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and Communalism in South Asia

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State, Development and Communalism in South Asia

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Introduction

One of the puzzling consequences of State¹ formation and economic development in South Asia is the intensification of communal² (sub-national, religious or casteist) awareness and the increasingly strong demand for equality on the communal basis. In this connection we can recall the recent events in Sri Lanka's Sinhala-Tamil conflicts, reservation issues in India, Sindi-Mohajir (refugee) antagonisms in Pakistan, and so on. We are witnessing an intriguing combination of "revivalism" or "fundamentalism" with the pursuit of secular or material goals. Sikh "fundamentalists" armed with machine guns and transceivers or naked "Sadhus" observing TV-acted "Mahabharata" on videocassettes are not bewildering scenes these days.

The fruit of development would ultimately be enjoyed by individuals. But the individualist perception of the State and society looks quite helpless to disentangle the complex factors involved in the communalization process in South Asian State formation and development.

Often help is sought for an "instrumentalist" approach, which views the communal demands as an aggregate of individual aspirations and the communal symbol as an "instrument" to mobilize and manipulate community members for secular and material gains. Detailed arguments on this and other approaches that have been frequently discussed in the literature of "ethnicity" studies need no repetition here. This paper rather tries to illustrate political and economic contexts where in a sense of communal deprivation and alienation grows in response to State formation and the developmental process (Sections I and II). It also examines how

the sense of alienation helps the community to consolidate itself and to transform “a community in itself” into “a community for itself.”³ It further argues that a more refined definition of “communalism” is called for in this connection (Section III).

I. State Formation and Communal Alienation

Representation or a power-sharing arrangement on a communal base is not a recent demand in South Asian polity. Representation was allowed gradually from the lower level and finally reached the provincial level in the 1930s. Major dominant linguistic communities were conditioned to think in terms of getting provincial (state) status to secure their identity. South Asian federalism has partly been a framework to accommodate the demands of dominant linguistic groups. Britishers also devised such elaborate institutions as army recruitment according to the theory of martial races, separate electorates and reservations. They were devices invented for the ultimate objectives of imperial security and governance by giving preferential treatment to certain minor or handicapped communities. Post-independent State formation in South Asia could not but succeed and reformulate these institutions.

1. Federating Process

Though the Indian federal system could well accommodate major dominant linguistic (sub-national) groups by granting state status through several reformative steps, the 1956 state reorganization being the major one, it is highly inelastic in accommodating lesser nationalities. Apart from granting autonomy to the existing states, there is, in India, a growing demand of the emerging linguistic groups to claim due recognition from the State.

Other South Asian States' records on federalism would deserve no better appreciation. Pakistan virtually maintained a unitary system in spite of federal pronouncement. Sri Lanka's recent experiment in provincial council failed to take roots. The apparently homogeneous Bangladesh “nation” cannot hide tribal unrest.

Indian federalism in this context could be a case to be examined. In comparison with other multi-national States like the USSR or China, Indian federal structure lacks sophistication. The constitution basically provides only “state (province)” as an intermediate level to accommodate sub-national communities despite a no less complicated nationalities structure. A limited device has been made with regard to the eastern hill regions, but it is provided as a transitional and an exceptional remedy. In fact, despite the complaints against the feeble position vis-a-vis the centre, Indian states altogether control nearly half of the development spendings of the State. So the minor linguistic or tribal communities demand recognition as communities with a state status. In India, current autonomy demands by various communities, like Gorkhas, Bodos and Central Indian tribes, some of which

comprise well over a million in population, converge into the formation of new states of their own. They have highlighted the inflexible polity that favours major sub-national communities but insensibly disregards the demands of minor ones.

As the Indian political system lacks the multi-tiered nationalities framework found in the USSR, a community feels alienated if it is denied a state status. Agitations in the USSR by several small nationalities with less than a million in population demanding the status of "Republic" can be understood in a similar context. It is not that those nationalities are more "developed" and therefore entitled to demand States whereas those in India have to remain content with lower status. Demand, after all, is very much contextual. What forces the minor linguistic groups in India to raise their demand for state is the inflexible polity that fails to accommodate lesser nationalities.

2. Consociational Democracy

South Asia is potentially an area in the Third World where a consociational model⁴ of accommodating political aspirations of the communities could find ready acceptance. It was a colonial policy to co-opt certain classes of people selected from officially recognized communities, however amorphous in substance, to run the various levels of executive and legislative bodies with limited delegated powers. Influenced by these constitutional devices, demands for such typical consociational arrangements as pronounced in M.A. Jinnah's "14 points" or B.R. Ambedkar's proposals were made on behalf of minority or most discriminated untouchable communities. But the dominant nationalist orthodoxy in independent India, and ironically in Pakistan, as is well known, rejected the consociational constitution of the State and left the consociational demands to be accommodated in the inner composition of the ruling nationalist parties, i.e. the Indian National Congress in India and the Muslim League in Pakistan. A dominant party was accommodative in its membership, but minimally accommodative in sharing power with other parties, and it often acted in an authoritarian way. The decline and fall of nationalist parties that started much earlier in Pakistan in 1954 and later in 1967 in India heralded a new stage of domestic politics in which a single party cannot claim universal representation. Even after the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, State formation in South Asia has yet to come out of this stage. Communal aspirations, whether of sub-nationality, religion or caste, hardly seem to be institutionally reconciled.

This argument, however, does not visualize the South Asian States in consociational models. Apart from the distinction between constitutional and partisan cooption, there is another missing point in the construction of consociational models that seriously impairs the validity of this theory if applied to South Asian reality. It basically presumes unambiguous communal boundaries as a social base of political accommodation, which South Asian societies lack. As will be discussed in Section III, communal boundaries are often ambiguous. Fission and fusion were

not the exception but the rule in the consolidation of caste identity. There also occurs frequent transfer of dimensions among the three attributes of the communal identity (see Note 2). It is hardly possible to lay a permanently stable consociational polity on this fluid base of social structure.

Weighing all the factors, accommodation of communal demands in South Asian polity would remain partial. The absence of dominant parties and basic inapplicability of a consociational model leave the polity constantly faced with the communal pressure, and in this process, the minority and less privileged communities become vulnerable, as they have proportionately less representation in the executive arms of the State organ, like the armed forces, police and higher bureaucracy. This is one reason why war, rioting or other disturbances intensify their sense of alienation, making them feel unprotected.

II. Communal Dimensions of Development

There are several aspects of economic development that tend to enhance communal awareness. What would otherwise be of purely economic significance bears communal implications depending on the "initial conditions" carried over from the colonial economy. Initial conditions can be summarily described as follows.

More or less advanced communities preempted disproportionately large shares in urban middle class services in the colonial period. Division of labour in the colonial period, because of the inarticulated labour market, was generally very much compartmentalized along communal lines. Large segments of handicraft, cottage and small industries produced locality or community-specific commodities, like handloom cloths, garments, biris (cigars), locks, brassware, bangles etc.

In post-independent development this picture is increasingly deformed by growing opportunity for public employment, growing mobility of the labour force, and hence keener competition for employment. Community-specific handicrafts like brassware or bangles are now manufactured by fresh entrants who are better endowed with financial capability. Communal specialization is remarkably eroded. And finally personal and regional disparity tends to be interpreted in communal terms and economic dissatisfaction is frequently compounded with communal preoccupations.

1. Shares in Public Sector Employment

In South Asia as elsewhere in the Third World, the public sector has been the single largest employer in the labour market. It has also been the only growing sector for the educated unemployed, which in India reached 30 million in the employment register. This matches nearly the same amount currently employed in the public sector. The simple fact is that the solution needs the creation of another Indian State to absorb them, which is certainly not realistic. In such desperate situations, demand to further break up the existing administrative boundaries by

creating new states or lower units like districts (India) or upazilas (Bangladesh) would be understandable. In the newly created administrative unit local unemployed youth will evidently get preferential treatment. Sub-national movements are spearheaded by student organizations without exception. These movements are led by a class of people whom Hamza Alavi termed "salarariat,"⁵ and they aim at carving out their own territory. Current agitation centered on the reservation policy in northern India must also be viewed in this context.

2. "Internal Colony" Syndrome

Development is an integrative process which articulates the economy into a broader market. In several regions or pockets in South Asia, economic integration brought about a serious drain of resources and sense of deprivation and alienation prevailed strongly enough to develop an "internal colony" syndrome. Former East Pakistan, since the mid-fifties onward, Assam, Sind and Jharkhand are typical examples. Even the people in Indian Punjab, where the per capita state domestic product (SDP) is the highest in the country, nurse similar grievances because of the central Government's reluctance to raise the procurement price of grains. Irrespective of the income level of the people, a sense of communal deprivation develops whenever terms of sectoral or regional transactions deteriorate.

Another factor to develop the "internal colony" syndrome is the growing mobility of the population, brought about by urbanization, colonization, and a huge influx of refugees. Its accumulative effect is a rapid change in the composition of the population in many areas of South Asian countries. Assam and Tripura in eastern India, the Dry Zone Tamil area in Sri Lanka, and Sind in Pakistan are regions where the population composition underwent remarkable changes. These areas are deliberately chosen here to show that the movements against outsiders and for the regional identity found fertile ground against the background of population replacement.

Locals protest against the "intrusion" of outsiders who are either potential competitors in an increasingly competitive labour market, which formerly was more compartmentalized along communal lines, or the exploiters of local employment and resources that primarily comprise the landed assets.⁶

3. Demand for "Homeland"

Thus the feeling of deprivation of resources and frequently of culture nourishes a strong sentiment of "homeland" being lost to the original inhabitants. This sentiment gives birth to a demand for autonomy or in its ultimate expression, for separation of the "homeland." But unlike ethno-nationalism in the Soviet Union which demands restoring lost sovereignty, "homeland" sub-nationalism in South Asia is rather a passive reaction to deprivation and generally lacks sound historical ground. Loss of a numerical majority in their own "homeland" is an addi-

tional difficulty in attracting the attention of the State. But the several “homeland” movements, like Gorkhaland or Bodoland movements in India, have successfully highlighted the inflexible polity that favours major sub-national communities but insensibly disregards the demands of minor ones. It should also be noted that in the successful pursuit of sub-nationalism or a “homeland” movement, external factors are very much crucial.

III. Alienation to Consolidation

Failure of accommodation and a sense of deprivation enhances communal awareness. A numerically major community like Bengalis in united Pakistan, or an economically privileged community like Sikhs in Punjab could succumb to the sense of alienation in certain circumstances. In this paper supra-national factors are not discussed but they exert increasingly graver influence on communal awareness. The incidence of alienation is very much contextual.

1. Redefining Communities

This proposition brings us finally to the question as to the unique feature of consolidation of communal awareness into a distinct entity on which the community claims redress.

We tend to think that communal awareness is based on primordial ties and a particular community consolidates itself resting on primordial unity. This is, however, a simplistic view of communal politics.

So far as the communal awareness is nourished to get rid of the situation that led the community to feel alienated, a community in some way or other tries to gain access to power or claim formal recognition from the State. A prerequisite for this would be to consolidate and make distinct its identity as a community. This statement sounds like an apparent tautology, but it points to a complicated process of redefining a “community.”

Contrary to the general belief, communal boundaries in South Asia have been largely ambiguous. As an example, in Indian Punjab, it has not been so easy historically to delineate boundaries between Hindus and Sikhs or Hindi and Punjabi speakers. Due to liberal intercourse between the two communities, the boundary was never clear-cut but gradational. Besides, the boundaries in religion and language little coincide. To state it generally, a community boundary is often horizontally fluid in one dimension, as well as vertically diverse in each dimension.

And once a communal dimension gets prominence, a redefining operation works in two ways, horizontally in the same dimension and vertically in the other dimension. Not only the Sikhs and the Hindus are made distinct and mutually exclusive categories (horizontal redefinition) but religious and linguistic (Punjabi, Hindi) boundaries are sought to be made uniform (vertical redefinition). The redefined Sikh “community” becomes more exclusive and boundaries become less ambigu-

ous. Communalization in South Asia involves such a redefinition process and liberal intercourse, so far unobjected, often gets disrupted. The extremist expression of this communalization is found in such slogans as "Hindu, Hindi, Hindusthan" or "Muslim, Urdu, Pakistan."

In the process of communal consolidation, a primordial tie has more of an operational than a substantial value, and it easily turns into a "mythic bond" once a community achieves consolidation.

2. Communalism and Nationalism

To end this Section, a brief comment would be relevant on the concept of "Communalism" that haunts the social scientists who are concerned with the prospects of the South Asian society.

The "redefinition" exercise, which is nothing but a process of community consolidation, concomitant with the enforced seclusion (relational as well as locational) and with sheer violence, can be termed "Communalism." It is frequently observed in South Asia that the "Communalism" thus termed is hardly distinguishable from regimental "Nationalism," which disallows social or cultural pluralism. The only difference might be, as B.R. Ambedkar claimed,⁷ that minority nationalism was always called as communalism by the majority community, while majority communalism is always gilded with Nationalism at the expense of minority communities.

Study of the experiences in South Asia would provide us with rich perspectives with regard to the social implications of State-formation and development not only in the Third World, but also in past histories that include our own.

NOTES

1. Throughout this paper, a distinction is made between "State" and "state," which is a federating unit of a "State."
2. "Communal" is interchangeable with "ethnic" so far as the latter is used as a sweeping adjective to include sub-national, religious and caste dimensions. It should be noted, however, that the three dimensions are transferable to each other by such means as religion-centric nationalism or the conversion of depressed castes into other religions besides Hinduism. A related discussion is presented in Section III.
3. The twin concepts of "Consolidation" and "Alienation" are convincingly discussed by Ramkrishna Mukherjee in "Nation-building and State-formation in the Third World," prepared for the 1970 UNESCO meeting of experts at Cerivy-la-Salle, France.
4. Arendt Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies: A Comparative Explorations* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).
5. Alavi, Hamza, "Nationhood and the Nationalities in Pakistan," *Economic and Political Weekly* (July 8, 1989).

6. A somewhat reverse reaction is that a growing number of the “sons of the soil” applicants forces the already entrenched “outsiders” to surrender their opportunities. The Shiv Sena movement in Bombay, Sinhalese nationalism and more typically the Malaysian *Bumiputra* policy fall in this category. These are the case of the rising majorities asserting themselves.
7. Ambedkar, B.R. *States and Minorities: What are Their Rights and How to Secure Them in the Constitution of Free India* (Bombay: Thacker, 1947).