According to Ray, the cultural community predates the modern nation-state, and is held together by bonds of emotion and sentiments; hence the title words "Felt Community." There is a large body of literature arguing the idea that the notion of "nation," "nationalism," and "nationality" were essentially attributes of modernity resulting from the growth of printing and industrial advance. Ray seeks to interrogate this notion. He, like C. A. Bayly earlier, argues against the idea that there is an intrinsic connection between nation and nationalism and the modern era, influentially proposed by Ernest Gellner and Benedict Anderson.

In this book, Ray argues that the analysis of emotions and ideas can be a significant and sufficient basis for the study of political process regarding the development of a nation. He demonstrates that there is a requirement for an emotional bond to occur in the making of a nation. Of the possible emotions, he singles out patriotism to be the key underpinning of Indian nationalism. In doing so Ray also engages with the historians of the late subaltern school who have characterized the modern nation of India as being fairly recent. He also rejects the notion that no sense of nation or nationality existed in pre-colonial India. In other words, he is clearly challenging the colonialist view that pre-colonial Indians were too divided along the lines of religion, sect, caste, language, region, and so forth, thus foreclosing the idea of an Indian nation. Thus he explains, "Historically and psychologically, the cultural community underpins the nation state" (p. 9).

The most persuasive and effective way Ray establishes his thesis is in the way he discusses the motivations of the 1857 "Mutiny" rebels. He demonstrates how normative communities of religion could in fact overlap and coexist with the notion of territorial state. Clearly, Ray’s work shows that the denial of national feeling before the era of European colonial expansion is overblown. It certainly seems to create and perpetuate neat boundaries between modern and premodern periods. Ray’s book is based on a large number of primary sources, including folk songs, poetry, and contemporary writings. He rightly points out that "The ideology of Mughal confrontation with the British has not claimed the attention it deserves from the historians" (p. 217). This has led to an inadequate understanding of the psychic foundation of the nationalism that took roots some decades later. Clearly Ray’s book is a major contribution to the continuing debate on nation and nationalism. It is a persuasive counterpoint to the work of Gellner and Anderson. This is a great accomplishment and meets the expectation one has from a leading historian.