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Politics of Identity: Ethnic Nationalism and the State in Pakistan

by Adeel Khan

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Theorising Identities in Pakistan: A Foucauldian Analysis

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Adeel Khan starts his book, which is based on a revised compilation of his essays written by him on ethnic identities in Pakistan between 1999 and 2004, with an unequivocal assault on the concept of state and nation. Nationalism, if not a pathology of the modern world, is certainly a 'pathetic way of dealing with a pathologically uneven and asymmetrical world order'. It is, he asserts, a child of nation-state and gets its lifeblood from 'the most powerful container of political power, the state'. 'State makes nation not the other way round', he would say. That sets the stage for his subsequent discussion.

Adeel weaves his essays together with first three chapters where alerts the reader about the 'dangers of untheorised history' and deals with the conceptual issues relating to ethnicity, nationalism and the modern state. He goes on to contextualize the colonial British Indian state in such a theoretical setting before he sets out on his analysis of the ethnic assertions-Pakhtun, Baloch, Sindhi, Mohajir- inside Pakistan. The tools he uses to isolate and analyse the strains of ethnicity and/or nationalism in each case are unabashedly Foucauldian. He emphasises the importance of social and economic forces and power relations within a society as locomotives of social growth and development or decay.

In the chapter on theories of nationalism, Adeel selectively draws upon the arguments of so called 'constructivists'- Benedict Anderson, Terence Ranger, Eric Hobsbawm, John Breuilly, etc.- and reveals his acknowledged bias for left of the centre approach to nationalism. His basic argument that modern state as a highly 'interventionist institution', penetrating into all aspects of human life and as a legal receptacle of legitimate power the state shapes the relations of power in a way which will preserve its hold on power and turn it into an 'ubiquitous, massive, powerful and violent container of political power'. The state is- he borrows from Adorno to convince us- the sole arena of all 'identitarian thought' and all 'identitarian struggles'. Thus it is the sole power that produces national identity even by default when the national identities are in conflict with the state. Because, Adeel would argue the nations aim at replicating state power and are reactions to it. The doctrinal and sentimental side of nationalism is nothing but a manifestation of political power which it intends to achieve. Coming down heavily on the 'promordialists' who would say that nations have an ethnic underlay comprising of inerasable history and memory, he argues that base of ethnicity/nationalism is 'not memory but amnesia'.

The 'reductionist' approach that Adeel employs in the study, through a process of oversimplification of historical and political processes as mere struggle for political power may be music to the ears of the Foucauldians but it certainly weakens the theoretical basis of his arguments, for social reality is much more complex to be understood only through the linear hypothesis that he compels the reader to believe in. Through an explanatory hypothesis Adeel seeks to identify the locus of power and denigrate the state as an institution of violence and power. Perhaps even he would justifiably go on to suspect the moves of the states to decentralize and devolve power to the periphery with the Foucauldian analogy of heart- that it has to pump out extra blood to the capillaries for otherwise it would burst. The state, every reasoned analyst knows at least since the days of Weber, would like to change its hue and seek to adapt itself to the changing times- by shedding power externally it would arrogate more legitimacy to itself and survive all assaults on it. But one would have liked to see some alternative framework emerging from such an impassioned invective against an omnivorous state, which can eat and digest every thing that comes its way. His analysis of the state, even if convincing, does not throw up any alternative and thus borders on a cynical approach to the reading of history. Or is it that Adeel is basically returning to the well known Marxian position of the withering away of the state as the only alternative to the ills of the 'irreplaceable' state, as an agency of power?

Nevertheless, his study of the colonial situation in India and the role of introduction of the modern statecraft deserve particular attention of the reader. Even if Adeel's analysis is refracted through a Foucauldian lens, he introduces certain categories which, though familiar to people introduced to Marxian and Gramscian analysis, goes beyond the leftist interpretation and acquaints the reader with the capacities of the state to construct and impose an ideology all its own. The categories of ruling classes, martial races, noble blood etc, Adeel justifiably argues, were 'abstracted collectivities' made to serve the interests of colonial power. The nationalist assertion from the Congress he would argue sought to counter such colonial power and induced a sense of insecurity in the Muslim gentry which ballooned into a separatist nationalist movement. The nationalism in either case had a false basis and was artificial and hungry for power. Both the nations adopted the same structure of state and even in some cases made it more rigid and domineering. The leaders of Pakistan movement, who were arguing for a loose federation, were seen to be repudiating the same principle in practice when they were granted their own state. The reflexive tendency of power to consolidate and homogenise was demonstrated in the case of Pakistan in no uncertain terms, Adeel would argue with passion.

Adeel is on a stronger wicket when it comes to analyzing individual cases of ethnic assertion within Pakistan. His effort to interpret and analyse each nationalist/ethnic assertion as an inevitable phase in the social, political and economic processes of a state is really commendable. As he himself argues, all analyses of Pakistani internal politics, with the exception of those by some of the leftist scholars, have emphasised on personalities. Even a scholar like Ayesha Jalal he would say has fallen victim to such a trend by arguing that Liaquat Ali Khan's assassination opened the floodgates of nationalist assertion within Pakistan. Even if he is critical of leftist interpretations of scholars like Hamza Alavi and Feroze Ahmed, he borrows his arguments from them and goes on to suggest that even people like Jinnah were mere tools in the play of power that unfolded across the subcontinent during the colonial and post-colonial days. The fact that Jinnah advocated a very rigid centre and sought more power on to himself through ordinances which amended the original colonial legal instrument called Government of Indian Act of 1935,

Adeel would suggest, was quite natural and any one else in his shoes would have done what he did for it was inevitable that a nationalist ideology after attaining statehood would seek to centralize and rubbish all possible opposition to it. He goes on to argue that in case of Pakistan the state has fallen victim to the inequitable social structure and as such the process of institutionalisation of state power has been infected by the virus of traditional system of patronage and political loyalty. Due to weak institutionalisation of the Pakistani state the system has been rendered dysfunctional and what has emerged from this is a “captive state held together through corruption, cronyism and ... the barrel of the gun”.

With his acknowledged tools of social analysis, Adeel, a Pakhtun himself, journeys through the colonial mode of stereotyping of Pakhtuns, dividing them between settled and tribal areas and accessing an obliging a cross section of influential collaborators among the Pakhtuns. The introduction of new revenue system and the market economy created a group of bourgeoisie (small Khans) and a large number of pauperized artisans. He interprets Pakhtun assertion as a consequence of struggle between the smaller Khans and Bigger Khans within Pakhtun society. The smaller Khans led by Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan had no other alternative but to appeal to the popular sentiments against a political backdrop which granted the more popular access to political power in a representative system. The smaller Khans were also duly countered on the eve of partition by the Bigger Khans, who were incited by the British to make common cause with the Pakistan movement through appeal to the Islamic sensitivities of the Pakhtun masses, Adeel would establish quoting Cunningham’s diary. It was the same Cunningham who thought it wise to divert the violent constituency of war-returned Pakhtun ex-servicemen and other militant elements towards Kashmir in the autumn of 1947, which goes in the name of lashkar invasion in history today. The Pakhtun nationalism consumed by the Islamic temper of the Pakistan movement could not quite attain the stature that Ghaffar Khan and his successors imagined it would after the referendum the Red Shirts lost through non-participation. The Awami National Party could not make a dent into politics through its nationalist rhetoric because of the Pakistan state’s openness to integrate the Pakhtuns into the mainstream. A powerful nationalist movement which turned into a political party in the 1970s is not more than a pressure group, Adeel would remind us. But still, Adeel says, the capacity for the movement to reawaken itself remains as is demonstrated by the Pakhtun response to the Musharraf’s Kalabaghdam project.

Coming to the Balochi assertion, Adeel says that the Balochis, as a society and culture, were completely overtaken by the colonial penetration which reduced them to an agricultural appendage to the metropolis. It also left its market at the hands of the migrant mercantile class from Punjab and Sindh. The Kalat-based nationalist assertion during the early years of Pakistan provoked the central administration which was most repressive and intolerant of any peripheral assertion. Even later during the 1970s, the provincial government’s decision to increase the proportion of Balochis within the state administration was misconstrued as an anti-state policy for it displaced an entrenched class of Punjabis and Pakhtuns. He also isolates the weaknesses of the assertion by the Pakhtuns and argues that the assertion of 1970s was more a political adventurism than a war of national liberation. Adeel rightly says that the Balochis are now pitted against Pakhtuns in the their home turf in Balochistan. However, going by the 2003-2004 edition of the Balochi re-assertion one may not agree with him that the Balochi national movement led by Saradr for most of the time has been seeking to capture political power rather than promote the Balochi national identity.

As regards Sindhi and Mohajir identities, Adeel deals with both from the power-relations perspective in more convincing ways. Gleaning through a rich source of facts and fissures he treads the terrain of Sindhi nativism and its socio-economic face. The phase between Napiere's 'sinned' accession of Sindh (after conquering Sindh he sent in a telegram saying Peccavi, i.e., 'I have sinned'.) to the initial assertion of Sindh as a separate province within British administration has been covered well focusing on the system of irrigation, change in economic structure, the disproportionate Hindu domination over resources and its impact of social relations. The turn of politics through 1947, the shift of gear from communal to nationalist politics in Sindh by leaders like G.M. Sayed, the unwarranted political interference of the centre in Sindh right since Jinnah's days, till the rise of Bhutto, an ethnic Sindhi leader and his party's consolidation of political power in Sindh have been dealt with quite convincingly by Adeel. The conflict of interest between the Sindhis and Mohajirs, the relative loss of political patronage and depleting share of Mohajirs in the power-equations led the Mohajirs to launch an identity-based movement for guarding the interests of the Mohajirs, but basically aiming at a maximal share in power. His study of the Mohajir situation is also quite convincing even if he does not have any alternative perspective to offer save his central hypothesis that all ethno-national assertion is primarily an assertion for power and more power.

In the final chapter of his book he deflates the argument that Jinnah's dream of securing Pakistan's journey through a democratic path was shattered by the rise of a military-bureaucratic establishment and argues that Jinnah and the leaders of the Pakistan movement were never wanted supremacy of the will of the people but they were always apprehensive of it. And the project of nation building in Pakistan through the might of the state, ideology of Islam and the language of Urdu, has utterly failed because it could never gel together provincial nationalities and indeed provoked them. At the same time Adeel argues that he has all along sought to demystify, if not delegitimise, nationalism and concludes that his analysis of the movements proves his hypothesis that nationalism is nothing but the product of the modern institution of power, the state. He would not accept the theory of an ethnic substratum injecting force and power to such nationalistic assertions and would suggest that the basic search for power by a group invariably crystallises in a nationalist movement.

While the power of presentation and style of argumentation distinguishes Adeel's analysis from other Pakistani observers and one tends to be swayed by the highly persuasive mono-chromatic picturisation of the nationalist canvass in Pakistan, he leaves many questions unanswered, i.e., if a community seeks power then what motivates the community to join the struggle? Does the community have a priori sense of belongingness? How does the sense of discrimination, even if it is primarily authored by the state and/or its agencies, filter down to the wider population within a community? Who plays a crucial role in converting such sense of disaffection into a mass movement? Does the elite play a role? Can we altogether dismiss the existence of a sense of ethnicity or communality even if we agree it is a product of power relations? What is the role of power relations that predates a state in establishing a state? Is it not capable of precipitating a sense of community or identity, even if not in the political sense like the national identities of the modern times? Adeel should think of seeking answers to these issues. The publishers should also take care to avoid many spelling errors which sometimes unnecessarily arrest the attention of the reader in the present book, especially names of authors, in subsequent editions.

