



Playing the Nation Game

The Ambiguities of Nationalism in India

Benjamin Zachariah

In his significant new work, *Playing the Nation Game*, Benjamin Zachariah examines the tension between the 'nation' idea as a necessary language of legitimacy with which to claim liberation, and its role in disciplining people and their identities in India in the name of national liberation. Focusing on the anti-colonial struggle and the subsequent 'Nehruvian' period, and necessarily on histories of interconnected and travelling ideas, it seeks to show the ambiguities, exclusions and consequent dangers of nationalism, and the ways in which scholarship and politics conspire to reify nationalist frameworks. It explodes spurious claims to 'indigenous traditions', and argues for a consistent separation of the categories 'state' and 'nation'.

In doing so, it examines the historiography of India and of anti-colonial nationalisms, looks at Bengali engagements with 'progress' and British rule, at the invention of 'Hinduism' as a category available for national use, and at 'Nehruvian' nationalism, which with its broad definition of national belonging, fails to delineate nationals from non-nationals. In the process, it provides ways of rethinking the standard narratives of Indian history. Interconnected narratives emerge with a common thread, a concern with writing histories of India that cannot be subsumed within a bland and obligatory history of Indian nationalism.

Attempting to open up new lines of thinking, possible research agendas, and ways of reading and teaching Indian history, *Playing the Nation Game* will be of interest to scholars of history and political studies, as well as to a wider audience of concerned persons for whom the claims made upon citizens in the name of nationalism have at times seemed less than comfortable.

Benjamin Zachariah's research interests centre on the social and intellectual history of South Asia, on the movement of ideas in the twentieth century, and on political culture, political rhetoric and standards of political legitimacy. He is the author of *Nehru* (Routledge, 2004), and *Developing India: An Intellectual and Social History, c. 1930-1950* (OUP, 2005), in addition to several articles and book chapters.

He studied history at Presidency College, Calcutta, and at Trinity College, Cambridge, and is now Reader in South Asian History at the University of Sheffield, and a senior research fellow at the Zentrum Moderner Orient in Berlin. He is committed to exploring the connections between academic historical scholarship, popular historical consciousness and political activities and activism.

'Driven by the consistent effort to think nationalism from beyond its intellectual orbit and inherent essentialism, the author provides lucid expositions of crucial instances of this ideology in India. This highly sophisticated book contains no nationalism, but the appeal to transgress it—a radical departure likely to stimulate much controversy.'

Hans Harder

Professor of Modern South Asian Languages and Literatures,
South Asia Institute,
University of Heidelberg.

*'Benjamin Zachariah's **Playing the Nation Game** draws upon a rich theoretical and historical lineage of scholarly works on a theme which is global in its scope. Zachariah revisits older histories and perspectives and interrogates most of them in a way that is stimulating, provocative and, finally, persuasive.'*

Tanika Sarkar

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