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## Understanding Identity Politics: A Constructive Approach

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### **Introduction**

Modernity heralded a new era in the relationship between the ruler and the masses by wedding the enlightenment norms of democracy, equality, liberty and justice to the idea of nation-state. Science and reason prevailed over dogmas and superstitions. States began to be governed by the political leaders having the mandate of people rather than by the whims and fancies of medieval rulers claiming religious sanctions behind their rule. However, this paper argues that the concept of nation-state unsuccessfully tries to weave together the modern norms of equality, liberty and justice with the primordial notions of identity which, in turn, results in construction of identities. A constructivist approach which tries to understand and uncover the interconnectedness between the tradition and modernity, therefore, goes a long way in understanding today's identity politics.

We live in a world where the political map is defined by nation-states. Identities matter in modern day politics as on it depends distribution of public goods by the state and more importantly, control of the state has become central to today's identity politics. Therefore, disadvantaged groups always contest the definition of national identity when that tends to effectively exclude them from political power and/or public goods. Identities provide motives for political action as people seek to ensure that the things they care about are also cared for, and they stir feelings to which aspired leaders can appeal to win support. Broadly, identities develop in a political context as they are found in the work of authors, journalists, artists, scientists, religious leaders, and social groups operating within governed communities and often respond directly to their communities' political burdens and opportunities.

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### **The modern state**

Modern state represents a structural coupling of statehood and national identity through the institution of citizenship. As a set of institutionalized relations between the state and the individual, citizenship can be considered as being composed of two major elements: firstly, the rules of formal membership and individual rights through which individuals are incorporated organizationally into the state, and secondly, the forms of national identification through which individuals are incorporated symbolically.

Once the Empires collapsed and gave way to formation of modern states, existing identities became more politicized. There exists larger space for manipulation and therefore confrontation. Journalist Neal Ascherson<sup>1</sup> in his book *Black Sea* writes:

“Different ethnic communities may coexist for centuries, practicing the borrowing and visiting of good neighbors, sitting on the same school bench and serving in the same imperial regiments, without losing their mutual distrust. But what held such societies together, was not so much consent as necessity—the fear of external force....It follows that when that is removed, through the

collapse of empires or tyrannies, the constraint is removed too.”

Similarly, Barry R. Posen argues that once an imperial order breaks down, ethnic groups feel that they have to provide for their own security. However, once they start to make arrangements to do so by organizing, buying arms etc. their neighbours become even more suspicious and arm themselves to an ever greater extent, which leads to a spiral of suspicion that eventually results in an assault that is understood by one of the parties as a preemptive strike against an imagined future assault by the other parties<sup>2</sup>

For these scholars suspicion and hatred between the ethnic communities is thus the primary assumption, and it is the lack of the conflict rather than conflict itself that needs to be explained. This understanding, first, fails to address the question of identity conflicts within modern-states as identities are not only based on assumed common descent, they are constructed. Secondly, it cannot explain peaceful coexistence of different ethnic groups within a modern state.

### **The roots of identities**

The roots of identities go much beyond modern statehood so do the adversarial relationship between them. However, it is within a modern

state that conflicts relating to identity claims became more localized and violence-ridden. The medieval world was divided into empires based on claim to different conception of God and therefore violence by European Christianity against Islam was regarded as legitimate. However, it can be argued that the imperial structure is less homogenous and more differentiated as it excludes some at the frontiers but allows others to settle within and claim community status. On the contrary, power in centralised Westphalian state in Europe, whether in England under the Tudors, in France under Louis XI, or in Spain under Ferdinand and Charles V, was maximized by the displacement of local identities by emerging national identities, evidenced in the spread of national languages, cultural practices, and bounded histories. The Westphalian state's ability to make claims on homogenizing national identities in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries provided legitimacy for the state's claim to monopolise coercion. Liberalism as an intellectual movement gave way to a liberal conception of nation-state by democratizing Westphalian states. The link between the nation and state is provided by the identity and identity as sameness provides the legitimacy for moral community which in turn legitimates the

regulation of behaviour by members of the community. The popular conception of rights, equality, liberty and justice including the right to self-determination is linked to identity in the liberal nation-state. In a modern-state, people could be mobilized for the maintenance of certain version of identity as national identity and others may be mobilized against it.

However, many scholars like Andreas Wimmer pointed to both positive and negative sides of modern statehood and argued that though the modern principles of democracy, citizenship and popular sovereignty allowed for the inclusion of large sections of the population previously confined to the status of subjects and subordinates, new forms of exclusion based on ethnic and national criteria developed, largely unacknowledged by the grand theories of modernity as a universalistic and egalitarian model of society.<sup>3</sup> Belonging to a specific national or ethnic group determines the rights and services the modern state is supposed to guarantee. Gyanendra Pandey and Peter Geschiere elaborating on the principle of exclusion, argued that early form of exclusion from citizenship was on the basis of assumed civilisational differences such as in terms of literacy, rationality, settled existence, cleanliness. But, as

an increasing number of countries joined the ranks of the 'civilised' as nation-states, a culturalist argument took the place of the argument about political 'unfitness' to ensure the dominance of particular group in these societies.<sup>4</sup>

Though it can be argued that the nation-state is built on a mobilisational ideology and it is therefore much more successful in resource mobilization than any imperial order could possibly be, the problem lies in considering cultural space as hermetically sealed units. It precludes the possibility of politicization of ethnic groups, homogenisation of ethnic groups and manifold break up of nation-states along cultural lines. Secondly, emphasis only on the basis of exclusion does not speak about the socio-economic and normative conditions which lead to the growth of a national culture. Thirdly, talking about modern principles of exclusion without referring to the socio-economic and normative background of modernity cannot deliberate on the scope of and power behind the national culture.

### **Formation of Identities by Elites**

Nation-states did not evolve naturally from the enlightenment ideas of *rights of man*. The argument that nation-state was the logical

consequence of social, economic and political modernisation emanating from the triumph of science and reason over dogmas and superstitions did not ensure the enlightenment norms of equality, liberty and justice being protected as modernisation was associated with certain power centres. Therefore, nation-state was not natural and represented interests of certain groups. The bourgeoisie controlled the state apparatus in the nineteenth and twentieth century European nation-state system and on the basis of its identification with the principles of modernity and nationhood, employed the classificatory, regulatory capacities of the state apparatus to monitor and oversee the gradual incorporation of select subaltern groups into the political community. Ironically, the universalistic and inclusive discourse of the Enlightenment was used towards exclusionary ends in the process. This occurred because the bourgeoisie equated its own culture with human nature, and made full participation in the political community contingent partly upon the subaltern adopting "proper" and "respectable" attitudes, practices and forms of behaviour. The result of this process was to shape subjectivity in "modern" directions, and to produce a national citizenry and more pliable labour force.<sup>5</sup>

Ernest Gellner associated

modernity to the spread of industrialisation. According to him, the latter led to unprecedented, all-pervasive change which disrupted the traditional balance of society, creating new constellations of shared interests.<sup>6</sup> In the similar vein, Pandey and Geschiere argue that conquest and capitalism were the harbingers of the modern world perhaps more than Enlightenment ideas and notions of the 'rights of man'. F.W Riggs argued that the success of industrial revolution depended on wide spread acceptance of the nation as a substitute for monarchy as the basic source of political legitimacy for an industrializing state as the organization of mass production and marketing of the products required for popular base. Thus, two processes began as leaders wanted to create popular base and people for the first time became able to influence policy making as they became politically important. Providing the socio-economic thrust to the evolution of nations, some of the Soviet anthropologists have delineated the historical ramifications of the various stages of the evolution of ethnic groups to the acquiring the status of nations or nationalities. However, in terms of their historical placement of the term 'nation' they come closer to the 'modernists' to the extent that they posit the nation in the wake of the various stages of the evolution

and growth of capitalism.<sup>7</sup>

The process by which the national idea emerged can be identified as the national definition of the community sponsored by the bourgeoisie from the emerging modern state, with the purpose of founding a reference for legitimation of power in opposition to the preceding social evidences and their forms of legitimation. Riggs says the substitution of popular for royal sovereignty made the link between nation and state a crucial factor in everyday life. It was not possible to legitimize democracy by claiming that any set of humans who happened to live within an arbitrary set of boundaries had the right to govern themselves by majority rule and representative institutions. Rather, a kind of mythical, even *sacred* entity called the nation became the basis for legitimacy. Thus, practice gave birth to norms to decide who constitute a nation and who do not. As modernisation process advanced, citizens came to depend increasingly on services provided by the state and to demand that political leaders should be sensitive to their needs; public policy and secularism replaced the reliance on natural and supernatural forces that was typical of monarchic rule. He says although *equality* and *justice* became talisman slogans in all modern states, their implicit premise has been that these

benefits belonged to members of their nation, not to others or aliens or outsiders”<sup>8</sup> Industrialisation did not directly lead to the development of norms of inclusion and exclusion to build modern political organization known as nation-state rather the latter was the outcome of the successful compromise between the new state elites and various component parts of the society: an exchange of loyalty for participation, equal treatment before law, welfare goods and symbolic capital associated with the nation. To achieve this objective certain populations assumed to be disloyal to the ruling elite were assimilated or forcefully homogenized or excluded through invocation of norms. Though these norms were considered secular and scientific as they were the products of enlightenment, scope for application of religious myths and cultural or/and moral policing was very wide.

### **Identity formation at the Grassroots**

Making people the reference point of all religions created hope among the masses to end aristocratic rule based on feudalistic conception of sovereignty and usher in modern state in many pockets of the world. National cultures are not always constructed from above, by 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 toward the centre to embrace the nation as much as the centre reaches out to the periphery. David Nugent writes that in Peru that there was no self-conscious modern bourgeois class committed to the principles of popular sovereignty to seize control of the apparatus of state. Rather, the “pseudo-state” that was Peru, remained in the hands of shifting groups of regional elites who were strongly wedded to notions of aristocratic sovereignty.<sup>9</sup>

As a result, popular sovereignty did not become an ideological tool manipulated by elites. In Chachapoyas, a region in Peru, popular sovereignty was used as an explicitly anti-elite ideology – one that was seized upon by marginalized middle sectors to confront aristocratic privilege. It tended toward inclusion, not exclusion, of marginalised categories. In the hands of the subaltern, popular sovereignty was used to reconfigure racial boundaries from below. In direct contrast with behaviour of the European bourgeois class, in Chachapoyas members of the aristocratic elite played no positive role in the implementation of popular sovereignty. They did everything in their power to retain their traditional

aristocratic privileges, to limit expressions of popular sovereignty to the domains of ritual and discourse, and to prevent popular sovereignty from moving directly into social life. Indeed, the elite went so far as to insist on the right to ridicule popular sovereignty – to counter all rhetorical and discursive expressions of equality and inclusion with public demonstrations of hierarchy and exclusion.

In challenging the aristocratic order, the movement of democratisation openly embraced “things modern” and “things national”. In addition to doing away with exclusionary racial divisions, reconfiguring history, and reconceptualising space, this challenge included accepting modern notions of discipline, order, hygiene, and morality. For these “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 authored from within the movement of democratisation appeared to movement participants as anything but imposed, external, or arbitrary. Rather, these were to a significant extent created by the people themselves, and emerged in the form of recognition on their part of the region’s most essential and

enduring characteristics. Reflected in phenomena as diverse as the ancient architecture of the *Inca* and the personal proclivities of *el pueblo*, they were seen as integral to the region and its people.

The image of society and personhood contained within the discourse of popular sovereignty, however, did not correspond to 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 interest and motivations of particular groups depicted as the interests and motivations of all groups. These and related processes of exclusion – built into the very process of state-building and nation-building – were to come to the fore in subsequent decades. Contrary to the argument of the primordialists, ethnicity in the 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.<sup>10</sup>

### **Construction of National Culture: Interface of Tradition and Modernity**

Many scholars while celebrated modernity in their writings could not detach themselves completely from the influence of tradition. Elie Kedourie considered the nation-state a spiritual child of the enlightenment. As such it is a modern, secular, European, and invented ideology. It proclaimed the overthrow of God and the power of man as the measure of all things, and it offered a purely terrestrial and anthropocentric vision of perfection in place of earlier religious and other-worldly conceptions. Anthony Smith argues that though nation-state is considered to be a modern ideology by Kedourie, religion and nationalism overlap and coexist uneasily in the latter's writing.<sup>11</sup>

According to Smith, while modern nationalisms often incorporate motifs from traditional religions, they also reject many of their ideas and practices. Modern state incorporated the very core of traditional religions and their conception of the sacred and their rites of salvation. Though both Kedourie and Smith seem to have found reasons for the co-

existence of tradition and modernity, they treated the role of identity and requirement of modernity as different. Anthony Smith has argued that modern nationalism arises out of a crisis of dual legitimation generated by the impact of secular modernisation as mediated by the modern bureaucratic state on societies regulated by traditional religiously derived norms. The social authority of religion in the past relied on its apparent ability to answer the problem of arbitrary suffering and evil in the world by positing a mysterious supramundane plan and promising benefits in the afterlife as a consequence of adhering to religious ethics. But this solution loses its force as science and rational modes of enquiry and organisation offer the possibility of overcoming the evils of poverty and deprivation in this world. The authority of science and its executive institution - the modernizing state begins to challenge that of religion over increasing dimensions of social life (for example, education, welfare and family law). At the same time self-reflexive character of rationalism threatens to disenchant the world of all stable meaning, overturning those beliefs which provided individuals and collectivities with identity and purpose. Thus, for Smith while tradition provided meaning and purpose for social action, modernity

provided science and reason.

However, Smith failed to recognise that science and reason are also part of religions. Tradition and modernity complement each other to ensure human freedom and happiness. Religions have not only other worldly applications; they effectively link this world with the other. The principles of tolerance, egalitarianism, compassion, equality have to be observed in this world for human freedom and happiness. Scientific and rational application of religion may ask for a change in the way modernity is defined. For example, Bhutan considers gross national happiness as the real indicator of human development rather than gross domestic product on rational grounds that growth in the material accumulation does not guarantee happiness. Globalisation is challenged as it plays on human being's status, creates artificial demands instead of serving the real needs of the people. Many modernists would agree with the arguments. While contributing to the conceptualisation of modernity, religious and ethnic groups conform to the already established norms of modernity, namely, national identity and bounded territory. Any government claiming to unite people on the basis of cultural principles cannot but work with modern rational

structures like bureaucracy, political parties, mass education system etc. For example, religious "fundamentalists" may reject the extreme naturalism of modernity by making individuals accountable to an unchallengeable god, but they nevertheless exhort their people to embrace such key world cultural elements as nation-building, mass schooling, rationalized health care, and professionalisation. They are apt to reformulate their religious doctrine in accordance with typical modern conceptions of rational-moral discipline. This is how different religious movements can be seen as conforming to rationalized models of societal order and purpose. By and large, they seek an idealized modern community undergoing broad-based social development where citizens can fully exercise their abstract rights.

Political nationalism and cultural nationalism merge together to such an extent that the distinction between tradition and modernity is blurred. Many scholars portray cultural nationalism as a transient phenomenon destined to disappear with full modernisation. However, this article argues that cultural nationalism is not a transitory rather a recurring phenomenon. The reason is the interaction between tradition and modernity has transformed

cultural principles into concrete economic, social and political programmes.

Though modernists argue that modern state relies on political nationalism for its existence, scholars differ in locating the centre of political nationalism. For example, Breuilly locates the centre of political nationalism in the modern state, Anderson in the printing, Conner in the modern communications and Gellner in the industrialisation process. For them, with the onset of modernity particularistic and parochial identities of the past get displaced by an umbrella identity called political nationalism.

In this paper, it has been argued that the primordial identities do not lose their relevance completely in the age of modernity. Identities are constructed at different levels within modern state as modern enlightenment norms are seized and adopted by politically powerful people as a means to divide or integrate primordial identities. Huntington's argument seems apt in this context. According to him, absolute monarchies and feudal states contain only a small amount of power, which grows as modernisation 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 distribution of power in their favour. 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.<sup>12</sup>

In the third world, modernity shaped nationalism two ways. First, in the colonies, social political elites played a major role in the growth of nationalism by rallying masses around enlightenment norms like that happened in Chachapoyas, against the colonial power and became instrumental in the formation of modern state. Secondly, in some states, like Bhutan, traditional elites realizing the necessity of finding new legitimations in a secular democratic age shaped by 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 the emphasis on modernisation and welfare activities invoke national

identity to fulfill their aim of not only sustaining the already available power but generating more power. This has, consequently, led to politicization of identity, which may not uphold interests of different communities as such as the definition of national identity is driven more by the necessity to meet political expediency than to protect and promote the interests of communities. Elites of different communities also create their power bases by defining and redefining the identity of the community in relation to the state so that they can direct welfare resources and modernisation process in a particular way and moreover, they aim at controlling the state. A closer look at 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 spheres as, and had similar interests to those of, their Hindu counter parts"<sup>13</sup>

Most of the times, the 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 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 political elite to identify some other out-group to mould it into a legitimizing history as the foundation of its national identity.

In all the developing countries, state is seen as the principal instrument of modernisation. Modernisation process requires the involvement of people in terms of their participation in developmental activities undertaken by the state. Safeguarding people's interests, therefore, becomes a necessity due to their role in the developmental activities undertaken by the state. However, many people remain at the receiving end of such welfare activities of the state. People who are divided along caste, class,

gender, ethnic and religious lines find it inconvenient to challenge the state as the developmental programmes are cast in the universalistic language of liberty, equality and justice.

### **A Constructivist Approach**

There are many perspectives to understand the growth of nationalism and therefore identities. Modernists underscored the importance of socio-economic and political factors that united nation and state and created nation-state. Modernists see state control as a central objective of nationalism. Modernisation in the form industrialization, market, printing press, the spread of the idea of popular sovereignty, the growth militarism and war-making etc united people in the form of a nation which together with state as its political expression formed nation-state to regularly express the will of the people. According to modernists, past did not play any role in the growth of nationalism, wherever it played any role it was that of a cover. For modernists nation-state is an integrated, conscious and political community. While modernists claim their perspective to be universal, culturalists consider it a western perspective that can account for the development of nationalism in the west where power is located in the hands of elites and political

institutions.

Cultural perspective, on the other hand, considers the role of past as important in the growth of nationalism. Culturalists can be differentiated from primordialists in that they emphasise on the lived experiences of the ordinary people instead of biological distinctions as the latter did. However, these perspectives fail to link nationalism with the institution of state. The cultural nationalist sees the state as accidental and focuses on the nation as either the outcome of a common past or through shared traditions and a shared destiny. For example, the ancient Greeks – often claimed to have a national consciousness because of their common language, religious cosmology and practices, and cultural institutions such as the Olympic Games, and their self-differentiation from others. According to modernists, Greeks lacked a sense of political unity, divided as they were into city-states, some of which were at times willing to ally with Persian invaders against their Greek rivals. In a similar vein, modernists cannot account for the rise of ethnic conflicts all over the world including the West European countries; whereas the theorization was political nationalism would replace cultural nationalism with the growth of modernity. To understand

ascendancy of cultural nationalism in the form of homogenization drive, undertaken by dominant ethnic group in the name of nation-building by the state, ethnic conflicts to maintain control over state or regarding distribution of resources and finally creation of a cultural framework within which political nationalism can be achieved, both modernist and culturalist perspectives have to be combined. Culturalist perspective cannot account for the growth of state as an instrument of modernisation and nation-building everywhere in the world. Cultural nationalism in order to sustain and ensure both internal and external legitimacy has to correspond to the norms developed in the international arena though shaped by internal compulsions.

Of course, there are theorists who subscribe to a limited understanding of culture like Anthony Smith. They link culture and modern state in an effective way. For Smith, the past works through myths, symbols and historical memories in the creation of modern state. Smith points towards the political nature of the transformation of ethnies into nation. He says modern state arises out of crisis of dual legitimation. While science and reason allied to modernity has discredited religion and its supremacy over social

organisation, it has disenchanted people for it lacks identity and purpose for social action. Therefore, people look to religion and ethnicity for meaning and identity. This account though links modernity and tradition; it fails to explain how cultural nationalism has over the years penetrated into social, economic and political movements in the modern era. The role of golden past, ancient heroes, myths and memories cannot equip a culture with the necessary material and ideas to shape it into a social, cultural and economic movement in the modern period when science and reason rule over dogmas and beliefs. Therefore, the robustness of an identity and construction of a new identity depend on their relative openness to science and reason.

There is a need to locate construction of identities within the framework of interaction between tradition and modernity. Modernity contributes to tradition in developing a concept of nation and uniting it with a state within a specific boundary, in democratization of institutions, development of scientific and rational structures and the state taking up the role of being an instrument of modernisation and nation-building. Tradition contributes to modernity in the nation-building process by maintaining a distinct

identity and secondly, myths, memories and golden past do not serve the purpose unless culture contributes to modernity in terms of its scientific and rational appeal.

### **Conclusion**

The paper tries to bring the idea of modern state as the product of enlightenment to critical scrutiny by examining whether the modern state has been able to break with traditional notions of authority, which derived its power from religion or still there is scope for invocation of religious myths. It is argued in the article that though the definition of the modern state inherits the normative traditions of the enlightenment era, there are many forces lying at the heart of its origin and working that militate against the humanitarian goals set by the enlightenment ideas.

The birth of modern state was much celebrated as it was thought to be the outcome of human reason and science. Enlightenment in Europe is the harbinger of such thoughts, which placed human reason over supernatural powers—the source of traditional instrument of domination. Secondly, modernists emphasised that socio-economic and political modernization would unite the nation with state by replacing ethnic, religious and other primordial identities in favour of a national identity.

Without underestimating the benefits of modernity, the paper argues that modernists tend to overlook the role of elites and popular movements in constructing identities for their self-interest. Secondly, modernity cannot be considered a break with tradition as the latter still has mass appeal not only because it provides a sense of rootedness amidst economic, political and social changes, it has scientific and rational elements (the core elements of modernity) within it. In contrast to the arguments of culturalists and primordialists that nationalism is an expression of political will of a distinct identity, the paper argues that identities are constructed in the modern era without dismissing their claim that there is historical basis to identities. Identities are neither entirely fabricated (as some modernists claim) as they persist in the face of social, economic and political modernization nor are they entirely hermetically sealed entities which cannot be constructed either. A constructivist approach which looks at the role of tradition and modernity in construction of identities by putting interconnectivity between the two in perspective therefore goes a long way in understanding identity politics in a modern world divided into nation-states. ■

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