

Ethnicity and Nationalism

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In what follows, I wish to argue that both ethnicity and nationalism are artificial constructs (*ipso facto* not "givens"). They stand as impediments to objective understanding of interpersonal relationship and as such inhibit all attempts at improving the conditions of life. Therefore, the myths of ethnicity and nationalism have to be exploded and demolished in view of a better tomorrow.

But at the same time, it can be said that the present decade (in fact, the last decade of the century) has been a decade of ethnicity and nationalism. The prophecy of the post Renaissance and Reformation period that spread out scientific temper and rational attitude will go a long way in integrating people, has failed miserably. Instead, throughout the world, the clamour for disintegration and separate identity in the name of ethnicity and nationalism is on the increase. Of course, there are historico-political and economic reasons for such type of demand in various parts of the world but the most important source of it is a kind of conceptual confusion that besets both ethnicity and nationalism.

“To begin with, I wish to argue that ‘ethnicity’ is a polymorphous concept. This means that it is not used in one sense at all. In fact, it is used in different senses on different occasions. Consequently, we have such expressions as ‘ethnic Indians’, ‘ethnic Asians’, ‘ethnic Oriyas’, ‘ethnic Biharis’, ‘ethnic Hindus’, ‘ethnic Muslims’ and so on. A closer look at these expressions reveals that they do not stand for any unitary meaning. While ‘ethnic Asians’, ‘ethnic Indians’ and ‘ethnic Biharis’ stand for people living in particular geographical territories, ‘ethnic Hindus’ and ‘ethnic Muslims’ stand for religious groups. In short, the criterion of determining the ethnicity of a particular group is not at all clear. On occasions, language, religion,

culture, race and etc. are referred to while talking about ethnic groups. Neither the social scientist nor the politician, including the common man are clear at all what do they mean by 'ethnicity' and 'ethnic group' when they use such terms. The ambiguity is due to the fact that most of the fundamental concepts used in talking about man and society are not clearly defined. Such unclarity is not permissible in respect of concepts used in natural sciences. In fact, most of the basic concepts used in natural sciences are so clearly defined that one cannot afford to use them in different senses within the system without the risk of contradicting oneself. Of course, the basic concepts of natural sciences particularly, those of physics do undergo change and modification but such modification and overhauling do not take place frequently and at one's sweet will. Only when there are experimental evidences pointing to the contrary and conceptual contradictions within the system, the existing scientific theory undergoes a radical change and the fundamental concepts are thoroughly revised. Such type of revolution has taken place in physics. But the revision of the so called basic concepts of social sciences like 'ethnicity', 'nationalism' and etc. do not spring from any kind of intensive investigation into the nature of man and society but by and large from specific social and cultural motives. Again, such concepts, unlike those of physical sciences are not only used by the specialists but also by the politicians, statesmen and the laymen alike. In fact, for some reason or other, everybody thinks that he or she is competent to talk about man and society; whereas, this is not the situation in the case of talking about matter, energy and motion etc.

Let us try to understand some of the ethnic movements that have been organized in the north-eastern part of the Indian state in the light of the observation and analysis presented of the concept of ethnicity. The two important movements are the ones organized under the leadership of Phizo in Nagaland and Laldenga in Mizoram, which in subsequent years gave rise to the call for secession from the Indian state. Of late, such type of movement has been organized by the Khasi Students Union of Meghalaya though without the call for secession.

It is true that there are both genuine and imaginary reasons for such movements. As for example, in terms of physical development

the region comes at the lowest grade of the national scale. The location of the region in the close proximity of the international border makes it vulnerable to the influx of foreign nationals from across the border which in its turn, creates not only socio-economic problems but law and order problems as well. These are all facts in the N.E. region. Besides, some politicians and intellectuals go on harping on some imaginary reasons responsible for exploitation and unrest. To booster their views they use (perhaps unconsciously) foreign 'nationals' and 'outsiders' synonymously. Further, it is being said that the woes and suffering of the people in the region are due to exploitation of the natives by the outsiders. This attitude gets manifest in the persistent demand for extension of inner-line permission Act, frequent agitation against the businessmen from the plains. It is also argued that seventy five per cent, if not more of the so called huge amount of funds that flows from Delhi to the region for encouraging growth and development goes back to Delhi. So, it is maintained that the natives are not at all the beneficiaries of the developmental process in the country.

To understand this aspect of ethnic movement in the north-east, one has to understand the small-group attitude. The small group, for some reason or other is most of the time suspicious of the so called big group. Perhaps, one is required to do a bit of psycho-analysis and dig the unconscious. The collective unconscious is formed of a plethora of factors such as long term geographical isolation, lack of mutual cultural intercourse and above all the overplaying of distinctive racial features of various communities. This ultimately leads to gradual erosion of mutual trust and fellow feeling which usually constitute the bed rock of any healthy socio-political order. The empirical fact of relative deprivation coupled with complex collective unconscious gives rise to frequent outpouring of communal venom in the region. From this it should not be concluded that there are no genuine political, social and economic reasons for the unrest in the region. As a matter of fact, there are causes for greater concern on this count. One of the major causes of demographic imbalance in the N.E. states is that we have not been able to check the influx from across the border. The government machinery has failed miserably in this regard. The philanthropist may invoke leniency in this matter but sympathy and

charity to allow people illegally crossing the border and surreptitiously settle down in another country should not be encouraged at this stage of human history and civilization.

As in other parts of the country, so in the N.E. parts is the preponderance of inequity in all spheres of society. In the plains voice is being raised and enlightened opinion expressed against the socio-economic inequality prevalent in the society but surprisingly, the native or the tribal elite in the N.E. are yet to speak on it. They are caught up in the dichotomy of outsiders and insiders, natives and plains men and so on. Inequity and exploitation of various types is a fact of Indian way of life today. In due course of time it has resulted in yawning gap between the life style of the rich and that of the poor. It is not caste-specific or religion-specific. One comes across such glaring disparity in income and life style of various strata of tribal society if one visits some of the urban centres such as Shillong, Kohima, Dimapur and Aizawl in the N.E. region. In a word, the elite of the Indian state have somehow managed to pocket the surplus at the cost of the starving millions. Further, these elites transcend the categories and barriers of caste, religion, race and region. The tribal elites including their non-tribal counterpart, like any other elite group in the world at various stages of human civilization create myths and symbols to perpetuate their ideology and hegemony. The process may be deliberate or the result of the dictate of the unconscious psyche or both. This complex amalgam finds its anchorage on the primordial myths of ethnicity and nationalism (sometimes, sub-nationalism). The populace have to be energized and moved; ethnicity and nationalism prove to be the potent instruments for the purpose.

Symbols and myths are powerful means of mobilizing attitudes and moving people to action. The so called intellectual middle class (to borrow Lenin's term) instead of freeing men from their age-old bondage and slavery create new modes of enslaving the masses. The masses in their turn, fall easy prey to the conceptual manipulation by the elites.

Whatever might have been the historical origin of the terms 'nation' and 'nationalism' during the nineteenth century 'nation' came to be used synonymously with 'state'. The concept of nation-state was regarded as the highest ideal of every group who wishe

to live a corporate life and strive for common socio-political and economic goals. Thus, nation and nationalism began to transcend the petty considerations of casts, race, region, religion and culture. The doctrine of one nation and commitment and devotion to nationalism were extolled. Consequently, state and nation were treated as coeval and coextensive.

But today, this doctrine is being questioned by the elite intellectuals throughout the world and more so, in the N.E. region of India. The distinction is being made between state and nation; the former being a juridical concept is distinguished from the latter which is said to be purely socio-cultural in nature. Consequently, the argument runs thus: In the past, India was never a nation; at present, it is a plurality of nations. In fact, India is a multi-national state. Each ethnic and linguistic community forms a nation or a subnation. Thus, each one of them, the Oriyas, Biharis, Mizos, Nagas, Khasis and Bengalees form a nation. Further, it is being said that there is no such thing as Indian nation. As a matter of fact, the so called Indians are really Indian citizens but at no time they are Indian nationals. The argument boils down thus: As for example, an individual, say an Oriya can rightly be said to have Oriya nationality though he has Indian citizenship. This type of attitude manifests itself in some of the slogans (such as we are Khasi by blood but Indian by accident) made by the ethnic movement leaders from time to time.

Nationalism of any brand and variety like ethnicity too, is a polymorphous concept. Further, it is not one of the "givens". It is a conceptual construct and like any other construct it can be put to use as well as abuse. Historically speaking, the concepts of nation and nationalism have played a very important role in integrating diverse and discrete groups thereby accelerating the pace of economic growth and development. The European nation states are standing evidence to it.

Now the question is: how to define nation and nationalism? What is a nation; what are its characteristics and how to determine its defining components? As has been said earlier, the concept of nation like most of the concepts that we use in talking about man and society are ill-defined and are opentextured. They do not have a correlate in the world. It is entirely left to us either to delimit it or

extend the boundary of this concept. The urge for such delimitation and extension sometimes comes from a very powerful motive to modify, change and even to reorganize different groups of people. Chandragupta Maurya, Napoleon, Bismark and Hitler were inspired by one kind of motive & a section of present day leftist intellectuals including some of the ethnic movement leaders are inspired and encouraged altogether by another vision. But both of them have tried to fight the conceptual monster of their own creation.

By saying this we do not wish to be dismissive of facts and brush aside empirical reality of inequality, injustice, discrimination and above all exploitation prevalent in the country in general and the N.E. region in particular. What we wish to suggest is this: The slogan of ethnicity and sub-nationalism are not solutions to country's problem. It is true that there are various linguistic, racial, cultural, religious and regional groups in the country. But at the same time, the line of demarcation between these groups is not very neatly drawn and not fixed for all time to come. In fact, the so-called dividing line keeps on changing from time to time. But the intellectual and the politician sometimes, for some reason or other while trying to make political capital out of the prevailing social situation, advocates and upholds the spurious doctrine of ethnic, tribal or sub-national identity. It is argued that these are what give life and blood to particular groups. In fact, it is pleaded that the loss of such identities leads to the elimination of the individual in a substantive way.

Now the question is: What is the nature of such identities? Why should we retain and fight for such identities? Does man have only one kind of identity or he is a combination of many identities? Such questions have rarely been answered by the so-called protagonists of identity theory. Let us have a fresh look at the problem. An individual or a collectivity may be characterized from the point of language, religion, race, culture, region and so on. There is not one single vantage point for the purpose. In fact, the vantage point is dictated and decided by the motive force that one has. Moreover, the so called religion, language, culture and etc. do not constitute an integral part of what is known as the being of the individual. In fact, the individual acquires them in due course of time. But at certain stage, the acquired characteristics become

dominant. It is a fact that human beings in general feel at ease with individuals of their own cultural, linguistic, religious and racial groups but at the same time it is not a necessary fact. If religion could be a cementing and integrating factor, Pakistan which was created in the name of religion would not have been partitioned off in subsequent years. Similarly, if language is a necessary cementing factor, Bangladesh and West Bengal would have come closer. Unfortunately, human history evinces contrary trend. It is this: Neither language nor religion nor the so called culture has held men together. We do not argue that religion, language and culture of various groups are not important and should not be encouraged. On the other hand, we wish to point out that the attempt to define and understand particular social groups either in terms of their language, religion or culture in exclusion of their tears, tragedies, miseries, suffering, aspirations and well-being, is a mistake. This mistake springs from, as had been pointed out earlier, the motive of singling out one factor and then absolutise it for a particular purpose (most of the time selfish and confused). The formation of states on linguistic basis in the post independent India is a case in point. People speaking the same language were put under one state with a view to integrating and promoting their mutual interest. But it took no time to give rise to fissures and cracks in the body politic. Today in India, people of one region do not wish to remain with the people of other regions of the same state. Demand for Uttarakhand, Jharkhand, even separate Garo state, stand mute witness to this trend.

Politics and state craft in India have been equated with collective bargaining. But who to bargain with? For all practical purposes, it is a mutual bargain between the central government and the state units. On different occasions different parties bargain. Most of the time, the planks of the bargain are either ethnicity, sub-nationalism, language, race, religion or culture. Of late, it is the caste-based reservation and protective discrimination or son of the soil doctrine. Let us for the time being, imagine a hypothetical situation where all the jobs are snatched away from the high-caste people and given to the so called socially and educationally backward people. Further, let us imagine a situation where the outsider-teachers of a University are removed and all teaching jobs given to the local people only.

By doing this, do we really reach the ideal and perfect stage where all socio-economic problems disappear for all time to come?

Humanity has reached a stage when no individual can sustain alone what to speak of flourishing and prospering in isolation? State or corporate life is a must. But the normative parameters are not to be lost sight of. The craving for value-free social science has ultimately succeeded in eliminating all the values from the art of governance. Organization and reorganization of people and states on the basis of ethnicity, language, religion and race cannot solve problems and deliver the desired result unless it is accompanied by equitable distribution of the national wealth, opening of equal opportunity for everybody irrespective of caste, creed, sex and region, practice of austerity in the so called high and public offices and above all, installation of a vigilant and watchful law and order machinery. Interestingly, (but for obvious reasons) the leaders of the ethnic and sub-nationality movements very rarely highlight these issues.

To conclude, ethnicity and nationalism are being treated as two sides of the same coin by some intellectuals and the leaders of the ethnic movements in this country. They are being used as instruments to mobilize people of various regions for political bargaining. It is not resented, if in the process, bombs are planted on the railway track and innocent people die in thousands. In fact, sometimes apparently non-violent ethnic movements have caused immeasurable suffering to the innocent masses in terms of life and property. The state machinery for obvious reasons and some intellectual supporters of these movements, sometimes underplay the loss of life and property during these movements.

As concepts, both ethnicity and nationalism are hollow and empty. They do not picture social reality. One who uses these concepts must recognise their emptiness; otherwise, one is likely to fall into the trap of absolutism and dogmatism. In fact, no amount of theorising by the social scientist and the social philosopher on whether India is a nation or a state of multi-nationalities is going to solve genuine human problems. Similarly, no amount of cogitation on the primordial identity or ethnicity of social groups is going to relieve the natives of their poverty and privations. It is a well known fact that Lord Buddha was averse to answering the so called

fundamental and useless questions. He preferred to remain silent and rather worked for elimination of suffering and misery from the world. The Buddhist attack on conceptual wrangling is very much relevant in the context of social action in India.

Do we need intellectuals and leaders to engage in hairsplitting argument whether India is a nation or a combination of various nationalities? Perhaps we do not need them. On the other hand, we need intellectuals and leaders altogether of a different sort who can, to begin with, generate confidence in the people, through their individual life style and work for reduction of disparity of all types among the people. Idealism of a very fundamental type is logically built into the very idea of social action. In short, no social action can be detached from value-free consideration.

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