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Paper No. 5
COMMUNICATION & NATIONAL IDENTITY: TOWARDS AN INCLUSIVE VISION

INTRODUCTION

The term 'national identity' primarily refers to ideas that exist in thought-form, an abstraction. It consists of a body of ideas that form the basis of shared loyalties to the nation-state. The ways in which this allegiance is constructed, made concrete, communicated and maintained over time, are what one might call the means and ends of national identity. National identity, in other words, is ordinarily taken to mean a shared structure of feeling, a largely imagined consciousness that is reinforced both through life's daily routines as well as through ritualised, symbol-laden, celebrations of nationhood. It is built on a foundation of fact and fiction that come together to form an account/story of origins. Myth, tradition and invented tradition are systematically employed towards the making of a common ancestry, the basis for shared belongings and a distinctive identity vis a vis the identity of other nation states. In an ordinary sense, it can be taken to mean that quality or sense of belonging that makes a person distinctly, quintessentially Vietnamese, Cambodian or Laotian, i.e., that sense of belonging that is nurtured by a commonly shared history, cultural continuity and belief in a national destiny. National identity is the glue that binds all citizens to a larger, wider, trans-local sense of belonging to the nation-state. It is also the means by which the nation-state elicits loyalty and solidarity from its nationals, particularly at times of internal or external crisis. At times allegiance to this supra-consciousness becomes all-consuming. In situations characterised by internal or external conflict, national identity, often co-opted by nationalism, takes on a sacred aura and becomes synonymous with both patriotism and with parochial, sometimes chauvinistic versions of national destiny. Nationalism, is the expression of a particular, often exclusive version of national identity.

National identity is a supra-consciousness in that it stands above all other affinities/identities ascribed to place, birth, gender, status, belief and ethnicity. In principle, the formation of national identity ought to be the outcome of conversations between dominant and less-dominant communities. The end result ought to be a shared conviction in a pan-national identity. This, however, is rarely the case. All too often, national identity is based on majoritarian identities and its very exclusivity is a cause for conflict.

National identity is not a given. We are socialised into believing in its essence. The media and other dominant cultural institutions play a
crucial role in linking subjects to a common history of origins, continuities and futures. The mass media, apart from educational and religious institutions and the family play a central role in defining national identity, charting its boundaries and maintaining its presence in the popular imagination. This is most obvious in the case of public, state-supported media, who through content and style, scheduling and representation, make conscious efforts to reinforce national identity. However, and despite such efforts, public media are inherently ambivalent in their representations of national identity. Perhaps that is to be expected, given the fact that national media represent 'official' opinion on matters related to the nation. This is particularly the case in pluralistic societies where national identity is quite often constructed on elitist or majoritarian lines. In such situations, the communication of national identity is fraught with political sensitivities.

Four trends, mainly political and economic, affect the constancy of contemporary national identity formation - 1) Conflicts between internal expressions of privileged identities and national identity - i.e., the Pribumi policy in Indonesia vis a vis the goal of Indonesian state philosophy, Pancasila, the application of the term Bumiputra (sons of the soil) to define Malays and not the Orang Asli in the case of Malaysia. In more extreme cases of national identity formation, such as for instance during the reign of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, it has resulted in the cultural genocide of minorities, such as the Cham. 2) The tension between national and 'supra-national' identities. The ASEAN unlike the European Union(EU) is not concerned, at least of now, with the goal of achieving political integration. The EU on the other hand is in the process of defining a pan-European national identity. So far, minorities seem to have been excluded from this process and an emerging Fortress Europe mentality does not seem to auger well for inter-ethnic relationships in Europe. There are a host of issues that will need to be addressed, some perhaps that are unresolvable, particularly in the context of real or imagined interventions by Brussels in the daily life of European nationals. 3) The third trend, is the break-up of nation-states - a trend that has no parallel in the context of the history of modern nations. The dismemberment of nation-states is most evident in the context of the former republics of Eastern Europe. But the intention to secede is ever-present, the latest being the case of Padania, an independent enclave in Italy and Chiapas in Mexico. 4) The fourth trend, which in some respects is the most serious is directly related to the globalisation of cultural identities in the light of the so-called 'demise' of the nation-state, cross-border flows of data and people. Conflicting identities and rootlessness are what one might call aspects of a post-modern condition. How these will, in the
future, affect the formation of what hitherto has been stable understandings of national identity will be anyone's guess. Many believe that the days of the nation-state are numbered although the opposite seems to be the case in South Africa where the government is trying to work out the basis for a common national identity for all of its citizens - black, coloured and white. Through participatory, multi-cultural conversations, ways are being explored to come to an expression of national identity that all South Africans identify with and that ensures multi-cultural/ethnic futures in South Africa. Simultaneously, globalisation has also spawned all manner of localist politics and associated identities. For instance, for some people living in the big metropolitan cities of the world, city-identity is fast-becoming as important or even more important than their national-identity.

I would like, in this brief address, to deal with issues related to the construction of national identity in the mass media. I believe that the issue of language is crucial to the debate, for it can either lead to exclusivist or inclusivist understandings of national identity. The deconstruction of the term 'minority' provides an example of the limitations of 'exclusive' language. I maintain that an 'inclusive', language of national identity together with a commitment to multiculturalist futures is worth considering in the interests of democracy and internal and external peace.

The Prospect of National Identity

It is fairly obvious that human beings in general, irrespective of nationality, do need to subscribe to identities other than the personal. Crucial to the formation of national identity is the inherited baggage of culture and its interpretation by those in positions of authority and power as well as the nature of state-formation. National identity in post-Independent India was, for example, fashioned along broadly secular lines. The government did try to create a 'secular' national identity through constitutional reform. However, with the benefit of hindsight, and inspite of the noble intentions that underlay this experiment in nation-building, it is clear that the version of secularism that was championed had little in common with ordinary expectations. The Indian government, committed to modernising the country, ignored the many traditions of village-secularism that pre­existed modern versions of secularism. No attempts were made to fashion an Indian version of secularism. Fifty years on, Indian national identity is still a contested entity. This sense of national identity is not completely shared by the Santali peoples or by the Hos and Oraons, who are among the many First Peoples of India and by innumerable other 'nations' defined along ethnic, religious, caste and
class lines. I would think that this situation is replicated in other parts of the world, in Laos for instance. Attempts, for example to give upland ethnic groups in Laos a larger sense of Laotian identity will flounder unless that sense of identity is built on inclusive foundations.

One could say that the health of a given national identity can be measured by assessing the extent to which the various 'nations' comprising the nation-state willingly subsume their parochial identities to that of a supra-national identity. In real life however, a consensual example is hard to come by. More often than not there are as many versions of national identity as there are nations. In other words, national identity is a contested site. And for good reason for in the majority of cases, national identity is synonymous with a core of ideas, gleaned from the culture of the majority community. British national identity for example, has its roots in a dominant Anglo-Saxon, mainly 'Southern' tradition. Needless to say the Celts, i.e., the Scots and Irish let alone diasporic nations living in the UK are not represented in the preferred version of British national identity. In the UK, where the Queen is head of both the Anglican church and the State, national identity is at times merely an excuse for a form of British nationalism. A year or two ago, the heir to the throne, Prince Charles, to the dismay of the establishment, questioned the exclusive nature of national identity in the context of a vibrantly multicultural/religious Britain.

There are also countries where national identity is structured along stridently exclusivist lines - Islamist as in Saudi Arabia, Hindu as in Nepal, Christian as in some European countries and state and party-centred as was the case in what were formerly known as the Socialist Bloc of countries.

In the construction of national identity there is no recourse to easy options. Perhaps, the chaos and uncertainty of identity formation that we see everywhere in Asia today will eventually lead to a period of peace and prosperity. But for the moment most if not all nation states in Asia face a number of identity-related dilemmas. Majid Tehranian(1993, p.168) in a study that deals with identity formation in the fledgling nation-states of Central Asia, describes the context of hard choices and multiple dilemmas facing these nations as they struggle to come to terms with a national identity - "Islamism provides universal, religious solidarity but threatens the tyranny of theocratic dogma. Nationalism provides linguistic and cultural bonds but threatens inter-ethnic conflicts of fearful proportions. Localism maintains the traditional ties of blood and kinship but undermines
modern, universalist democratic ideals. Regionalism promises collaboration among neighbouring countries, but also threatens new hegemonic dominations by external (Russia or Turkey) or internal (Uzbekistan or Kazakhstan) powers. Globalism opens up isolated Central Asia to the sources of foreign investment and winds of cultural change, but also threaten growing gaps between the urban, cosmopolitan elites and the rural, parochial masses. Which road to take? It seems that there are no easy choices. Much will depend on the version and vision of national identity that will be communicated by the media in these countries.

Communicating an Inclusive Vision of National Identity

An inclusive national identity is built on the fundamental premise that any given nation-state consists of innumerable 'nations', each of whom are heir to continuities in terms of history and culture and to a collective destiny. Apart from recognisable 'nations', there are also marginalised groups, like grassroots women and the urban and rural poor whose rights to the national must also be recognised. While a perfect, wholly inclusive version of national identity might be impossible to formulate, particularly in the context of plural societies, it needs to be reasonably inclusive.

To follow on, there are two aspects that are central to the making and maintenance of national identity. 1) the right to culture - the inalienable right of every 'nation', irrespective of their status, to practice, express, promote their identity as a community provided that this does not infringe on the rights of other nations to do the same. In other words this individual/personal right needs to be located within a larger culture of rights and responsibilities. I would go as far as to say that a culture of rights is what sustains national identity. It can become the basis for building an inclusive vision of national identity and also function as a yardstick by which national 'identification' is measured. And 2) the right to communication which is central to the maintenance of national identity over time and which is inclusive of the following - the right to fair representation in the mass media, the right of access and participation in a nation's communication spectrum, and the right of ownership and control of the media. All these rights are inviolable under international law but are subject to national political systems in operation. Furthermore, media ownership patterns - public-service, state control, private ownership, mixed ownership, etc., do affect, both subtly and not so subtly, understandings of national identity and its maintenance over time. National identity is more than just pious words enshrined in formal doctrines such as a constitution. It is fundamentally about the rights to citizenship and the enjoyment of that right. One cannot
expect a person who has been living on the streets for all his or her life to identify with the nation.

There are, it seems to me, three ways in which nation-states make use of culture and communication in their constructions of national identity. There is 1) the assimilationist model which by far is the most common of the three strategies followed. This is the model adopted in the USA where the primary aim of the nation-state is to submerge particular identities, to assimilate all cultures into what in popular parlance has been called the 'American way of life'. In general 'Americanisation' is a predominant result of a persuasive economic ideology. While in principle the freedom of information is Gospel Truth in the US, in reality, given the nature of media ownership patterns, many groups are not represented in the media. There are a number of variants of this model, some that are transparent and others that are much less so. This model seems to have inspired the secularist approach to identity formation that have been carried out in some of the larger Asian nations like for example in Indonesia and India. In other words, these nations have opted for a secular version of national identity. However, the tension between commitment to multiculturalism on the one hand and an inclusive national identity on the other is a common cause for both covert and overt conflict in many Asian countries. 2) The integrationist or the multi-cultural approach to national identity formation is less common but is notably followed in Australia. (At least this was the case until very recently). A multi-culturalist national identity is built on the basis of conversations with living cultures. It is arrived at by allowing the mosaic of peoples and 'nations' within a nation-state to enjoy full rights to culture and communication. In terms of communication access and participation, the Australian government does for instance, provide state-support for ethnic and aboriginal media although the present Conservative government is less enthusiastic of such support. 3) The prosyletic model. In an era dominated by the politics of nationalism and fundamentalism, some Asian countries have succumbed to this model. The aim in such cases is to promote a particular set of values - religious, nationalist, ethnic at the expense of all others and to force other nations to subscribe to this exclusive version of national identity. Needless to say the right to culture and communication are by no means automatic in this approach to identity formation.

These models are by no means water-tight. Many countries adopt a mixed approach to the formation of national identity. For instance, most European countries, although liberal in terms of rights and freedoms are quite conservative when it comes to protecting and maintaining a national identity which is almost always framed in
exclusive terms. A few do support ethnic broadcasting and a variety of minority cultural projects but such projects are not allowed to influence the sanctity of a dominant, national identity.

Language and the Politics of National Identity: Reaffirming Citizenship

The formation of national identity is a complex process. There are a number of factors that determine its constitutive vision, including the political, social and cultural. Equally important is the way in which this vision of national identity is translated into and expressed through language. The intentionality of meaning is a fundamental characteristic of language and therefore of narratives in general. As such constructions of national identity privilege a particular vision of society. Given the fact that language structures understanding, our ability to make sense of the world is conditioned by the interpretations and representations of reality on offer. Increasingly, these representations are communicated to us via the mass media.

National identity for whom? seems to be a simple enough question but the answers to that determine the vision of national identity. It would come as little surprise to know that in a great many countries of the world, national identity is more often than not allied to the group that is dominant - numerically, economically and politically. The right to live by and celebrate national identity is in other words, by no means automatic for all those who reside within the boundaries of a nation-state. Athenian democracy was for the citizens - meaning those who owned property, and not for the slaves. While the times have changed, the tension between majorities and minorities, between citizens and non-citizens remains. This tension is played out in the media and is never really reconciled. I believe that in order to circumvent this tension we may need to resurrect and employ a more expansive and substantive understanding of citizenship, meaning the right of every individual living within a nation-state, irrespective of who or what he or she is, to have access to its benefits, enjoy its securities and at the same time abide by a culture of rights and responsibilities. In other words this culture of rights and responsibilities should be the basis for the formation of citizens. Equally we should do away with the discourse of majorities and minorities for it contributes to a flawed basis for understanding national identity. Let me explain briefly.

The word 'minority' as described in the Concise Oxford Dictionary has three meanings among which is the following - "small group of persons differing from others in race, religion, language, opinion on a topic, etc." It is interesting to observe that the accent on 'difference'
qualifies the meaning of this word. Equally important to note for our purpose is the meaning of the root word 'minor' that denotes something that is insignificant, inferior, subordinate and 'less than'. In other words, our reading of the word is conditioned by a structure of association, that in this case gives us little option but to associate minority with something that is inferior, lesser than, unimportant.

Let us briefly examine the meaning/s of the word 'minority'. It is a multi-accentual word and derives its meaning in context. In any given country it is more often than not used to describe a 'people' or 'nation' like for example indigenous groups and people of faith who are distinct from the majority community i.e., the numerically significant ethnic/religious group who claim a dominant stake in the nation, imagined or otherwise. It is also used in a political sense to refer to people who are in opposition to the dominant group in power. On occasion it is used to describe people who hold dissenting opinions. It is even used to describe a majority group, i.e., women, who are more often than not assigned minority status. It has often been used to describe people like the Dalits in India who are numerically significant but who have, for politico-ideological reasons been denied their rights to full citizenship. Conversely, it has been used to describe groups like the Afrikaners in South Africa who until recently enjoyed maximum rights at the expense of other groups in South Africa. Today, it is more often than not used to refer to disadvantaged peoples deserving of preferential treatment, affirmative action, positive discrimination and legal protection. In other words, I take it that the meaning of the word minority specifically refers to socially, economically and politically marginalised people who may or may not be united as a 'nation' and who are, at best, only grudgingly recognised by governments. As such these communities do not participate in the life of the nation-state to the extent that other communities do. These are people whose cultures, beliefs and ways of life either do not affect the mainstream or are proscribed by it. These are people whose substantive rights as citizens have not been met, and whose identities are either misrepresented or ignored altogether.

How have minorities come to be defined as such, on what basis and by whom? Let me give you an illustration. I come from the state of Kerala in India. Near our home in the mountains of the Wynad, there live groups of indigenous people like for example the 'Kurichers' and the 'Paniyas' who until very recently lived off the forest and its produce. Of late many of them have been forced to settle down, to take up cultivation and animal husbandry. Their environment and traditional ways of life have come under pressure from unscrupulous private interests, over-bureaucratised officialdom and a State-driven...
ideology of developmentalism that seems bent on modernising their traditional ways of life. What is interesting from our point of view is that none of these people have ever defined themselves as a minority. This nomenclature is of recent origin and is co-terminous with the discourse of colonialism, democracy and the nation-state. In other words their identity as a minority is not of their making but stems from the many outsiders who have come into contact with these people, i.e., colonial rulers, settler communities, local government and their ideologues inclusive of census-takers, historians and ethnographers.

Politics and history as well as culture and societal decree play their part in the development of the language of national identity. Deconstruct this language and one comes face to face with the origins of words and to the power relationships, influences and motivations that have led to the creation of dominant accents, preferred associations and meanings of national identity.

Granted that the formation of a truly representative national identity is crucial to the survival of nation-states, how should this be expressed through the communications policies adopted by Asian governments? For a start, and from the examples alluded to earlier on in this paper, the use of inclusive language in our constructions of national identity is a must. The word minority is mildly disparaging to say the least. It somehow, almost by default, seems to suggest that there are communities consisting of 'others' who are inferior and therefore deserve to be denied the rights associated with substantive citizenship. Perhaps we need to replace the discourse on 'majorities' and 'minorities' with that of multiculturalism which in intent and flavour signifies a commonality, a coming together rather than in opposition. A multiculturalist basis for national identity makes eminent sense in the context of plural Asia.

Secondly, we need to recognise that in our media-saturated environments, the mass media are a primary source for meanings, understandings and interpretations on a host of issues inclusive of that related to the question of national identity. In other words, the media can and do facilitate certain, preferred understandings of of national identity. Through routine cordonings of the boundaries of debate, providing interpretive frameworks, censoring oppositional views, making use of stereotypical images and readings, denying access or space to marginalised communities and manufacturing selective readings of reality, the media can and do restrict the circulation of inclusive understandings. This may not be the result of conscious attempts at restricting understanding, merely the result of inherited, routine ways of interpreting reality. Public bodies need to
ensure the fair representation of peoples and cultures and citizens initiatives do need to monitor the 'state' of national identification.

Thirdly we need to recognise that the communication of national identity is not something that can be managed solely by government/public efforts. State-support for NGOs involved in development, education and communications work will help ensure the dissemination of national identity across a broad spectrum of citizens.

Finally, we need to accept the fact that despite the given-ness of national identity, the negotiation of national identity is a continuous process and an entirely voluntary affair. The cultural consequences of globalisation have scarcely been mapped in Asia, but it is quite possible that one outcome might be a movement towards trans-national identities at the expense of the national. While the possibility of cultural dissonance is to be expected, an inclusive foundation for national identity might be the only way to preserve a common, national consciousness in an era dominated by the global.

Pradip N. Thomas

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