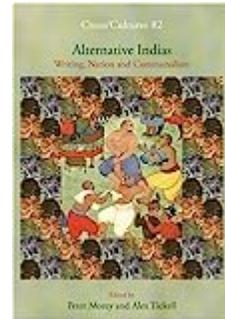




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The Literary Minority: Alternative Perspectives on Indian Nationhood

India remains a vast sea of culturally, ethnically, socially, and politically diverse structures and groups and yet all too often the examination of nationalism in India is simplified by communal dichotomy, the division between Hindus and Muslims. Peter Morey and Alex Tickell's *Alternative Indias: Writing, Nation and Communalism* offers a variety of analyses for understanding how nation may be conceived, defined, and practiced across the Indian subcontinent in relation to the tensions between secular and communal, between modern and primordial.

The basis of Morey and Tickell's volume rests on Sunil Khilnani's assertion that it is inadequate to examine Indian nationalism in terms of homogenous definitions (p. x). The contributors to *Alternative Indias* examine, instead, how writers and texts have questioned the homogeneity of a "Hindu nation" via the multiplicity and variety within that nation, and the cultures throughout the subcontinent more broadly. Each essay tackles this objective from a pointed perspective, focusing on the history of Hindu nationalist thought, the impact of communalism, the use of urban space, the maintenance and policing of borders, regionalism, gender, and the is-

suues of language. The units of analysis, literary texts and film, are all English-language, admittedly another point of contention in the postcolonial identity-building framework. This decision was not, the editors tell us, a conscious effort inspired by Salman Rushdie's claim that "comparatively little of value has been written in Indian languages in the last fifty years or so" (p. xxvi). Rather, it is precisely because the works in question were written in English that they become invaluable for the study of nation. How discussions are shaped and transformed by language, in addition to how the works are received, defines the relationship identity takes relative to national and political discourses.

Alternative Indias focuses on the post-Partition subcontinent, self-consciously aware that recent events find their intellectual roots further back—equally in modern and ancient history. The tensions created by the secular nation-state, as it was advocated by Jawaharlal Nehru, and the nationalist consciousness derived from religious-cultural traits, as prominent in the *Hindutva* (Hindu nationalism) movement, have increasingly led thinkers to question the appropriate nature of the structure of an

Indian state. As Tickell and Morey note, Partha Chatterjee, T. N. Madan, and others remain stringently opposed to the violent nature of right-wing religious nationalism, while at the same time highly critical of the Indian nation-state. The focus of the work, however, does not rehash the rise and prevalence of Hindu nationalism, but rather addresses how minorities within the state create compromised identities, neither avowedly Hindu nor secularist. As Tickell and Morey rightly point out, “the appeal of communalism is distinctly limited ... [and has yet to] extend much beyond the Brahmin and Kshatriya castes” (p. 225). How national identity is composed in the remaining population goes unnoticed by the rhetoric of the “pure” tradition. Moreover, as Shirley Chew and Elleke Boehmer discuss, women must find their own way in this multifaceted approach to national identity, much as, Boehmer tells us, Virmati must do in the novel *Difficult Daughters* (1999) when she is symbolically cast out of her mother’s house (p. 57). It is precisely the minority view, within the “Hindu majority,” that *Alternative Indias* seeks to develop.

The limits of Nehru’s secular Indian state are examined in Anshuman A. Mondal’s opening chapter, the anchor for the entire volume. Embedded in the most secular nationalists’ rhetoric, Mondal explains, lay a “number of tropes that surreptitiously encoded a Hindu majoritarian point of view” (p. 22). Among the most crucial of these is the notion of the “composite nation.” Indian nationalism, Mondal goes on to argue, has always been “either covertly or overtly associated with a ‘Hindu’” imagery, and thus at its very essence not secular (p. 5). While it is important to note that Mondal is not arguing that all nationalists spoke with the same voice, he is cautioning those who cry out against Hindutva with a “pure” secular nationalism to pay attention to the motifs and cultural “artefacts” they themselves use.

Alex Tickell’s article, “The Discovery of Aryavarta,” reinforces Mondal’s contentions by noting that Nehru’s secular India became intertwined with the other nationalist narratives of the day, particularly those which found their roots less among modern definitions of nation and more in primordial conceptualizations (p. 50). Some of these primordial concepts, Elleke Boehmer contends in her analysis of Manju Kapur’s literature, become apparent in the dynamics of gendered roles in society. Despite the fact that little has been done, Boehmer notes, in any postcolonial nation-state to rectify the inequality between the sexes, the allure of nationalism remains a powerful tool, even among this otherwise disenfranchised female populace. Symbolically women’s roles play an important part in creating the imagined community, or na-

tional ethos. The symbolic role of females in Indian literature is brought even more to the fore in Shirley Chew’s article, an analysis of Shashi Deshpande’s *Small Remedies* (2001), which concludes that the peripheral place of women allows them the unique ability to reassess the past in order to make sense of the present and future, ultimately redefining nation in the meantime.

The reinvention of history and the cultural memory, which is produced in the process of defining a national identity, is at the heart of all of the articles in *Alternative Indias*. Amina Yaqin, in her examination of Anita Desai’s works, maintains that Urdu becomes a tool linking the present and modern worlds with a distinct cultural heritage and the memory of separation, particularly in relation to Partition (p. 91). Likewise, Ashok Bery’s critical examination of A. K. Ramanujan’s literary legacy notes the powerful role of language in underscoring “his explicitly articulated views on India’s cultures, [being] opposed to any monolithic conceptions of India” (p. 138). These monolithic conceptions, specifically those proposed by Hindutva adherents, directly develop into the communal strife evident in the news, and are present in the focus of Rohinton Mistry’s *Family Matters* (2002), the object of Peter Morey’s analysis. Told through the eyes of a down and out Parsi family, Mistry’s novel, Morey tells us, follows this trend of examination of nationhood via the minority perspective. The black-white dichotomy defined by the “us versus them” divide is paralleled in Mistry’s examination of corruption. How, particularly for a Parsi family obliged to perform “Good thoughts, good words, and good deeds,” does “good” become differentiated from “bad?” Likewise, we may conclude, how does “Hindu” become differentiated from “Parsi?”

A thread of continuity runs throughout the unique and interlinked articles in *Alternative Indias*. How the minority perspective defines, shapes, and informs the Indian sense of nationhood is carried throughout the articles dealing with significant components of Indian English-language literature as well as the final chapter of the work, Bombay cinema. The usefulness of *Alternative Indias* rests in the works’ ability to add depth to the study of Indian nationalism without weighing down the scholarship in a quagmire of theory. But beyond this, it offers a guideline for examining the complexity of national identity in a seemingly dichotomous worldview. The combination of historical and literary (filmic) analysis, offered in *Alternative Indias*, reaches across disciplines to underscore the complex reality of nationalism in the subcontinent and at the same time offer new avenues of approaching large segments of the region’s population.

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