

Book Review

Chandra, Rajshree. 2021. *Competing Nationalisms: The Sacred and Political Life of Jagat Narain Lal*. Viking Penguin and The New India Foundation, Gurgram, pp. 222,

Reviewed by

Pavan Kumar

Volume II

Perspectives - A Peer-Reviewed, Bilingual, Interdisciplinary E-Journal

Janki Devi Memorial College

University of Delhi

Find us at - <http://perspectives-jdmc.in/>

Chandra, Rajshree. 2021. *Competing Nationalisms: The Sacred and Political Life of Jagat Narain Lal*. Viking Penguin and The New India Foundation, Gurugram, pp. 222,

Pavan Kumar

Nationalism is an essentially contested concept. It has been interpreted in various ways and there is no authoritative definition that can encompass all the ideas around it. If some consider it as a unifying and cohesive force, for others it is an instrument of exclusion, oppression, and domination. Many historians trace the roots of world wars to the emergence of nationalism in Europe while historians from the South describe it as a force that galvanised millions against colonialism and imperialism and in favour of self-determination and freedom.

In this debate on the many meanings of Nationalism, Rajshree Chandra's book *Competing Nationalism: The Sacred and Political Life of Jagat Narain Lal* provides quite a complex and perplexing idea of Indian nationalism through the life of one of India's freedom fighters and her grandfather Jagat Narain Lal. The book narrates the story of Jagat Narain Lal's journey through many shades of nationalism. In her view, Jagat Narain Lal walked four pathways of nationalism; and these four competing paths were: Ascetic, Hindu Nationalist, Anti Colonial, and Civic nationalism. She argues that it would be injustice to capture a figure like him within the brackets of only one category of nationalism. She urges that we should go beyond the black and white of the matter and focus on the numerous shades of personalities and their ideas of nationalism. By doing so, we might be better suited to interpret the concurrent Indian politics and rise of contemporary Hindutva under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

The book is divided into six chapters. The first chapter of the book, the Shaping of Nationalist Consciousness, travels through Jagat Narain's early life. It documents his early education, his stay at Allahabad, his marriage with Ram Pyari Devi, his moving back to Patna, and starting his law practice in Patna High Court. This further traces his involvement in the Non-Cooperation Movement while being influenced by the ideas and life of Mahatma Gandhi. This development led Jagat Narain to leave his practice and join as faculty member of Economics at Sadaqat Ashram and Bihar Vidyapith. In the coming years, his influence in Congress grew and he became a prominent voice in Bihar Congress along with Rajendra Prasad and others. He was arrested in 1921 and imprisoned for boycotting the visit of the Prince of Wales. This phase of his life is marked by personal sacrifice for the nation and community.

Chapter two focuses on his ascetic journey. Rajshree Chandra categorises Jagat Narain's ascetic journey through three conscious acts: Suffering, Renunciation, and Righteous Conduct. Through these means, he transcended worldly pleasures and devoted himself to the service of mother India. He writes, 'I lost so many of my precious ones- those near and dear to me, my father, my wife, my child and others in subsequent journeys....but I have never grieved over all these earthly losses – and that not merely because it is a privilege to suffer for the country's freedom and to sacrifice all that one hold dear, but also because destiny has amply repaid me for this and made me many times richer though not in a worldly sense' (Chandra 2021: 33). He continuously tries to detach himself from desire, pain, and attachment. The Gita was the source for his path for righteous conduct and detachment, and he continued exploring the Gita in jail too.

Chapter three rather focuses on a more controversial idea of Hindu, Hinduism, and Hindutva. While, in his early years he joined congress on the call of Mahatma Gandhi, he was not completely ready to detach himself from the organisation as he was also very conscious of his Hindu identity. He felt pain time and again, for the conditions of the Hindu population and their constant ‘exploitation’ by both Hindu priests and missionaries who were ‘converting’ them to Christianity. Thus, he was carrying two identities together: Hindu, and nationalist. He kept shifting or adjusting his identity between Seva, Sabha, the Congress, and Sangathan. If, on the one hand, he was ‘worried’ about the problem of conversion, on the other hand he was also an active member of the cow protection organisation. These activities brought him closer to the Hindu Mahasabha, of which he was a prominent member. This led him to shift away from the Congress. However, the arrival of Munje and others in the Hindu Mahasabha and the idea of Hindutva made him uncomfortable with the Hindu Mahasabha, thus forcing him to move towards the congress. Rajshree Chandra writes, ‘The more his “self” got fractured into simultaneous brings – a Hindu, a Hindi nationalism-vadi, a Congressman, a Hindu Mahasabhaite, a Gandhian, a Karmayogi – the more fissiparous became his nationalist identity’ (Chandra 2021: 71). He was very critical of Hindu priests and their indulgence in corruption. This led him to initiate the legislation of the Hindu Matt, but he was not supported by many in this endeavour.

The fourth Chapter details Jagat Narain’s life post-1934. This period is marked by his more active and dedicated participation in the anti-colonial struggle as he distanced himself from the Hindu Mahasabha and moved closer to the Congress. He was elected as a member of the Bihar assembly and made a minister in the government. However, later, he left the government when the Congress decided to resign in the wake of the

Second World War. As a congressman, he opposed the communal award, and on this line, he tabled a resolution for an undivided India in 1942 in the wake of the Cripps Mission. He stressed the idea of 'forgive and forget' between Hindus and Muslims for a united India. However, as the Congress and its top brass accepted the partition plan, he was left with no choice but to agree with them.

The Idea of civic nationalism and ethnic/cultural nationalism is discussed in chapter five. In the wake of Savarkar's ideas of *punyabhumi* and *pitrabhumi*, and other Hindu right-wing ideologies, Jagat Narain chose to agree an idea that was more modern, secular, egalitarian, and accommodative; i.e. civic nationalism. He did not let his Hindu identity and interests come in the way of a more egalitarian idea of citizenship. This chapter uses the constituent assembly debates in detail to give a comprehensive picture of the debate on citizenship. Jagat Narain's commitment to these ideas stemmed from the need for unity in the country and maintenance of solidarity. Chandra demonstrates that he was a great votary of free speech and labour rights. However, he was not in support of including the word secular in the constitution and was also against the inclusion of the right to propagate religion in the Indian Constitution.

The last chapter, the *Inheritance of Contradictions* focuses on post-2014 India.

This chapter runs as commentary on the current 'crises' or contradictions that India is facing. It comments on India's 'majoritarian turn' and gives away the civic nationalism once it was proud of. However, in her view, the contradictions, especially the secular one, are exploited by the right wing and conservatives in Indian politics and it is damaging the integrity of the nation rather than making it stronger.

Thus, the book *Competing Nationalisms* is an important intervention in India's history of nationalism and the various strands of nationalism. Biographies like these inspire us to read more about such personalities because they are beyond black and white narratives, and they explore the greys of India's freedom struggle. This is the greatest achievement of this book. This would further ignite interest in the life and thought of Jagat Narain Lal and many more of his contemporaries. This reason alone suggests that Rajshree Chandra deserves appreciation and congratulations for taking up this mammoth task.

However, the book has a few limitations. The first thing that Rajshree Chandra misses is the social location of Jagat Narain Lal. The book does not mention his caste location in society, a location that might have affected his political and social philosophy. Caste is, and has been a very important influencing factor in constructing our world views. The critics of Hinduism such as Gandhi and Vivekananda faced discrimination in their lives because of their social location, which affected their world view towards religion. Thus, exploring his social location and its association with his ideas would have added greater value to the analysis. The second important aspect which this biography misses is exploring the question of gender and Jagat Narain Lal's perspective on the same. His relation with his mother and wife is also not fully explored. This requires attention. If we talk about nation and nationalism and leave out the women from the discourse and discussion, we are missing out on half of our population.

The book also does not reflect on Jagat Narain's life from 1951 onwards. This period was marked by his active political engagement in Bihar. To be better acquainted with

someone's ideas, relying solely on diaries, speeches and biographies should not be enough. It becomes significant to trace the activities that were a part of him. Ten years is an extensive time frame for tracing someone's political ideology and commitments to them. Thus, interpreting this period would have added more value and utility to the book.

The book is written in an extremely elegant language and does not use unnecessary jargon. It is useful for both, scholars or academicians, and 'common' people. This also enlarges the scope for a wider audience. If (/one is) facing the current political dilemma regarding nationalism, secularism, freedom of speech, liberty, and the role of religion in politics, one should without any doubt read this book as this has the ability to raise awareness of the predicaments faced by the forefathers and the choices that they made out of competing ideas of nationalism and freedom.

About the reviewer:

Pavan Kumar teaches political Science at the department of Political Science, Janki Devi Memorial College, University of Delhi. He is been awarded PhD in 2022 in International Policy and his thesis title was 'Examining Vallabhbhai Patel's Approach to India's Foreign Policy'. His research interests are : history of India's foreign policy, Patel, Machiavelli, Theories of International Relation, Caste and Gender in Indian IR. He can be contacted at pavan@jdm.du.ac.in.