

From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

What makes a nation?

The Punjab destabilization and recent communal outbreaks have brought this vital question to the fore.

Midway through her speech from the ramparts of the Red Fort on Aug. 15 celebrating the 34th anniversary of India's independence, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi directly posed the question which underlay the entire content of her speech. "What does a nation mean?" Mrs. Gandhi asked. "It is not the land," she continued, "but each one of you, wheresoever you may be living."

In the past month the Prime Minister has repeatedly emphasized that a nation is its citizens, a view she is directly counterposing to the land- and religion-based chauvinism of the Hindu extremists and the leftists who have both capitulated to communalism.

The communal outbursts in Bombay and Bhiwandi and the emergence of the so-called Sikh nation have undoubtedly prompted the Prime Minister's initiative.

In early August, Mrs. Gandhi intervened in the parliamentary debate on the Punjab to respond directly to apparently incidental remarks from the opposition to the effect that India is many nations. "I strongly deplore the remarks," Mrs. Gandhi stated. "India is one nation; it was one nation; and it will remain one nation." But the opposition MP persisted: "How can you object when that is the view of so many political parties in India?"

"The word *nationality* may have many meanings, but I am afraid it is a dangerous word to use," the Prime Minister responded. "The word I use is *community*, never *nation*." Mrs.

Gandhi went on to note that in some communist countries, and in Marxist parlance generally, the word *nationalities* is used, but in India, the Prime Minister insisted, "There is no question of there being different nationalities. We are all one nation; we are all Indian citizens, and, as I understand it, the word *nationality* means different citizenship."

"How can a foreign national become a citizen?" came the opposition rejoinder, and the following exchange culminated the discussion:

Prime Minister Gandhi: "Why not? You take Indian nationality, then you become part of the Indian nation."

Member of Parliament: "He becomes an Indian citizen; he does not become an Indian national."

Prime Minister Gandhi: "He *does* become an Indian national. . . ."

Two weeks later, in an interview with the news agency Tanjug on the eve of Yugoslavian President Djuranovic's state visit, Prime Minister Gandhi was prompted to explain that India was not "multi-national" in the sense that that was understood in Yugoslavia.

The discussion on "national integration" is not new in India. But recent events have given the matter new urgency. Just what is the basis for India's "unity in diversity," the content of the secularism to which the Congress Party and Union Government has been committed since independence.

There are, broadly, two schools of thought. The one argues that India's

unity is chimerical and arbitrary, something imposed by British colonialism. The chauvinists of every community can be counted in this group. The Hindu extremists, who claim hegemony by virtue of their majority status, are but one stripe.

The counterpole has been articulated historically by the Indian left, with the Soviet Union's solution of the "national question" the model of reference. Like the Soviet Union, this argument goes: India is made up of many "nations" or "nationalities" and, as in Soviet Russia, this need be no obstacle to consolidation of a unified secular state, which is paramount.

While the evil fraud of the first viewpoint is blatant and obvious, recent events have begun to bring the more subtle bankruptcy of its left counterpart to light.

It is not just that the Indian left parties' posture of support for secularism includes the assertion that Muslims and other forms of minority communalism are "not as dangerous" as the Hindu variety. As the self-serving argument goes, the Muslims, being a minority, cannot achieve political power in the country. Ultimately, of course, the nation must take second place to the "class struggle," the "liberation" of the "oppressed minorities," and so on in the Marxist scheme.

In fact, today, the Marxist concept of *nation* is scarcely distinguishable from tribes; it is essentially racial, devoid of any universalizing content, and therefore necessarily opportunistic.

Thus, while probably not a surprise to top government officials here, the indications of extensive involvement of several varieties of left elements in on-the-ground destabilization of Punjab—in defense of the "Sikh nation" against oppression by the "Hindu-majority government" at the center—have undoubtedly provoked serious thought.