



Book Review on Shashi Tharoor's 'The Battle of Belonging: On Nationalism, Patriotism, And What it Means to Be an Indian'

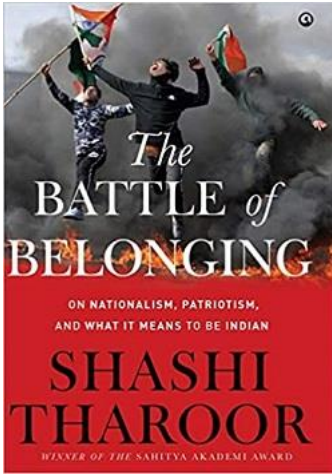
Suraj Gunwant

Teaches at Department of English, Ewing Christian College,
University of Allahabad, Prayagraj, UP, India.

In the last decade or so, nationalism has ceased to be an abstruse social science topic in academic debates around the globe. A number of countries have reported resurgence of movements within their politico-cultural space that insist on a greater inward look, emphasis on local, indigenous religious/ cultural practices, and a need for

homogeneity at a time when the world is getting increasingly connected and globalized.

Such a retrogressive movement has a special link with India where the theory and practice of the current ruling party, the BJP has



catapulted nationalism into the street and the social media space. Shashi Tharoor's most recent book *The Battle of Belonging* attempts to address the threats and challenges to the Indian republic spawned by, in the author's estimation, a marked shift to 'ethno-nationalism' under the BJP regime. The author in his book pits this ethno-nationalism of the BJP and the RSS against what he calls 'civic-nationalism' which was endorsed by the founding fathers of the republic of India and is deeply embedded in the constitution of

the country. The idea of civic nationalism which he espouses is not predicated upon one's 'ethnicity, religion or language' but 'involves multiple and layered affiliations' and integration derives from 'a sense of mutual commitment among citizens to a common set of ideals, values, and rules'. Such nationalism is, according to the author, noble and benign as well as more appropriate to the new world order we inhabit. Ethno-nationalism, in contrast, harks back to a relatively primitive age when allegiances to one's homeland descended from one's relationship to the dominant ethnicity.

Divided into six sections and 38 short chapters, the book starts by locating 'the idea of nationalism' as something of recent vintage that supplanted great empires of the world and gained distinct currency only in the 19th century. It defines nine broad categories of nationalism and argues that nationalism as an idea should be marked differently from its synonym patriotism in that while patriotism is natural love and pride in one's birthplace and encompasses

acknowledgment of flaws, and is more open to coexistence; nationalism is based on not registering any warts, is mindless promotion of one's nation as the most superior of all and has xenophobia embedded in it. Tharoor then goes on to call nationalism janus faced because while as a myth it unites people and gives them a sense of belonging, its flip side entails a fear and hatred of the other which leads to wars and disorder. In the subsequent sections of the book, the author draws attention to and criticizes majoritarian nationalism, the kind of nationalism practiced by elected leaders in the US, the UK, Turkey, India, Israel and so on which he theorises as a backlash against the crisis of globalism and multiculturalism. His specific target here is relentless attempts at cultural homogenization of his home country India which for millennia has been the cradle for tolerance, pluralism and heterogeneity.

In the culture war that engulfs the country, Tharoor, drawing ideas and inspiration from Nehru, Gandhi, and Ambedkar, is evidently on the side of more liberty and openness to religious, linguistic, and cultural diversity as means to achieving national integration. This of course is not the first time the erstwhile diplomat and minister of parliament has expressed his distaste for majoritarianism, sectarianism, and linguistic chauvinism which, in his analysis, has spiked over the last decade resulting in multiple reported instances of hate crimes, cow vigilantism killings, fake news, trolling, rape threats etc. weakening India's unity in diversity. His entire oeuvre, across genres, iterates pluralism as the basis of the true idea of India. The author wants his reader to not get swayed by the continuous stream of fake news and Whatsapp forwards, the overly masculine posturing of the powers that be, the vitriol and propaganda in media, the insistence on singularity of the *Hindi-Hindu-Hindustan* rallying cry of ethno-nationalism.

The major problem with the book is that it feels too wordy and repetitive at multiple junctures which may put off many readers. This becomes more acute for those who are familiar with the author's ideological and political allegiances articulated in his

countless print media articles, speeches, interviews, and of course books. What works for him here is the pace of the narration which is fast and fluent. The book is not particularly intellectually demanding, and theoretically does not break new ground. Barring the first section titled 'The Idea of Nationalism' where the author marshals support of established thinkers in familiarizing his readers with multiple ways of imagining nationhood, nationalism's origin and its multiple facets, the rest of this book remains very much a polemical account, a passionate indictment of the sins of the rival political party, particularly its leader at the helm. It is an exercise in non-stop castigation of Hindutva and often sketches its opposition in broad strokes, colouring it in monochrome. If one reads this account of modern India in conjunction with say Vinay Sitapati's *Jugal Bandi: The BJP Before Modi* (2020) and Badri Narayan's latest *Republic of Hindutva: How the Sangh is Reshaping Indian Democracy* (2021) then one may conclude that the book oversimplifies the conservative right-wing movement and follows closely the tradition of liberal-left view of the RSS and its affiliates. Detractors may say that it refuses to register how the BJP and the RSS have refashioned themselves along modern enlightenment values, assimilating those communities which were historically on the fringes, and have accepted India's ties to its West-inspired constitutional structure while simultaneously ceasing to be agents of bloodshed and riots.

As a polemic, the book succeeds in persuading its reader to be on the right side of history and convinces her to align her nationalism with what is becoming increasingly common in the more developed west notwithstanding the current discontent with globalization and pluralism in certain parts of Europe. In terms of concerns it finds company with Aakar Patel's *Our Hindu Rashtra* (2020) and K S Komireddi's *Malevolent Republic* (2019) both of which are eminently readable but the celebrity of Shashi Tharoor generates for this book a larger and perhaps more receptive readership.

Author's Bio-note: Dr. Suraj Gunwant teaches literature and culture at the Department of English, Ewing Christian College, University of Allahabad, Prayagraj. Prior to joining the department in 2017 he wrote his Ph.D at IIT Roorkee. His research interests include Travel Narratives, South Asian Literature and Culture, Masculinity and Politics, and Contemporary Fiction. His critical works have been published by *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies on Humanities*, *IUP Journal of English Studies* as well as by Routledge and Palgrave Macmillan.

Title: [The Battle of Belonging: On Nationalism, Patriotism, And What it Means to Be an Indian](#)

Author: [Shashi Tharoor](#)

Publisher: [Aleph Book Company](#)

Available: [Amazon](#)

Suraj Gunwant

Suraj Gunwant teaches at Department of English, Ewing Christian College, University of Allahabad, Prayagraj, UP, India.



PRIME AT
₹ 999
PER YEAR*

amazonprime

Original Shows 1-day delivery* Ad-free Music

Join now

*T&C Apply

The advertisement features a light blue background. At the top left, a white starburst shape contains the text 'PRIME AT ₹ 999 PER YEAR*'. In the center, the 'amazonprime' logo is displayed on a dark blue rectangular background. Below the logo, three white boxes with blue outlines contain the text 'Original Shows', '1-day delivery*', and 'Ad-free Music'. At the bottom center, a yellow button with a black border says 'Join now'. In the bottom right corner, the text '*T&C Apply' is written in a small, dark font.

Get Your Book Reviewed

If you have got any book published and are looking for a book review, contact us. We provide book review writing service for a fee. We (1) write book review (2) publish review in CLRI (3) conduct an interview with the author (4) publish interview in CLRI. [Know more here.](#)

Authors & Books

We publish book releases, Press Release about books and authors, book reviews, blurbs, author interviews, and any news related to authors and books for free. We welcomes authors, publishers, and literary agents to send their press releases. Visit our website <https://page.co/Vw17Q>.