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# Nation and Self: A Study of Pradip Kumar Patra's Select Poems

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## Abstract

Pradip Kumar Patra is one of the most prominent writers of the 21st century. His poetry renounces the idea of a nation, landscape and culture. As a poet, he urges to immortalise his love for his mother land. In narrativising his native panorama he also adheres to his patriotic ideals. His poetry generates his love for his native place in particular and his country in general. Most of his collections of poems – *Panoramic Shillong* (1996), *Summer Implications* (1996), *The Winding Path* (1997), *Denouement* (1998), *Dewy Morning* (1998), *Midnight Divinity* (1998), *The Rain Speaks* (2009) emphasise on the element of nostalgia, inclusiveness, memory, national consciousness and Indian sensibility. This paper intends to study the select poems of Patra that talk about rural life, attachment, ambivalence and adoration. Further, it attempts to locate how the elements of nation and nationhood act as the background of his composition. The understanding of the term 'nation' seems to be an individual construct. The poet seems to be conscious of his national identity, cultural heritage and societal implications. His Indianness categorises his conscious and subconscious self. His selfhood seems to be very much Indian. He gets influenced by Indian tradition and culture. Patra's state of mind deciphers the gravity of his native land as well as his Indian sensibility. His native land serves as a precursor to his Indian way of thinking and meditating. In his poems nation acts as a mere identity that symbolises his strength and sense of belongingness. His perception of Indian beliefs and myths provides him peace at times of crisis and annihilation. The urban habitation, the

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tangible reality and the rural tapestry contribute to his idea of being an Indian. The paper insists on the nationalist sentiment of Patra that gets articulated in his poetic endeavour.

**Keywords:** Nation, poetry, land, culture, society

Pradip Kumar Patra is a poet of much acclaim and commend. He delves deep into the structured details of his native land. He ponders over the effect of myriad influences, colourful imitations, collective receptivity and survival strategy of his village. His idea of his native land accustoms with his validation of Indian nationhood. The correlation between his native land and his country represents his selfhood. His poems generate an ideological belief about nation and society, family and self and festivity and celebration. He situates his identity more as a nationalised self than as a mere individual. He involves himself in deciphering earthly consciousness towards his country, land and village. His calm and placid mind allows him to enlighten himself with Indian sentiment and tradition. His poems appear to be an amalgamation of religion and relics. He most often seems to be aware of preserving Indian culture and heritage. He celebrates his Indianness. His very self seems to be loaded with Indian sensibility.

Patra's concept of nation revolves around his axiom and credence. He believes in himself in installing the ambit of nation and nationhood. The most interesting aspect of his poetry lies in the way he theorises the very idea of nation. The Macmillan dictionary defines nation as "a country that has its own land and government". Longman dictionary of Contemporary English defines nation as "a country, considered especially in relation to its people and its social or economic structure".

Further, Iyengar refers to Harindranath who believes that "poetry is man's- the poet's as well as the reader's- elemental need: no expendable luxury but the very oxygen of existence" (604). He also refers to Hannah Arendt's view who regards that the society in a modern world is "that curiously hybrid realm where private interests assume public significance' and the realm flows unceasingly and uncertainly into each other 'like waves in the never ending stream of the life-process itself" (605).

Anderson writes in the 'Introduction' to his book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* that nationalism is more of a "phenomenon" that "has existed and exists" (3). He further tries to conceptualise "the formal universality of nationality as a socio-cultural concept …" (5). He emphasises more on cultural system than on political ideology. He believes in the

existence of nation which is an absolute truth. Similarly, Patra also talks about the existence of his national identity through his poetry. In his poem "Shreds of Speculation" (in *Summer Implications* (1996)) he writes: "… the stone image/ of Dasavatara stored by the/ Archaeological Survey of India/ in the state museum" (lines 22-25). This poem seems to be a manifestation of the binary between preservation and endangerment. As he writes how he is reminded of "the ancient/ relics of a land which/ suffers from religious devastation/ for the sake of fanaticism" (15-18). Here, he idealises the museum further, it acts as a preservation hub that protects the spirit of India and its resourceful entity. His positivity towards his village river, Subarnarekha, counts to the list of traditional and ethnic centricity. His allegiance with his native land comprehends to his feeling of belongingness. As he writes in "All About Subarnarekha": "the intimacy/ which develops so spontaneously" (4-5) the river provides him 'healthy attitude'(21) and 'positive impressions' (19). His poems grow to attain grandeur both in mood and essence. He attains spiritual pleasure in dealing with the history, mythology and nature of his country in general and his land in particular. In "The Beach Festival" he talks about the unification of his fragmented self. "The silence/ of the horizon" (9-10) invokes a sense of festivity and enjoyment in the mind of the poet. In the poem "Experiencing a Bliss" he says: "I have observed, my village smiles… and smile the/ peasants ploughing the land" (17-20). He here applauds the convergence of the sea and the rain that aspires to the "fertility of the sterile earth" (24). In "Indian Festival" he urges to foreground the dichotomy between natural and artificial, permanent and mechanical, urban and rural, and life and soul. The poem reads as: "No precision/ no artificiality/ and no conscious improvisation … Yet it has a significance" (1-6). For the poet, Indian festivity is an expansion of cultural exchanges and nationalist sentiments. It appears to be enlightening and blissful. He identifies himself with the Indian territory and experiences a new life in his own earthly form. The poetic-self endures to live a life of peace, percipience and content. His attachment to Indian tradition and customs allude to the wisdom of his greater approval. It is indeed a realisation, an achievement and a fulfilment. He embraces the faithful conscience and soothing Indian sensation. To him, nation is a mere consciousness. He gets intoxicated by the richness of the Indian soil. He tries to cast the present in the glory and the wonder of the past. In "Historic Golconda" he sings: "the song of/ freedom" (17-18). He, here, feels within the glorious and the rich past of the fort. His very self casts itself to be Indian in approach and experience. This collection regenerates his understanding of the term nation. The narrative style of his poetry creates a state of apotheosis which is a pre-condition of an achievement.

The term nation intensifies the very identity of the poet. Patra's nationalist-self acts as an indomitable spirit in deciphering his unconditional love and respect for his country. He literally sees, perceives and wonders about his land. He simply seems to be amazed at the spirit of India and the Indian way of life. Parthasarathy in the Introduction remarks: "An important characteristic of Indian verse in English in the mid-twentieth century has been its emergence… that it is Indian in sensibility and content, and English in language" (3). In *Panoramic Shillong* (1996), the poem "Beauty" talks about his understanding of the term beauty. The poem begins with the word 'creation'. He feels sustained at the beauty of his nation on the one hand and of his native place on the other. He goes deep into the basics of beauty. The image of a 'Banyan tree' (6) symbolises the spirit of the earth in the poem "Benevolent Canopy". His benevolent self edifies to the prevalence of spiritual practice and human virtue. He sees and feels India in its gracious wind and enormous landslide. He feels honoured to be the son of his native land. He shares an emotional bond with it. The poem "Native Land" infers with: "… in my heart is love, untarnished/ and unprompted for my native land" (29-30). His native land remains in his memory forever. He grows in thoughts and feelings with his land and the memory of his ancestors. Further, the varied Indian myths and beliefs bring an amount of "peace for silent reminiscence" (12). He wishes to liberate himself by getting immersed in the microcosm of the Indian subcontinent. In his poetic style he touches almost every corner of the Indian territory namely Meghalaya, Assam, Telengana, Odisha, Bengal, Himalaya and many more. His Indianhood elevates his entire being to an uncalculated height. His nationalist endeavour assures him courage, confidence and clarity. Patra here dwells with nature and its confluence on the country landscape. The song of the cuckoo, whistling of the wind and yellow flowers contribute to the vitality of India and the Indian subcontinent. "Spring at Ravenshaw College" creates a dynamic panorama of the Indian topography. The word 'saffron' (29) symbolises heritage, belief, convention and cultural edifice. The poem reads as: "During the meditative noon I feel/ the history of the Ravenshaw College/ with all its saffron hue" (27-29). His subjective Indian outlook also adheres to the riots, societal inequality and illegal practices in India but that never withstands the peace and harmony of India. His poems are a gallery of his manifold expressions and experiences. He becomes nostalgic at the regular and rhythmic sound of the running train, the ludicrous poverty and ancient monuments. He feels celestially united with the Indian virtue and endurance.

His Indianness is prompt, active, extensive and resourceful. *Dewy Morning* (1998) explores the range of Patra's underlying poetic discourse and structural verse. His idea of gods and goddesses contribute to the expanse of his conviction and exasperation. The divine occasion of 'Durga Puja' (2) in "The Durga Puja Feeling", the cow' (5) in "Emergence", 'the pearls of the Charminar' (14) in "Hyderabad Memory", 'the postman' (19) in "The Postman", 'the caves of Ajanta and Ellora' in "Soul and Sympathy" subscribe to the unveiling of his Indian experience. The 'I' in the poet gets merged with the 'I' in India. Adrian Hastings in *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism* insists on the importance of religion in the creation of nationhood. Patra also analyses his own maturity and spontaneity in dealing with the truth and beauty of India. He visualises India with his own speculative philosophy. His poems are a clear perception and evaluation of his own self. His poems appear to be a culmination of varied sources of human life. In the poem "Words" he writes: "… I feel, I breath fire,/ when in joy I forget/ whether I breathe fire or air" (3-4). His encounter with the world gets a definite form through his poetry. In "World Beyond Life" he writes: "Much water would have flown down the Ganga/ by the time a change comes" (10-11). He here makes a critique of 'Western feelings' (19) and 'colossal ignorance' (22). By projecting his Indianness he revolts against the monopoly by the bureaucrats of the world.

*Denouement* (1998) presents the poet's realisation about the strength of the alliance between the poetic self and his individual self. In "Answer" he says: "I am in the dust/ I am in the scent of the earth" (6-7). Moreover, he writes: " … I am/ lying peacefully on the ground looking at the sky" (9-10). His Indian consciousness grows as he grows in his experience and wisdom. The incredible India is audible to him. His alliance with the resources of India becomes a part of his existence. He seems to be preoccupied with the fragrance and music of the Indian grace. Being an Indian is happiness for him. As he comments in "Happiness Beyond Reason": "Than is the happiness bound by no cause/ and effect; its grace I believe would flare/ my fragile existence aflame" (8-10). He celebrates the Indian civilization which is full of pristine beauty and passionate sensation. Each and every aspect of his poetry cast him as an "integrated living being of the earth" (19). Eric Hobsbawm in *Nations and Nationalism* describes nation as a myth oriented identity. For Patra, the sanctity of the nation expands his inner being. In "Longterm Survive" he uncovers the significance of "ceremony of/ Kartika Purnima" (6-7). His Indianness is an open ended endeavour. The trajectory of the nation gets intensified with the development of his understanding. He recognises himself with his village and its

landscape. In "My Village" he writes: "I become an 'I' only,/ the 'I' rests peacefully within me" (7-8). His village appears to be his identity. His "Spontaneous Spiritualism" reads as: "… I see the vermilion smeared/ stones worshipped as Goddess Kali under a tree" (5-6). In "Memory" he refers to Goddess Saraswati and how the effigy gets "discovered some days/ after her immersion in water" (11-12). Such instances recount his association with the events and how it immortalises his feelings. He articulates his Indian imagination and transmits his expression that excels the range and depth of human vocabulary. Harrison and Boyd refer to Anderson who "tries to explain how nationalism as an ideology, and national identity embedded in that ideology… " (2).

*Midnight Divinity* (1998) attempts to unveil the difference between objects and concepts and vice versa. The Indian way of worshipping 'tulsi plant' (4) occupies a special place in the poet's mind and heart. He writes: "Time has not been able to fade its glow" (7) in the poem "Love and Devotion". The poem "Love and Liberation" is a critique of Indian dowry system. He dwells with the extent of how an educated Indian girl seems to be marginalised in a patriarchal society. The poem reads as: "They charged one lakh/ and twenty thousand:/ one lakh as dowry and the/ rest twenty thousand for furniture" (1-4). Patra also assures the national history when he talks about Lord Buddha and his teachings. He tries to configure the mythical reality in the light of Indian Archaelogy and history. The 'peepal tree' (19) in "Non-violent God" seems to be symbolic of peace, intellect and divinity. He desires to become a human who will have a complete perception of the earth. Patra delightfully receives the goodliness, godliness, peace and ecstasy of his country. He attains a sense of belongingness towards his nation. He speaks about the significance of the Rameshwaram setu in "Survival". The line reads as: "… the making of the/ Rameshwaram setu cannot be undervalued" (12-13). It gives him inspiration and consoles him to live life afresh.

The first poem in *The Winding Path* (1997) appears to be a panorama of his psychological and psysiological attachment with the Jagannath temple. It is a symbolic of trust and desire. It helps him to retrieve his cognizance. He writes: "Distrust treats in/ followed by the crumbling/ of the Jagannath temple" ("About a Lost Identity" 18-20). He seems to envelope the varied expedients of India namely the 'innumerable masterpieces' (6), 'myths' and 'archives' (12), and 'natural tapestry' (22). As he says in "Beyond Entanglement": "The vision of life is not just/ an entanglement in ambition and/ achievement but an inner engagement/ with idea and experience" (6-9). These lines refer to his psychic mental arrangement that intends

to triumph in viewing India as a dedicated devotee. The Indian edification vindicates him of all his frustrations and distrust. In "Divine Resurrection" he talks about how "the Indian ecology fathoms a certain kind of accomplishment to attain divine resurrection" (25). Further the collection also adheres to the implication of Dusserah, when the "Goddess/ really comes down to the earth" (1-2). The different Indian impressions contribute to the bucket of his enormous experiences.

His poetic agenda excels in the survival of India's codes and conventions both in spirit and glow. The multicultural and multilingual India gets featured in his "Handcuff". The poem reads as: "India as a whole" (22). His poems represent India both in parts and as a whole. His manifestation of India defines the alliance between human and self, and poet and individual. Simultaneously, it also analyses the sense of optimism that cultivates his thinking and imagination. To him, India appears to be a gentle, sensitive and nostalgic rhetoric. The very national consciousness makes him a perfect human being. He writes in "Voice of Silence": "… psychoanalyse my conscious, subconscious and/ supraconscious-/ still no trace of sorrow/ I am perfect" (9-12). His apprehension of the maxim 'nation' is more a preparation for perfection and less a process for seclusion. The authentic prevalence like 'the sound of the conch' (1) and the working of 'Rahu' (14) codify his own existence in intangible alertness. The poem "Puri" is a conglomeration of his true Indian self. It symbolises his hope of survival, attainment of knowledge and empirical reality. The Puri sea and the Thakurbari of Puri act as an instance that projects his ideal Indian consciousness. He identifies himself with "its inner resilience" (2). "The Puri Sea" satisfies his quest for discovery and exploration.

Each and every aspect of his poetry in *The Rain Speaks* (2009) is Indian in tone and content. Poetry according to Bruce King is a 'created artifice' (136). The rain, the earth, the river and the jungle provide an era of self-sustainability. The poem "Ventilation" talks about "… the divine mainstream/ where there is no hatred, no bloodshed, only love and love and love …" (18-20). Further, in "An Innocuous Feeling" he writes: "I realized the futility of trying to/ understand each and every phenomenon/ of the world, instead, I felt how things/ were delightful in as- they-are" (9-12). This is again symbolic of his expanded idea of life and living. These aspects help him to feel a "breezy memory' (13), "eerie enlightenment" (14), "intimate yearning" (15) and "spontaneous acceptance" (16). In the poem "River" his maturity of understanding and extensive strategic behaviour get reflected. He writes: "The 'I' in me is not as vast/ as the reality, it is an intense/ microscopic whole, the 'I' in me is a mystery,/ it is a hypnosis, it is an ecstasy" ("Experience of Rapture" 9-13). The

'I' in the poet participates in the established order of the country. The mythical reality of Kalijai and Chilika subscribe an element of satisfaction and attainment within the poet. He accepts the nation as it is. He recoils himself by saying: "What was unthinkable/ just like 99 Orissa supercyclone yesterday/ is a fact today" (7-9). The poem "I Shall not Hurt You" verifies the way he justifies his acceptance of the national history. In "Intimate Earth" he writes: "I look around/ and touch the earth of the garden/ and feel it, it is the earth I've/ been seeing since my birth" (22-24). He here meditates on the beauty and serenity of the Indian landscape. He feels intimate with the mother earth. In spite of the unrecorded loss and catastrophe, the coastal Odisha (formerly Orissa**)** still survives because the poet believes that: "the reality does not/ remain reality all the time" (31-32). The then scenario changes to a memorable entity. The poem celebrates the envisioning of "a green earth" (45). The brown earth symbolises the existence of superpower. The hazards look like "the supercyclone is only a test" (44). "In Supercyclonic Transgression" Patra concentrates on the fact that how the nation believes in creating harmony even by recollecting the 1999 supercyclone. The poem relives India's past and engulfs the intimate propaganda to saturate the devastation and disaster brought about by the cyclone. In "Life in Debris" Patra describes about life being eternal and death which is 'temporal' (24). The poem structures the binary between death and life, vacuum and experience, temporal and permanent and existence and survival. The poem "Death is a Way of Life" and "Life in Debris" situate the poet's position with the legacy of being an Indian.

The aspect of nation and nationhood seems to be the progenitor of his religious thought and cultural solidarity. He locates himself with the Indian landscape that appears to be cool and colourful. The simplicity and legendary spirit of India as a nation is embedded with the poet's elucidative comments. The prosperity of his nationhood provides him peace, harmony and surprise. Nation and nationhood is a grand entity for the poet. It is a response, memoir, mastery and consummation.

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