. For Ernest Gellner, one of the most well-known proponents of this argument, the emergence of nationalism is best understood as a functionalist response to macrosociological changes set in motion in and through the transformation of agrarian societies into industrial societies.³⁸ In the Parsonian terms of this classic transition narrative of *gemeinschaft* into *gesellschaft*, the nation is a structural-functionalist byproduct of industrialization, encapsulating a distinctive set of modern “pattern variables.” Its emotive content and affective impact—the nation as a community of feeling, or a “crucible of emotion”³⁹—is of less interest than its formal or structural features, as the means and also the outcome of the cultural homogenization “required” by an industrial polity. Moreover, Gellner’s nation is an entity marked by the conspicuous absence of politics and power. In his account, the formation of the nation is unmoored from any conscious or deliberate acts of political agency, and is

theorized instead as an ineluctable and unintended byproduct of structural transformations. The alignment between political and cultural units that is at the core of Gellner's definition of the nation takes place not as a result of the concerted efforts by state elites to create a homogenous national culture, but as a cumulative effect of changes in modes of production, social relations, and political organization.

Other modernist accounts make political agency more causally efficacious. Thus, for instance, Miroslav Hroch's discussion of European nation formation accords an integral role to political entrepreneurship, with the mobilizational strategies of different circles of political agents enabling the diffusion of nationalist ideology from the rarefied confines of the intelligentsia to a mass population.⁴⁰ In a similar vein, Tom Nairn and Michael Hechter, although upholding a structural-systemic account of the nation's origins in the transformative impact of capitalist development, place central emphasis on how the experience of uneven development by political elites in the periphery led them to undertake deliberate projects of nation building and state building.⁴¹ In all of these instances, the sociopolitical and materialist determinants of nation formation rather than its emotional or psychic lineaments receive emphasis. The ideological and identitarian aspects of nationhood and the impact of the nation form on subjectivity and lived experience—what it means to *be* or to *become* national—do not occasion sustained analytical attention. Even as modernist scholars partake of a “constructivist” view of the nation,⁴² conceptualizing it as a “made” and historically contingent rather than an essentialist, “found” community, the constructive labors that constitute the nation are for the most part seen to stem from external structural sources rather than from the desires, fantasies, and imagination of individual human subjects.

It is in this context that Benedict Anderson's account of nations as “imagined communities” breaks new theoretical ground. In combining the structuralist-materialist accounts of nation formation with a sustained focus on the ideational-subjective constitution of nationhood, Anderson defines the nation as an “imagined political community—and imagined as both limited and sovereign.”⁴³ At one level the emergence of the nation is explained in terms of social and economic transformations such as the advent of “print capitalism,”⁴⁴ or as the formation and consolidation of a new form of human solidarity—a bounded community that perceives itself to exist in the simultaneity of “homogenous empty time”—as a result of the widespread circulation of print-capitalist commodities such as the newspaper and the novel. Anderson also turns his attention to the structuring effect of

political formations and modes of governance, theorizing the emergence of “creole nationalism” in the eighteenth-century Americas in relation to the particular modalities of colonial government. He argues that the “blocked mobility” experienced by creole elites born in the colonies, where positions of power were invariably occupied by *peninsulares* (those born in Spain), triggered movements for national autonomy—an experience that would be replicated several centuries later in the context of the Asian and African anticolonial nationalist movements. Anderson’s explanation for the advent of “official nationalism” also incorporates a similar discussion of political exigencies, with the nationalizing campaigns undertaken by imperial formations such as the Hapsburg empire or Tsarist Russia described as politically strategic efforts of state elites to counter and co-opt popular linguistic nationalist movements.

At another level, however, the emotional and affective aspects of nation formation and the work of the “imagination” in bringing the national community into being are integral to Anderson’s argument. The “dawn” of nations during the “dusk” of religious belief is enabled not solely by the technological innovations of print capitalism, nor by the (deliberate or unintended) effects of political structures and the interested maneuvers of political agents, but by the universal human need to believe in a higher, trans-individual purpose in a post-Enlightenment world where unquestioned faith in divine providence is no longer a possibility. As Anderson observes, “With the ebbing of religious belief, the suffering which belief in part composed did not disappear . . . What then was required was a secular transformation of fatality into continuity, contingency into meaning . . . few things were better suited to this end than the idea of a nation.”⁴⁵

When the death of God and the “disintegration of paradise” are seen to enable the birth of the nation, the workings of human belief become integral to the definition of a nation. In this sense, even though Anderson’s account of nations and nationalism draws upon historical materialist epistemologies, it bears more than a passing resemblance to the psycho-mythic discussions of nationhood examined earlier. As in these discussions, Anderson places causal emphasis on individual, “ineffable”⁴⁶ psychological drives and desires without exploring the actual mechanisms that are involved.⁴⁷ What were the means by which the individual “need” for belief was transformed into a collective belief in the existence of a national community? Equally, what are the means by which scholars can ascertain the existence of such a collective belief—that is, how do we know that an increase in the number of readers of the modern novel meant that the “imagined community” of the

nation had assumed material reality? Such questions move beyond the consideration of “what” a nation is to an engagement with the “how” of nation formation, an issue that remains mostly obscured in Anderson’s otherwise comprehensive investigation. As Michael Herzfeld has rightly observed, Anderson’s argument consequently has “a tinge of psychological reductionism—we are never really told how we know how and what people imagine.”⁴⁸ If socio-biological and psycho-mythic accounts of nationhood overlook the enabling role played by political and social structural transformations in the emergence of nations, and if structural-functionalist accounts err in the opposite direction by neglecting to discuss the role of human emotion and affect, then Anderson’s attempt to combine these two approaches constitutes an equivalent omission.⁴⁹ Although he sets out to explore the structural as well as the affective conditions of possibility for nation formation, he shies away from a sustained examination of the relationship between structures and sentiment and then ends up asserting rather than explaining the joint role played by institutions and the imagination in bringing the modern nation into being and ensuring its continued existence.⁵⁰

Such an explanation would entail grappling with one of the central (and in some respects the most curious or inexplicable) silences that haunts scholarship on nations and nationalism—namely, the silence around the figure of the state. Although modernist and perennialist accounts of the nation’s origins differ over the extent to which nations are new or old, or are artifactual or natural phenomena respectively, the nation is commonly acknowledged to be a formation that is substantially different from other configurations of human sociality, such as families, religious orders, or interest groups. This difference turns on the unique conjunction of politics and culture in the nation, or the fact that the nation is simultaneously a political as well as a cultural expression of sovereign community.

The distinctive hallmark of the “age of nations” is widely considered to be the alignment of political and cultural units either through structural transformations in capitalist relations or through more agent-centric means—that is, by nationalist movements that contest existing political structures in order to build a state of their own (state-building nationalism) or by state elites that undertake projects of homogenization and nationalization within the territory over which they rule (state-built nationalism). Nationalist attempts to establish a representative relation between nation and state such that the state is the sovereign “gauge and emblem” of the nation, and the resulting centrality of the “state idea” to the idea of the nation, are notions with which few would disagree. Thus, in Anderson’s famous definition of