

## Growing Nationalism Exacerbated by COVID 19: Editorial Essay

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For a long time, we have witnessed the rise of nationalism in Asia and many nations in Europe. However, it seems that the virus from Wuhan added fuel to the fire. In the second half of March 2020, the US President Donald Trump referred to the COVID-19 coronavirus as the *Chinese virus*. I am sure he did that intentionally. A great media war ensued after this between the two countries and vital ally such as Australia too made a statement following President Trump. Mr Scott Morrison remained a shade more polite, nevertheless believed that the coronavirus emanated in Wuhan, “likely in its wildlife wet markets” (ABC News, 2020). Not to be outdone, the editor of the state-run Global Times, Hu Xijin, described Australia as “chewing gum stuck on the sole of China's shoes”. “Sometimes you have to find a stone to rub it off,” Hu posted on Weibo (ABC News 2020). These cacophonies lead to the question—is nationalism a bad one?

### The Bad Nationalism?

Unfortunately, this seems to be the new nationalism gyrated from the propaganda war between the US and China, to begin with. Nevertheless, a series of actions followed in many countries. In those early months, a truck filled with medical supplies was stopped at the German-Swiss border, after German Chancellor, Angela Merkel decided to stop most exports of protective medical equipment. A diplomatic spat between Germany and its neighbours, Austria and Switzerland ensued (Vogel, 2020). It is alleged that the US hijacked mask shipments in a rush for coronavirus protection from France. Turkish-made masks destined for some

European nations never arrived (Willsher et al., 2020). China was also accused of stashing its supplies. Czech authorities undertake state-backed stealing of masks meant for Rome.

Turkey went one step further. Instead of working on covid with NGOs and deal with casualties domestically, it worked quickly to build a reactive Foreign Policy with clear Islamic tonalities. It handpicked 80 countries with large Muslim populations around the world — from Sudan to Somalia (ÖZTÜRK, 2020).

Extremely resourceful and rich regional cooperation instrumentality such as the European Union (EU) displayed shameful lack of camaraderie with the people of Italy during COVID-19. Brexit, almost a one-sided anthem at the beginning which was initiated much prior to Covid 19, has earned further currency and popular nationalistic response in the UK during the pandemic. Although Mr Boris Johnson, The Prime Minister of the UK joined the rank of the world leaders that continued foolhardy handling of Covid 19, he is unlikely to be admonished for getting up and becoming vociferous on the Brexit. Once again, nationalism reigns. Earlier, President Trump withdrew US largesse to the World Health Organisation. He continued his insinuations and offered his assurance that by the Easter of 2020 he would wipe the virus out of the USA and it will be business as usual. This is a new nationalism that has raised the bar, but the virus remains and reigns supreme.

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi called a conference of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) states to lead the critical response to COVID-19 collectively. Mr Modi's move was described as a thoughtful drive to respond to China's growing influence in the region by reasserting India's leadership (Karki,

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2020). India pledged \$10 million toward a SAARC emergency fund and also offered a team of specialists for the SAARC states. Turkey and India, despite their domestic suffering, continued to venture out and exercise in foreign policies that showcased their nationalism and humanitarian response.

### **Nationalism in Pre-Covid Times**

In previous writing of mine elsewhere, I remember narrating a story about Bwera, a Ugandan city on the banks of the Rubirihiya River (Pulla, 2013). The river separates the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Uganda, east of the Beni region. It is in the Banks of the river that Ugandans and Congolese bring their merchandise, share a stall space and indulge in selling. As stallholders they discuss their produce and products and assign prices in *Kinande*— a language that happens to be their shared mother tongue. Interestingly, they carry transactions in shillings on the Ugandan side, and in francs on the Congolese side. On both sides of the border, the same merchants practice their marketing. People from the Congo region load their trucks with bananas and palm oil and cross the border and unload their goods in Uganda, but on the other side of the border, they show Ugandan ID papers. The same goes for the Ugandan drivers who enter the Congo through Kasindi. (Pulla, 2012). Surely, an inspection of their loads of beer, bags of grey cement, corn starch and other merchandise is inspected by the customs officers. The Ugandans use their Congolese ID, as it allows them to claim some exemptions from certain taxes. The Border post officials can never tell the difference between a Ugandan and a Congolese driver as they arrive at the check posts. The discomfiture for the supposed to be nationalistic, does not matter at all for the border security officers as to who is considered as Ugandan and who is identified as Congolese (Pulla, 2013).

### **What is Nationalism?**

One of the great books to read on Nationalism is *imagined communities* by Benedict Anderson, which was originally written in 1983 and republished again in 2006. Historically, rebellion,

unrest and a yearning (Anderson, 1983) to be free from British yoke in the erstwhile colonies were sacrosanct in descriptions of inviolable nationalism. Interestingly, the conceptualisation involves expression of interest in one's country. The evocative feelings about the land and the territory, the flag and its colours. Gradually its contours address language, the skin colour, the racial features of its people and move into its economy, land, Military forces, air and water borders (Anderson, 1983). The national anthem, national songs, dress, protected animal species, birds, ecology and the rest will add further spice. Clearly, nationalism is multi-layered and multi-dimensional—the dynamics are rooted in the ideological bases and sentiments of people to get organised as movements or rally around a cause (Das et al., 2020). Just like the Ugandans and the Congolese that trade at the Kasindi border amicably (Pulla, 2014) coexisting nationalisms have allowed people within European Union to move into each other's' nations until recently and were not met with alien treatment. The following section discusses about pandemic populism.

### **Pandemic Populism**

In pre-Covid era, protagonists used crises well to fuel nationalism at critical junctures in history. Today's political leadership used Covid 19 as an opportunity to galvanise people and expand on the show of solidarity, comradeships of myriad colours and seem even to instil fear into society. Media releases from Governments, World Health organisation (WHO), Pharmaceutical companies, Medical Councils and social think tanks on one side and the alternate media, social media, mainstream opposers, and just common people all have equal opportunity in spearheading and in crusading for their cause and effect. I always maintained that fear is an industry; there is so much of merchandising that goes with it. There is very little that seems to be about human well-being, but everything appears to be about creating a world of control and containing. Amidst their anxiety, people have a right to ask: Is there a plan to control the world? There are sections of medical professionals in Spain and in Germany that seem to voice an

opinion that Covid 19 is a planned pandemic, Susann R  thrich, a member of parliament with the center-left Social Democrats, in Germany suggests that it is crucial to take the current uncertainty seriously (Pfeifer, 2020). She asked that decisions are publicly discussed and made transparent, especially in the second phase of the pandemic, she suggests "we must not stifle any new debates that emerge" (Pfeifer, 2020). R  thrich warned that "the longer people have to give up their well-established everyday lives. Even supporters of contact bans and stay-at-home orders are becoming more receptive to populist or conspiratorial content due to the prolonged uncertainty and politicians ought to respond" (Pfeifer, 2020). Dr Anthony Fauci, President Trump's adviser, in his keynote address to Georgetown University, ranted with a strange certainty "that during the first term of President Trump a surprise outbreak of an infectious disease would surely happen!" (Fauci, 2017). In the following year (2018), Bill Gates announced that a global pandemic was on its way and that would easily wipe 30 million people (Loria, 2018a). Melinda, (Mrs Gates) did not lag behind. She added that an engineered virus is humanity's greatest threat and also assured this would hit humanity in the coming years (Loria, 2018b).

However, today it is different, some seem to see nationalism as growing evil, and some think it is a necessary evil. What happened when the Virus of Covid 19 came along with a border pass? Countries bolted their doors within so that humaneness that used to go beyond the borders is well contained and redefined. This new nationalism pervasively moved across the continents and let people die in thousands and led them to be buried in mass graves. Florian Bieber suggests that "[I]ike air, nationalism is both ubiquitous and elusive. It permeates the global system, states, peoples' behavior and can be seen as both conservative and as a revolutionary force, threatening the status quo" (2018, p. 519).

### **How many sides to Nationalism?**

Brexit, (UK) ascendancy of Mr Donald Trump in the USA, Mr Narendra Modi in India are

examples of the rise of nationalistic ethos amidst the ushered in a patriotic fervour in these countries towards change. Although some of the slogans in the recent past may be pre covid a new forms of reaching self-sufficiencies within nations have also been pursued as part of new nationalism., for instance, the US slogan 'America First' used by President Trump, or the idiom 'Make in India' by Indian Prime Minister Modi are examples of driving nationalism through development (Bhattacharyya and Pulla, 2019). Critics surely can argue that these may be rhetorical, nonetheless intrinsic in the notion of nationalism aimed at working towards robust economic development (Das et al., 2020).

In the USA, in the year 2016 when first time Mr Donald Trump won the presidency, it appears the American nationalism touched a different flavour. Both the Republican and Democrat Party establishments seem to have been outraged in a way by Trump. There were millions of working- and middle-class American families that seem to have gone for Trump and were concerned about wage disparities. That was a new nationalism. More recently he also stood against the Big Pharmaceutical companies and seemed to have made drug prices cheap and affordable. Trump-era also brought in the lowest prison rate for Black Americans in 31 years. (Bedard, 2020) He did commit to big budgets to the military, amongst other things and promised that he would bring most of his troops back from Afghanistan. Similarly, amidst huge, almost 10 million migrant labourers from cities and towns returning to their villages, nearly half a million of them walking or bicycling, Prime Minister Modi's Government and that of India's State governments, there was a gigantic task. The government came out with one nation – one ration card that will be a clear winner if the scheme is implemented by March 2021 (Express Web Desk, 2020).

To many nonchalant political leaders of the world that harangue right across the world, the advent of covid 19 in the first place was not unknown. However, they chose to underplay and in many powerful nations such as the USA, UK, Australia amongst others, the politicians

bluffed away. There were Prime Ministers and Presidents who were overconfident, frivolous and blatantly ignorant of the pandemic's capacity to overthrow regimes, economy and showed their blissful ignorance (Pulla, 2020). Mr Trump suggested that his "country wasn't built to shut down" and said that "if it were up to the doctors, they'd say let's shut down the entire world. This could create a much bigger problem than the problem that you started out with" (The New York Times, 2020). Moreover, this he said at a time when 158 Million Americans were told to stay home. Many critics of Jo Biden may not see the current election process as a very fair one, but no one can overrule political casualties as a result of new norm nationalism that seemed to have included ridiculing social distancing, not wearing masks, and for choosing freedom. Except that choosing freedom came with a bonus of death for many.

Susan Blackmore, suggests "that most near-death research, focusses on 'near-death experience' (NDE), of jets of lights, out-of-body experiences, and very occasionally brings out a life review of the person as though their whole life is flashing before their eyes. People who survive such experiences often report profound changes in their personality, preferences and – above all – their motivations" (Blackmore, 2020). Several leaders across the world were brushed by Covid 19, yet the impacts on their handling do not display the depth, intuition and compassion moving towards humanness and empathy. These leaders refused to see a new order that was being ushered into the world, that is, to live one needs to give up one's freedom and stay indoors (Pulla, 2020). Several thousands of deaths during the current crises sought to have intensified some sensible strategies across the world. Can a close brush with death really change anyone? Boris Johnson had one such moment previously, and the medical staff were considering how to announce his death (The Guardian, 2020). At the time of writing this editorial, he has quarantined himself as he met with an important other who had contracted Covid 19.

Undeniably the pandemic impacts are working on the psyche of humankind and changing the observance and meaning of nationalism. Recent research suggests that human beings across all nations do not necessarily adorn more nationalistic orientation during a crisis. It seems that nationalism is "contingent on their ideology: if a person's ideological belief aligns with their national identification, they will become more nationalistic; however, if their ideological belief contradicts their national identification, they are more likely to withdraw support for the nation-state" (Su, & Shen, 2020, p.5). Admittedly, the causal link between Covid 19 and nationalism meets the hypothetical constructs found in the crisis-nationalism literature. Su & Shen (2020) argue that the insecurity and uncertainty caused by crises, prejudice people to take a call.

Plenty of evidence is seen during the pandemic, the future of which is ripe with further questions about the manufacturing, distributing and dispensing of the so-called vaccine. Would this be universal like most vaccines or we will witness a vulture approach in which some vetoing nations decide who gets it first and how that nation will determine whose lives are important? Nevertheless, of course, this would meet the definitions of nationalism. Pandemical crisis of the current times is adding to the primacy of the state surely. I am afraid that we might see the Darwinian theory equally in full play in the present context. Millions of Covid struck people old or young seem to rely on the primacy of the state to manage their lives. Will affluence decide who would get the vaccine?

In this current surrender of many people across the world and across the nations, a bloody quick rise is of nationalism. As scholars, we might tease between nationhood and statehood till cows come, the reality, however, is loud and perceptible. Merchants of fear and pharma plausibly have an opportunity in the current incited nationalist emotions, and their merchandising ways and means might lead the states into anarchy and further spread of strife. I see an uneasy Christmas where the loved ones are left in nursing homes in the best interests of the rest. Who is the rest? The pandemic surely

is determined to stress cohesion within countries and ushering warring attitudes around vaccine to come. The number one casualty is not the human being, even before he is declared dead and gone it is ethics that will continue to be sacrificed at the altar. The world will never be the same as it is that ethics that seem to have been given away freely. There is no conclusion; it is pandemic.

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