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## > Asian art & cultures

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## A Journey of Research in Asia

# Crossing between Old and New Nations

The past several decades have witnessed a growing communications gap on the nature of nationalism between Western scholars and those in the new nation-states in Asia. Within academic circles in the West, the critique of nationalism is well established. Among scholars from the more recently independent states of Asia, one finds greater identification with the nation. I will try to explain this gap by exploring the changing relationship between nationalism and globalization in different parts of the world, before outlining an approach that aims to bridge this gap.

Forum >  
General

By Prasenjit Duara

For radical intellectuals in the newly independent countries, the nation – even when its performance disappointed – was the unquestioned vehicle for decolonization as well as the horizon for our goals and expectations: the building of an egalitarian socialist society, national development, the reconstruction of national culture and the dissemination of scientific and secular consciousness. By contrast, Western critique of the nation has a long history. Contemporary criticism, again mainly from the West, draws attention to the nation's many failures: state socialism has led to inefficiency and coercion; national development to ecological imbalance and disaster; national culture to chauvinism and exclusion of outsiders and minorities; secularism has become the lightning rod for the discontent of resurgent religious groups. Far from the solution, nationalism is now seen as part of the problem. Can the nation still be the goal of our endeavours? Is it still fruitful to see the amelioration of the conditions of the poorest through national lenses?

In the new nation-states, the attitude of intellectuals towards nationalism and the nation-state is more complex than in the West. Foreign criticism of the national project is often perceived as grossly one-sided and irresponsible, ignoring both the nation's intractable problems and its genuine achievements. As both insider and outsider, I have levelled the critique and experienced the pain of not having the prob-

lems and achievements of the new nations recognized. Inhabiting both sides of this border has not brought me special insights and may have compounded my dilemmas. But my position has spurred me to probe these dilemmas further.

Globalization and the accompanying shift towards the globalization paradigm have tended to undercut the moral weight of nationalism and national models. The shift to the globalization paradigm does not mean, in my view, a shift towards the positive evaluation of globalization, although that may be the dominant tendency. I understand it to mean that the societies of the world have been globalizing for quite some time and that nations and localities have been just as significantly shaped by global developments in society, economics, culture, and ideology as by their individual histories.

### Nations and global competitiveness

Debate now rages on when globalization began. My own view on this question is that it depends upon which indices are considered. In my recent writings I argue that the early twentieth century represented an important stage of 'cognitive globalization' when societies the world over re-fashioned themselves as nation-states.

In this view, nations are not ancient continuities. While the shaping influence of historical factors is undeniable, the institutional and cognitive re-casting of societies as homo-

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logous national units is a recent adaptation to survive and compete in a world of imperialism and capitalist competition. In contrast to empires and kingdoms – loosely integrated societies of the past – ‘imagined communities’ with an overarching loyalty to the nation-state were well suited to economic and territorial competition. The ideology of social Darwinism, which dominated much of the world from the late nineteenth century until the end of World War I, most starkly reflected this competitive world.

Over the course of the twentieth century, the brutality of this competition – which led to two World Wars – was moderated by anti-imperialist movements and by institutions such as the United Nations, which sought to establish global rules for conduct. But the basic form of the nation-state remained one designed for competitive advantage. Thus, both in terms of its origins and ultimate frame of reference, nationalism was closely bound to globalization. At a fundamental level, nationalism represented a form of globalization.

### Territorial nationalism

How did the newly independent nations seek to achieve their goals of development, equality, and global justice? Most decolonizing nations, rejecting the model of racial or ethnic nationalism, adopted a model of equal citizenship rights for all within their territory. The territorial model of civic nationalism seemed well suited to the realization of the nation’s emancipatory goals, and provided a framework for building a nation out of a diverse society without privileging dominant groups.

Nationalism and capitalist globalization, moreover, functioned as strategies of mutual facilitation and containment. Nation-states sought to regulate flows of capital and resources not only to gain strategic advantage in global competition, but also to stem the erosion of social institutions and relationships, mainly caused by the free flow of capital. Nation-states have historically been wary of rapid transformations as they erode the jobs, statuses, relationships, loyalties, and authenticities that underpin state sovereignty. Although the territorial model did not generate rapid growth rates, it worked – at least for as long as the state acted as the principal agent for re-distribution and regulation – to moderate internal and external cutthroat competition.

### Ethnic nationalism

Even in the best of times, it was unclear if the ideology of territorial nationalism was adequate to generate the loyalty and enthusiasm of the nation’s diverse groups, who ascribed to a variety of interests and visions of society. Because of these weaknesses, exclusive racial, religious, and linguistic nationalisms were never far from the surface, supplementing civic nationalism and providing, when necessary, more passionate forms of identification against Others. Nationalists of the blood and soil variety tend to overlook or deny their commonalities, resorting to immanent or purely internal conceptions of sovereignty based on the deep history of their people and the land: an authentic national community morally superior to outsiders and to traitors within. I call the power sustaining and sustained by this essentialization the ‘regime of authenticity’ (Duara 2003).

To be sure, the ‘regime of authenticity’ exists to a greater or lesser extent in all nations. Both ethnic-cultural and territorial-civic nationalisms require a doctrine of authenticity because nationalism is a form of identity politics where sovereignty is based upon the distinction between us and them. The territorial civic model flourished for a time because theories of immanence were balanced by the need to integrate domestic societies, and external pressures were more easily contained – in significant part due to the Cold War. Despite the potential for nationalism to be exclusivist and competitive, conditions for constructive nationalism prevailed during much of the post-war period.

It is unclear whether conditions that allow for constructive nationalism exist today. Engrossed as they are in economic globalization, most nation-states prioritize global competitiveness over balanced development. Not as such weakening nationalism, globalization is transforming it in unpleasant ways, intensifying ideologies of immanence and authenticity. The older nation-states are just as vulnerable to the pressures of globalization. While the current ‘jobless recovery’ in the US highlights the long-term flight of blue-collar jobs, concern is growing over the loss of white-collar, technical positions to places like India, China, and the Philippines.

All over the world, territorial nationalism is being re-drawn thus joining regions and communities capable of counter-acting actual and perceived threats with greater resources and collective action. Hence, we hear of Greater China and Hindu nationalism connecting national majorities with diasporic

communities to enhance global competitiveness. Such contemporary nationalism, shorn of the language of solidarity that characterized the movement for decolonization, in some ways resembles the social Darwinist rhetoric of a century ago. The faltering promise of territorial citizenship in multinational countries has an alienating effect on minorities and peripheral regions alike. In Southeast Asia, the rapid expansion of elite wealth has once again led to the targeting of Chinese ethnic minorities.

National populaces are confronted by anonymous markets that commercialize, erode or transform the belief in sacred myths of nationhood. The most immediate response to this threat is, ironically, greater attachment to myths of national authenticity, even as these myths are themselves commodified, consumed, and returned to the void. This kind of ratcheting effect represents a dead-end: a dangerous re-play of the anxiety and ambivalence the nation has displayed towards the forces of globalization, its counterpart since birth.

The only way out of this impasse is for scholars in old and new nation-states alike to recognize that, whatever else we may think of it, globalization has swept us into shared time-spaces. Inequalities will continue to exist between nations, but uneven development will cut across national boundaries. While globalization’s homogenizing dimension causes us to exaggerate our differences as nations, it also allows us to see that we inhabit the same problems and opportunities. In this lies the basis of dialogue.

### Regional interdependence

While the existing relationship between globalization and nationalism seems incapable of generating new visions, emerging transnational linkages present new opportunities to think about development in spaces where nation-states have had little interest or access. They enable scholars and intellectuals to draw attention to those who have been left behind or peripheralized by national societies.

While transnational linkages are global, many of the dense points of interaction and interdependence are regional, pointing to new ways to think about development. To be sure, the one experience with regionalism we have had – Japanese imperialism’s doomed experiment with the Co-prosperity Sphere – can only serve as a negative model, a model where regionalism became the vehicle for nationalism. We have also seen how competing interests and visions make Asian regionalism a project for the long-term future. While an Asian regional formation is unlikely to look like the European Union, Asian scholars should look at Europe anew – without post-colonial anxiety – to learn from the EU and avoid its mistakes.

Allow me to indulge in my fantasy for Asia’s future. Nations, of course, are unlikely to disappear any time soon. Central to the formation of a region, however, is interdependence, an interdependence likely to be expressed in complex, multi-tiered, and multi-nodal apparatuses permitting cooperation, coordination, control, and autonomy. Interests are, and will remain, too varied to make the region anything like a nation, while the distribution of power is, and ought to be, unfavourable to the hegemony of any single country. At any rate, it should be an inclusive, functional formation rather than an exclusive power bloc. But perhaps it ought to have just enough power to deter the US, the hegemon that now dominates the world.

Despite some brave efforts, we scholars have been laggards. The forces of globalization have generated trans- and sub-national relationships that have sped ahead of the initiatives of nationally organized academic establishments. Business networks and states have sponsored organizations such as APEC, the East Asian Economic Council, and the Asian Development Bank (ADB), each with its own vision for Asia. What role can scholars play that will allow us to regain our moral responsibility? What lies beyond national competitiveness and scholarly careerism? Let me suggest one example from the region where I was born and spent my early childhood: Assam.

Assam is part of the frontier zone between Southeast Asia, China and India, and used to be, a very long time ago, a vibrant region of flourishing commerce and Buddhism. It is now a disaster-stricken, exploited periphery, where a war of all against all reigns amidst the futile project of sorting out who’s who. Assam is of course important to me, but I also raise it because it’s the kind of place that Asianists ought to

### Editors note >

This article is a shortened and revised version of the keynote speech, which the author delivered at the International Convention of Asian Scholars 3 (ICAS3). Reactions for the author can be sent to the editors at IIAS. The full text of this speech can be read at: [www.iias.nl](http://www.iias.nl)

### Biography >

Professor Duara obtained a PhD at Harvard University in 1983 and won the American Historical Association’s Fairbank prize and Association for Asian Studies’ Levenson prize with his first book, *Culture, Power and the State: Rural North China, 1900-1942* (Stanford 1988, 1991). This study treats some of the basic themes in connection to the social and cultural history of modern China, which feature among Duara’s evolving interests since the 1980s. He deals with the changing relationship between the state, elites, and popular culture from the late imperial period until the present and has, in recent years, scrutinized many of the problems regarding these issues through the lens of gender and sexuality.

A second area of Duara’s interest deals with nationalism, imperialism, and transnationalism. He has written two books with a comparative understanding of nationalism: *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (University of Chicago Press, 1995, 1996) and *Sovereignty and Authenticity: Manchukuo and the East Asian Modern* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2003). While the former work deals with nationalism and the emergence of modern historical consciousness (mainly) in China, the latter seeks to understand the changing relationship between imperialism and nationalism in twentieth-century East Asia through the study of Manchukuo, the Japanese puppet state in the Chinese northeast (1932-1945).



Courtesy of the author

Prasenjit Duara

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explore. Its incorporation as a periphery in the Indian nation-state has de-linked it from its historical connections, while its backward and troubled status ensures that celebratory notions of Asia will pass it by.

Yet there are people in places like Yunnan and Assam, in institutes such as the ADB and the Ford Foundation, and elsewhere who have begun re-thinking the region with an eye towards its revitalization, well beyond its present national confines. Today the old Stilwell Road is again in use, trans-Himalayan trade has re-opened, and there is talk of an Asian highway. As scholars of Asia, we can deploy our knowledge of the changing contours of regions and affiliations, of multiple links between centres and peripheries, of complex relations between culture and political economy; so that when the political formations are born, we too can shape them in just and meaningful ways, to restore the spirit of the anti-colonial movement that once brought Asians and others together. <

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