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Hind Swaraj and Essentialist Nationalism
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When Winston Churchill was told by Secretary of State for India Leo Amery that rotting corpses lined the streets of Calcutta, he is believed to have said: "I hate Indians. They are a beastly people with a beastly religion."

This exchange encapsulates a key tendency of colonial discourse—it reduces the colonized to an 'essential' idea of what it means to be Indian, to be Arab or African. Here Churchill completely overlooks India's religious diversity, racially essentializing it as a "beastly" country with a single pagan religion. It is no wonder then, that the postcolonial writer Salman Rushdie describes this sort of essentialism as "the respectable child of old-fashioned exoticism." (1991, 67) It is clear from the writings of scholars such as Stuart Hall that this process of essentialism reinforces damaging colonial discourses and perceptions, thus acting as an imperial tool. But can the script be flipped? Can essentialism be used as an anti-imperial tool? Through a careful analysis of Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj*, this essay will consider the manner in which Gandhi employs essentialism as a tool to create a collective Indian identity, a precursor to anti-imperial nationalism. It will also consider the limitations of this approach—by using arguments from collectives such as the Subaltern Studies Group and thinkers such as MN Roy, it will argue that Gandhi's nationalism as in *Hind Swaraj* may not be as inclusive as it seems at face value.

In *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi struggles with a dual task—the repudiation of English 'civilization' and the creation of a national identity for a nation with immense linguistic, socio-economic and cultural diversity. To accomplish this second task, Gandhi, focuses on the idea of an 'essential', common past shared by all Indians. According to Gandhi, "We [Indians] were one nation before they [the British] came to India. One thought inspired us. Our mode of life was the same. It was because we were one nation that they were able to establish a kingdom.

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Subsequently they divided us." (1908, 45) Gandhi is conspicuously ambiguous as to what exactly this "one thought" or "one mode of life" means, but the methodology of his argument is clear—he is arguing that there exist some innate, essential properties that are shared by all Indians. Notably, these properties seem to be distinct from the identities of other countries. Gandhi argues that India is "fired" with an "idea of nationality in a manner unknown in other parts of the world. Any two Indians are one as no two Englishmen are." (1908, 46) However, Gandhi's idea of essential Indian characteristics is unique in that it does not seem to restrict itself to Indians— in the words of Gandhi's Editor, "If the English become Indianized, we can accommodate them." (1908, 69) When the Reader refutes this as impossible, Gandhi says that such a refutation is "equivalent to saying that the English have no humanity in them." (1908, 69) This exchange demonstrates two characteristics of Gandhi's essentialist nationalism: that there is an implicit link between "humanity" and Indianness, and that it is ostensibly very inclusive—even former oppressors are welcome to be a part of it. Thus, Gandhi employs essentialism as a tool in the political space to create a seemingly inclusive national identity—an important anti-imperial weapon.

It is important to note that using essentialism as an anti-imperial tool does not seem to be restricted to the sphere of politics. Conrad, in his novella *Heart of Darkness* employs essentialism in the literary field to offer a subtle critique of colonial atrocities in the Belgian Congo. His narrator Marlow believes that it is "thrilling" for a white man to contemplate "the thought of [his] remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar [the chants of the Congolese]." (1899, 63) In moments like these scattered across the novel, Marlow contemplates the idea that there are 'essential', innate similarities between the Congolese and the white man—

this idea makes colonial atrocities unjustifiable, acting as a critique of imperialism. Thus essentialism seems to function as an anti-imperial tool in both the political and literary space.

But are there downsides to using essentialism as an anti-imperial tool? In the words of theorist Diana Fuss, "the binary articulation of essentialism and difference can also be restrictive, even obfuscating, in that it allows us to ignore or deny the differences within essentialism." (1989, xi-xii) This idea leads to an important question: does Gandhi's seemingly tolerant essentialist nationalism ignore and deny the differences within the Indian people? And if so, what are the consequences of such a denial?

In answering these questions, it is imperative to consider the thoughts of progressive, anti-caste Indian thinkers of the time, such as MN Roy, Periyar and Bhagat Singh. Periyar is famously quoted as asking: "Is the Brahmins' rule *swaraj* for the *paraya* [pariah]? Is the cat's rule *swaraj* for the rat? Is the landlord's rule *swaraj* for the peasant? Is the owner's rule *swaraj* for the worker?" (Habib, 2017) These questions are very relevant ones—when Gandhi says that the "common people lived independently . . . . They enjoyed true Home Rule" (1908, 66), is he simply wishing away a legacy of caste-based and financial oppression of the subaltern? Perhaps in his search for an essential Indian identity to gather around, Gandhi is glossing over fundamental deep divides in Indian society, without whose rectification a true nationalism is not possible. To quote Noor Muhammad, member of the Bombay Legislative Council, "How can we ask for greater political rights when we ourselves deny elementary rights of human beings to our own people?" (Habib, 2017)

What is Gandhi's response to these questions in *Hind Swaraj*? When the Reader brings up the ethical issues of pre-colonial Indian society such as child marriage and animal sacrifice,

Gandhi elucidates that these "defects" are not "ancient civilization. They remain in spite of it." (1908, 67) He reassures the Reader that "attempts have always been made, and will be made, to remove them. We may use the new spirit that is born in us for purging ourselves of these evils." (1908, 67) What is important to note is that Gandhi does not seem to see the "purging" of these evils as a prerequisite for the formation of a "new spirit" or national identity—he suggests rather that the proposed national identity be channeled to the eradication of social evils. Could this order of priorities affect the efficacy of Gandhian nationalism as an anti-imperial tool? The Marxist revolutionary MN Roy is quoted as saying: "the masses cannot be rallied and made to take an active and conscious part in the struggle, unless they see that the object is not to revive the Brahmanical Age of priestly exploitation . . . but to promote the welfare of the vast producing class." (Habib, 2017) Roy further questions: "why should the class, which does not enjoy any of the rights and privileges that go with property, be active or passive supporters of the politics of bourgeois nationalism?" (Habib, 2017) This argument thus questions the inclusivity of Gandhi's essentialist nationalism—his focus on claiming one essential past, one essential mode of thought may have glossed over key socio-economic differences instead of addressing them as a hurdle to essentialist nationalism. In his prescription of essentialist nationalism first and social change later, Gandhi may have alienated the subaltern, whose primary concerns are vastly different.

This essay began by reiterating the postcolonial idea that essentialism contributed to the formation of a damaging imperial discourse. However, following an analysis of the use of essentialism in Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* and (to a limited extent) Conrad's *Heart of Darkness,* one may conclude that essentialism is a double-edged sword—it can also be used as an imperial as well as an anti-imperial weapon. Gandhi in particular uses essentialism to develop a seemingly

tolerant, inclusive form of nationalism. Upon closer examination of Gandhi's nationalism, however, one of the dangers of essentialism becomes apparent: it risks the ignorance of differences within the essentialized group. In Gandhi's nationalism this risk manifests in the form of the denial of the struggles, priorities, and values of the subaltern, which remain unincorporated in Gandhi's politics. This is perhaps a bleak conclusion—can nationalism that bases itself on an 'essential' national identity never be fully inclusive? Is there then an alternative way to construct a national identity or will we have to resign ourselves to the Ambedkarite idea of entirely abandoning our "fetish of nationalism?" (Cháirez-Garza, 2019, 1)

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