Elites, Nationalism and Nation-States
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Abstract

Nationalism creates and recreates a sense of distinctive identity and autonomy based on the Enlightenment idea of human freedom that enables people to survive in a modern world in which unpredictable change has become the norm. While, in the medieval world, the feudal states invoked religion and cultural resources to make people servile, the modern state invokes identity in a language of serving people in order to help them attain freedom and happiness. However, the modern states end up in leveraging the dominant sections of the society because the privileged sections of a community cleverly use identity to foster their socio-economic interests by camouflaging private interests under the cover of the Enlightenment ideas of equality, liberty and justice and welfare of the masses.

Key Words: Nationalism, Nation-states, Elites, Socio-economic interests, the Enlightenment.

The difference between the pre-modern and modern state is that the latter derives its legitimacy from people. Nationalism is considered essential to unite people and connect them with the state thereby making the modern state a nation-state. The theoretical traditions inspired by the Enlightenment ideas of human freedom and welfare such as contemporary liberalism, multiculturalism and welfare state nationalism elaborate upon the need of a shared identity, solidarity, recognition, and patriotism for effective governance of people, protection of human freedom and promotion of human welfare. However, many scholars like F.W. Riggs, E. Gellner, S. Huntington, Breuilly, and Walker Conner, on the other hand, pointed to the political, economic and social forces responsible for the growth of nationalism in a modern state thus making it a nation-state. They were keen to see how the Enlightenment belief in science and reason gave birth to the practice of viewing them both as a means and as an end relegating the idea of human freedom to a secondary place and leaving its contours being shaped by various socio-economic, scientific and technical forces.

While a focus on the socio-economic, scientific and technical forces pointed to the role and interests of the ruling elite in the evolution of modern state and nationalism, the idea of human freedom inspired by the European Enlightenment looks to the interests of the people. Taking stock of the role of the socio-economic and political interests on the one hand and the idea of equality, liberty, justice and popular aspirations to form self-government on the

other, as the background to the birth of modern state, the author discusses the nature and working of the modern state. A closer look at the interactions between the practices and norms would show a convergence of interests privileging the predominant pre-modern forces to reproduce the nation-state in a desired way.

Elites and Nationalism: In the nineteenth century Europe, it was the bourgeoisie which employed the regulatory capacities of the state apparatus to monitor and oversee the gradual incorporation of select subaltern groups into the political community although the universalistic and inclusive discourse of the Enlightenment was used in the process. According to F. W. Riggs, the success of industrial revolution depended on the widespread acceptance of the idea of nation as the basic source of political legitimacy.[1] An industrialising state as an organisation of mass production and marketing required a popular base. Thus, two processes began as the leaders wanted to create popular bases for themselves and people, for the first time, became able to influence policy making as they became politically important. According to him, industrialisation, democracy and national identity are part and parcel of the modern state.[2] Gellner associated modernity with the spread of industrialisation. According to him, the latter led to an unprecedented and all-pervasive change which disrupted the traditional balance of society, creating new constellations of shared interests. For Gellner, nationalism was the offspring of the marriage between state and culture, and the latter was celebrated on the altar of modernity.[3] Therefore, scholars like Pandey and Geschiere argue "Along with, perhaps more than the Enlightenment ideas and notions of the 'rights of man', conquest and capitalism were the harbingers of the new world".[4]

It can be argued that a modern state relies on a single national identity rather than supernatural or hierarchical sources of authority in order to ensure a democratic base for itself for industrial development and achieve other group objectives by acting against external enemy and meeting the welfare needs of the people. However, the origin of nationalism in many places points to the fact that the conditions for its emergence were largely shaped by the elites for their self-interests and hence, they were imperfectly actualised. Providing the socio-economic thrust to the evolution of nations, some of the Soviet anthropologists have delineated the historical ramifications of various stages in the evolution of ethnic groups to the status of nations or nationalities. However, in terms of their historical placement of the term 'nation' they came closer to the 'modernists' to the extent that they posited the evolution of nations along various stages of the evolution and growth of capitalism.[5]

In marked contrast to Europe where socio-economic factors were instrumental in the formation of national identity overriding many particularistic identity claims and excluding many marginalised identities from the national space, the Chachapoyas movement in Peru, was led by the people themselves against the entrenched aristocracy and was based on local culture, however, subsequently leading to the exclusion of marginalised groups on the basis of socio-economic interests. Modernity made people the reference point of all the religions and cultural practices and created hope among the masses that the aristocratic rule based on

a feudalistic conception of sovereignty would end ushering in modern states in many pockets of the world. Where there was no self-conscious modern bourgeois class committed to the principles of popular sovereignty to seize the control of the state apparatus unlike what happened in Europe, it was the people themselves who challenged feudalism and defined the national culture. It needs to be underlined that national cultures are not always constructed from above resulting in the imposition of a unitary and homogenous national essence on subject populations with their distinct local cultures. Rather, in the making of the national cultures, the periphery may reach towards the centre to embrace the nation as much as the centre reaches out to the periphery. David Nugent argues in his article *Modernity at the edge of Empire* that there was no self-conscious modern bourgeois class in Peru and the state could be conceived as a "pseudo-state" which remained in the hands of shifting groups of regional elites who were strongly wedded to the notions of aristocratic sovereignty.[6]

It is interesting to note that in its challenge to the aristocratic order, the movement of the people in Peru openly embraced "things modern" and "things national". In addition to the challenge of getting rid of the exclusionary racial divisions by reconfiguring history and reconceptualising space, the challenge also included accepting modern notions of discipline, order, hygiene, and morality. For this, "personal" characteristics were seen as the antithesis of the violent and abusive behaviour of the decadent aristocratic elite. The new cultural identity and alternative moral universe emerged from within the movement of democratisation and appeared to the movement participants as their own creation authored by the people themselves and not imposed or arbitrary, and reflected the region's most essential and enduring characteristics.[7]

However, this did not mean that the image of society and personhood contained within the discourse of popular sovereignty corresponded to the actual social conditions. Exclusion was an integral part of the movement. Democratisation meant not only the empowerment of the urban, male middle class, but also the systematic exclusion of women and peasants from the more "open" society envisaged within the movement. Even though the transformations in local life brought about by the movement were consistently cast in the universalistic language of the Enlightenment, these changes represented the interests and motivations of particular groups. The instances of exclusion built into the very process of state-building and nation-building surfaced in subsequent decades. It can be argued quite contrary to the argument of the primordialists that ethnicity (including distinctions based on religious, cultural and linguistic factors) in a modern state is susceptible to socio-economic and political variables. Socio-economic and political factors are not simply external to the dynamics of ethnicity rather they are quite intrinsic and fundamental in determining the shape of identity.[8]

Both the European and Peruvian cases substantiate that identity and socio-economic interests reinforce each other. Three factors-socio-economic interests, the Enlightenment norms and identity must be balanced against each other by the powerful groups in order to be instrumental in the formation and domination of the modern state. The modern state becomes an apparatus through which the socio-economic interests of the elites are sustained

and promoted by astute use of identity in the modern language of welfare and justice. Developing and pursuing proper strategies in promoting specific identity groups gives elites the desired benefits in socio-economic terms. Likewise, the distribution of socio-economic privileges in a society defines and provides a specific shape to the structure of identity. In this context, it is apt to argue that the primordialists and the perennialists while ascribe importance to the historical role of identity and identity groups, they lose sight of the socio-economic dimension in the process of the construction of national identity out of disparate primordial identities. The modernists, on the other hand, overemphasise the socio-economic factors at the cost of the historical role of identities.

The fact that that needs to be underlined is that both the schools fail to see how identities and socio-economic interests can be pursued at the behest of one another. The modern nation-state, which regulates the affairs of a society through coercive power and derives its legitimacy from the institutionalisation of the Enlightenment norms, becomes a medium for the interplay of identity claims and socio-economic interests. Therefore, political power becomes indispensable for the realisation of the socio-economic interests of the elites. The elites cannot pursue identity or socio-economic interests politically unless they tie them to the Enlightenment norms of popular sovereignty, liberty, equality, justice and welfare of masses. The modern state, as the embodiment of the Enlightenment norms, has both the coercive and extractive power. Coercive power is necessary to work for the common objectives by regulating behaviour of the masses and extractive power to generate resources to undertake welfare measures. However, there are examples where the three factors, namely, socio-economic interests, the Enlightenment norms and identity claims were not suitably combined leading to the political death of the privileged groups. In Sikkim, presently an Indian province, the ruler Chogyal failed to create a national identity because he was moved by narrow political interests without thinking to balance them with identity claims and the Enlightenment norms or popular aspirations for liberty, equality and justice leading to his political death and subsequent annexation of Sikkim to India. Chogyal was reluctant to become a constitutional head and resisted to transfer the reserved subjects to any elected government. He wanted to remain as the chief executive of Sikkim combining all the powers in him which resulted in popular uprising in 1973.[9]

The ruler was of Tibetan origin belonging to the Bhutia community, The Bhutia contact with Tibet was limited to aristocracy in Sikkim who intermarried there and conducted business. The majority of the Bhutias had no attachment to Tibet nor had Sikkim's personality evolved to an extent where they had any significant understanding or involvement in the nationalistic sentiments. The nationalistic sentiments were confined to the educated elite who constituted a small minority. Lepchas, the second largest community, had been neglected and suppressed linguistically and culturally ever since the Bhutia invaders came in 1641. The Kazi aristocracy, among the Bhutias, played an economic havoc. They stood by the ruler as long as their socio-economic interests were promoted by the ruler, once they saw the power shifting from the Chogyal to Delhi; they joined the mainstream being assured of the economic and cultural interests fully protected.[10]

The institutionalisation of the Enlightenment norms by the modern state, the liberal theoretical tradition's exhortation for loyalty to the political community and moreover, the prospect of use of religious or any ethnic identity for ensuring human freedom provide ample scope to the elites of the dominant ethnicity to manipulate symbols and other ethnic markers to promote their socio-economic interests.[11] The emotive power behind and indigenousness of identity propels the elites to use identity as the basis of their rise to power, whereas the state's authority to distribute welfare goods and modernise society provides the elites with opportunities to influence identity groups in a particular way. At times, a particular identity is subjected to a particular mode of socio-economic distribution. This is how socio-economic and political power and identity are mutually re-enforcing.[12]

Dominant ethnicities are born out of three possibilities in a modern state. First, where there is self-conscious bourgeoisie as the European case suggested, used identity for socio-economic and political interests and formed dominant ethnicity. Second, where the people led the fight against aristocratic rule inspired by the European Enlightenment norms and became the true interpreters of identity and formed dominant ethnicity as the Chachapoyas case suggested. The second possibility is applicable to many third world colonial states as well. Third, in the absence of self-conscious bourgeoisie and without a colonial history, the rulers used identity to preserve the socio-economic and political privileges of the pre-modern era by adopting the Enlightenment norms in order to stay in power and help form dominant ethnicity as the case of Bhutan suggested.

Socio-Economic Drivers of Nationalism and Modern State: It is clear that national culture can come from below by uniting the people on the basis of the Enlightenment ideas like popular sovereignty, equality, liberty and justice. However, even in the cases of upward movement of nationalism as the Chachapoyas case pointed out, the socioeconomic factors influence people's movement by becoming instrumental in associating political power with the better off and excluding the worse off. And once the modern state is established, the very national culture based on the Enlightenment ideas is likely to be reinterpreted to suit the interests of the elites who happen to be the products of modernity and who control the modern tools like press, education and electronic media to a large extent to reach out to the people. While Anthony Smith argues that it is possible to date an embryonic development of modern nations back to ancestral times, Walker Conner retorts by arguing that such a task would be purely speculative and contain sweeping explanations. If nationalism is a mass-not elite–phenomenon, then it can only occur at a quite advanced stage of modernity: That is when the development of modern mass communication makes it possible for an elite group to spread national identification among the larger sections of population.[13] Modernists also differ in their emphasis while insisting on the modernity-nationalism linkage. For example Breuilly locates the core of modernity in the modern state, Anderson in the printing press, Conner in the modern communications and Gellner in the industrialisation process.

Samuel Huntington seems to have used modernity to mean the dialectical relationships between the modernizing society-which includes developments in printing, mass education,

industrialization etc and the modern state. According to him, modernization can involve changes not only in the distribution of power within a political system but also in the amount of power within that system. Absolute monarchies and feudal states contain only a small amount power, which grows as modernization proceeds. An increase in the quantity of power in a system must also bring about an increase in the amount of competition for that power. Existing powers and privileges must be protected more energetically in circumstances where new spheres of competition threaten to change the existing distribution of power. As the scope of social mobilization extends deeper into a society as a result of modernizing initiatives such as mass education, the problem of integrating primordial social forces into a single national political community becomes more urgent.[14]

It is argued that the newly democratizing states as a result of modernity can set in motion a number of forces that ultimately bring about a shift in individuals' primary political identification from membership in an associative civil state to membership in a particular ethnic or religious nation. Dictatorial regimes face no active opposition to their ruling because legitimacy to their rule does not depend on popular consent and thus they face little need to compete for the mantle of popular legitimacy by whipping up mass enthusiasms. Unleashing mass nationalism would only hinder their goal of depoliticizing domestic politics and would introduce needless complications into their management of foreign relations. Especially prone to myth making are the situations of partial monopoly over supply of ideas in the market place of ideas, which often occur during the earliest stage of democratization due to the struggle between the traditional power holders and the new claimants to the leadership position.[15] Thus, modernity which brings people and state closer may also create problems for the ruling elites as people secure different channels to oppose governments or force them to distribute resources in a particular way or stake claims to share political power. In the third world, modernity shaped nationalism in two ways. First, in the colonies, social political elites played a major role in fostering nationalism by rallying masses around the Enlightenment norms against the colonial power and became instrumental in the formation of the modern state. Second, in some states, like Bhutan, traditional elites realizing the necessity of finding new legitimations in a secular democratic age shaped by the Enlightenment ideals, sought to incorporate the masses by claiming a role as the permanent guardians of national continuity as the Prussian monarchy and land-owning aristocracy did in the post-1871 Germany.

In present times, highly bureaucratized states with emphasis on modernization and welfare activities invoke national identity to fulfill their aims of not only sustaining the already available power but generating more power. This has, consequently, led to politicization of identity, which may not uphold the interests of different communities as such definitions of national identity are driven more by the necessity to meet political expediency than to meet and promote the interests of the communities. Elites of different communities also create their power bases by defining and redefining the identity of the communities in relation to the state so that they can direct welfare resources and modernization process in a particular way and moreover, they carry with them the ultimate

objective of controlling the state apparatus. A closer look at the Indian history points to the same fact - "The definition of the Muslim community articulated by the modernizing Muslim elites associated with Sayyid Ahmad Khan and the Aligarh movement was a political one. In contrast to the *ulema*, who attached most value to the symbols of Muslim identity that not only separated Muslims from non-Muslims but isolated Muslims from contamination by alien religious and legal influences and preserved the influence of the *ulema* within the Muslim community, the modernist elites were interested in using the community as a base for the exercise of influence in the wider society. The Muslim aristocrats and government servants who founded the various institutions associated with the Aligarh movement moved in the same sphere as, and had similar interests to those of their Hindu counter parts".[16]

Most of the times, nationalism was successfully forged by the presence or deliberate creation of out-groups by elites. For example, in colonies repeated and institutionalized references to successful struggle for independence from the colonial power were generally considered a highly useful tool for nation-building. In the cases of states which were never colonized like Bhutan, the success of nationalism depended on the success of the political elites in identifying some other out-group and moulding the struggle into a legitimizing history and the foundation of its national identity.

In all the developing countries, the state is seen as the principal instrument of modernization and the process of modernization requires involvement of people and their participation is the key to the success of the developmental activities undertaken by the state.[17] Consequently, though safeguarding people's interests is the natural outcome of modernization, they are cast selectively in the universalistic language of the Enlightenment evoking the principles of equality, liberty and justice by the elites of the modern state. People who are divided along caste, class, gender, ethnic and religious lines, find it inconvenient to challenge the state which is considered as the embodiment of the Enlightenment principles of equality, liberty and justice.

Nationalism was forged and nation-states were created in Europe through the selective use of the Enlightenment norms by the elite groups though the ulterior objectives were fostering their own socio-economic interests. The happenings in Chachapoyas in Peru were regarding the selective use of the Enlightenment norms by the people themselves. The rule of elites was based on the feudal principles and the Enlightenment ideas were seized by the local people to establish the modern state. However, the Enlightenment norms were cast in a universalistic manner hiding the socio-economic interests of specific groups which surfaced later.

The modern nation-state has structurally coupled statehood and national identity through the institution of citizenship. Understood as a set of institutionalized relations between the state and the individual, citizenship can be considered as being composed of two major elements: first, the rules of formal membership and individual rights through which

individuals are incorporated organizationally into the state, and second, the forms of national identification through which individuals are incorporated symbolically.[18]

Thus, the modern state has already seized the universalistic language of Enlightenment norms in its favour by institutionalizing them. Modernity has brought the state and masses closer. While the interests of the elites depend on a popular base, people also look to the modern state for welfare needs and modernization. But the reciprocal relationship is flouted as masses are divided and their claims are particularistic. They fail to be an effective challenge against the state which is expected to speak for the whole society. However, the fact remains that the institutionalized universalistic language of Enlightenment is used by the state as a cover for the socio-economic benefits of a few.

Conclusion: The reason behind exploring the socio-economic and political factors in the rise of nationalism and the modern nation-states is to build a causal relationship between the political nature of identity and the role of elites in not only sustaining power but in continuously maximizing it as well by controlling the state apparatus. Moreover, the article foregrounds the selective use of the universal language of the Enlightenment by elites both in sustaining and generating power. Though Riggs establishes links between industrialization and the growth of modern state which is truer for the growth of modern states in Europe, the article attempts to bring in arguments related to modernization in other aspects, the role of masses, historical role of identity and contribution of modern theories in the growth of nationalism and evolution of the modern nation-state. It has been argued that while people's dependence on modernization process and welfare activities has inflated the power bases of elites in the modern state, people have been mobilized along traditional ethnic and religious myths and symbols either against the state for redistribution of welfare goods in a desired way or by the state directing the modernization projects in particular ways.

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[1] For details see Riggs, F. W. 1998. "The Modernity of Ethnic Identity and Conflict", *International Political Science Review*, Vol. 19. No. 3, p. 276.

[2] Ibid

[3] For details see Gellner, E., 1983. *Nations and Nationalism,* Oxford: Blackwell publishers.

[4] Pandey, G. and Geschiere P., 2003. *The Forging of Nationhood,* New Delhi: Manohar Publications, pp. 10-26.

[5] Phadnis, U. and Ganguly, R., 2001. *Nation-Building in South Asia in Nation-building in South Asia,* New Delhi: Sage, p. 51.

[6] Nugent, D., 1997. *Modernity at the edge of Empire: State, Individual, and Nation in the Northern Peruvian Andes, 1885-1935, Stanford: Stanford University Press, pp. 319-320.*

[7] Ibid.

[8] Nugent, D., 1996. "From Devil Pact to Drug Deals: Commerce, Unnatural Accumulation and Moral Economy in Modern Peru, *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 23, No. 2, 382- 397.

[9] For details see Das, B. S., 1983. *The Sikkim Saga*, New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Mishra, M..K. 2010. "Modern State and Rationalisation of Identity", *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 71, No. 1, pp. 25-39.

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