

The Myth of Ethnic Nationalism

B.S. BUTOLA

Nation and Nationalism are the most general and universal categories and identities within capitalism. According to Eric Hobsbawm "the last two centuries of the human history of planet earth are incomprehensible without some understanding of the term Nation and the vocabulary from it". It is for this particular distinguishing feature that the 19th century (to be more precise between 1780-1880) has been rightly called the century of "Nation Building" by Walter Bagehot. These and similar other observations are based on the premises of the enlightenment rationality whose most sublime achievement is also the entity and the identity called nation. According to the enlightenment rationality a nation and national identity is a substantive and totalising concept and identity. It presents a centralising discourse and all other entities and identities including the ethnic identities are defined in relation to this centralising, universal concept. But, in the process of their definition (the ethnic identities) in relation to the general (the national identities) the former stand subjugated and appropriated by the universal identities. However, the process of appropriation of the minor identities and their appropriation by the universal identities is never complete largely due to the structural logic of capitalism which never appropriates anything including the class identities in totality and completely and it allows the majority to subsist at the bare minimum levels of their subsistence. It is so because, keeping majority at that level of subsistence is critical to the survival of the system. Therefore, according to Sartre, nation represents a totalising category and entity without claiming the totality.

Under the rationalist discourse these (nations, nationalities) identities are mere abstractions obtained by emphasizing only those

qualities present in the object of the same genus which are common with all others, thus accentuating some and ignoring (suppressing) the other qualities. Conspicuous absence of full concreteness with all their (entities like ethnicity) specific qualities, concepts like nation, nationality etc. thus evolved failed to provide discrete identity to these concepts so that thereafter, there remains no other identity/entity or concept identical to it (nation). Thus, the entities/categories like nation and nationalism which should have represented the full and productive relatedness comprising the polarity of its uniqueness and generality at one and the same place and time, the concreteness and the abstraction constituting the two sides of the same coin have made these concepts diffused, prone to multiple symbolism, imageries and explanations. John Dunn for example defines the "Nations consist of those who belong together by birth (genetically, lineally, through familiarly inherited language and culture). Watson sees nationalism as "an ideology that creates national consciousness within a political unconscious population". For Paul Brass "ethnicity and nationalism are not given but are social and political constructs. They are creations of elites who draw upon, distort and sometimes fabricate materials from the cultures of the groups they wish to represent in order to protect their well-being or existence or to gain political and economic advantages for their group as well as for themselves", at any given point of time. "If an ethnic group succeeds by its own efforts in achieving any one of these goals either within existing state or in a state of its own it has become a nationality or a nation. A nation therefore may be seen as a particular type of ethnic community or rather as an ethnic community politicised with recognised group rights in the political system". To him there are two fundamental processes of nation formation:

(a) Ethnic nationalism: by transformation of ethnic group in a multi-ethnic state into a self-conscious political entity.

(b) By amalgamation of diverse groups and the formation of an inter-ethnic composition or homogeneous national culture through the agency of modern state. For Eric Hobsbawm the old meaning of a nation envisaged mainly as an ethnic unit but in recent usages it stressed "the notion of political unity and dependence" the "one and invincible" the nation considered was the body of citizen whose collective sovereignty constituted them a state which was their

political expression. For whatever else a "nation was the element of citizenship and mass participation or choice was never absent from it". This shows that these terms were not only ambiguous but also packed with inherent contradictions which have made these to exist at the inter-face of the old and the new and the abstract and the concrete and uniting the both.

In its efforts to universalise from this nation to nationalism stand for a simulacramic objectivity vulnerable to interpolation from the above and subversion from within.

Today, nation as an entity and nationalism as a force, (an ideology that asserts the right of a given nationality to form a state and become a movement to attain it and nationalism as an ideology that rationalizes such a demand has become a forceful political movement mobilizing all nationalities to form their own state) has come under attack from two apparently different and dialectically opposite complexes, one from the larger entity and force of globalization representing the structural logic of global multinational capitalism of the post world war second era from without. It is a challenge which according to the modern political scientist like John Dunn, Istvan Hont and Andrew Hurrell etc. is one of two most fundamental crises of the nation state the other being the ecological crises including threat from nuclear annihilation and environmental degradation, global warming, ozone layer depletion, green house effect etc. Thus the nature of the crises before the nation state being perceived in terms of:

(a) Preserving the territorial integrity in terms of political, economic and geopolitical territory.

(b) To provide the people within their territory with adequate welfare and comfort.

The solution from the point of view of global multinational capitalism in the appropriation of the nation and nation state on the same principle with which the nation has appropriated the minor or subaltern entities under the garb of enlightenment, universal and rationalist paradigms. Under this principle of globalization the only fundamental obstacle visualized by the multinational capitalist class is the nation state, the interest of national bourgeoisie. To get rid of these they have resorted to two legal as well as subversive mechanisms. Formation of M.T.O. / W.T.O. on the one hand at the

legal plane and by extending overt/covert, financial, moral support to the forces of subversion from within on the other. Therefore, the second and the most fundamental challenge to the nation state is articulated through the ethnic nationalist movements which in the post modern terminology also means deconstruction of the totalizing entity like nation and its realisation into smaller communities and ethnic entities in the form of ethnic nationalism. Thus nation today faces the challenges of appropriation from above by the force of globalization and subversion/deconstruction from within from the divisive forces of ethnic nationalities.

To me these forces are apparently different and diametrically opposite yet unified at the base. A process of achieving similar objective by walking differently but striking together (Leon Trotsky).

It is within this background that the question of ethnicity, ethnic nationalism and nationalism need to be evaluated or exploded strictly within the parameters of 11th thesis on Feurbach by Marx.

Nationalism which was a progressive category and an identity against the primordial identities of feudalism and other pre-capitalist social formations had remained a class-concept during the phase of bourgeois revolution the world over. Then, it was liberator to cultural and other identities by giving distinctiveness to each identity as identities under the feudalism were more fuzzy (Kaviraj). Nationalism in this phase created/liberated identities (for example, in 1740 Europe had 4 identities of ethnic, linguistic and religious origin and by 1870 there were more than 400 of these identities).

In the subsequent phase i.e. under imperialism, nationalism became the annihilating force, an appropriating agency as well as the steam-roller for identities including cultural, religious and class (both from within and without). It is due to such process of appropriation that the nation and the nationalism, as bourgeois categories were brought under interrogation and a number of resistance movements got momentum by performing the historical task of questioning the authenticity of bourgeois nation and nationalism world over. Once again, nationalism became synonymous with class-consciousness, particularly in the colonies. Nationalism became the site of intense class struggle between the 'Contending-Classes' in the 'emergent' nations. During the phase of late capitalism, nationalism was transformed into hegemony of the ruling elite to

appropriate the subaltern identities, not by force or aggression but, by persuasion and consensus. The subaltern classes, as a result became the collaborators of the ruling class to define their identity. The mechanism followed was to create a mirror-image of the subaltern consciousness in the ruling class ideology and thereby succeed in appropriating the power of the subaltern as an autonomous force outside the space created by the ruling class ideology. More correctly, hegemonic process is the condensation of the persuasive power of the ruling classes and collaboration of the subaltern classes. In this process, the subaltern classes stand appropriated. Dis-emplacement of class solidarity to the national solidarity and class identity to the national identity become the hallmark of class rule in this phase of capitalism. This shows how the ruling elite conspicuously manipulates the subaltern consciousness to the false consciousness of nation to disorient/disempower the subaltern.

In the 'Late Logic of Capital' or post-modernism or globalisation, categories like nation and nationalism stand appropriated from above and 'Deconstructed' from within. This is acute in the periphery of the global capitalism, where the finance capital not only appropriates the national capital but also subjugates the subaltern classes into the simulacra of imageries: the various ethnic, cultural and particular identities. In a situation of 'choicelessness', the paradox of making a choice between the two poles, globalisation or simulacral imageries, nation is a neither/nor, a demonstration of an impossibility, a historical abyss created by the rise of capital and its subsequent transformations. The potentials of the subaltern classes remain unmanifested on both temporal and extra temporal dimensions and therefore, remain a 'dangerous supplement' against this spectre of capital. The subaltern classes in the periphery are still a joint front against the onslaught of the global capital to engage themselves in revolutionary and ideological struggles to emancipate the abyssal simulacra of global capital. Therefore, both nation and nationalism remain emancipatory-transitional categories for the subaltern classes.

The question becomes all the more pertinent because the pretense of the nation to permanence and its claim to an immemorial history (Kaviraj) transcribes within itself historical stability and

political credibility that how an ever evolving nation can sustain itself on the face of deconstruction from within and appropriation from above?

The Myth

Nationalism and ethnicity do not form a qualitative semblance and quantitative difference to each other. On the contrary, the concept of nation negates the existence of ethnic communities (a counter argument to Paul Brass) and rise of ethnic movements are not the same as the emergence of nationalism through the process of deconstructing the nation from within, but it indicates the crises of nation and nationalism (a thing not included in the list of crises mentioned by John Dunn, Istvan Hont, Andrew Hurrell and others).

The rise of the so called ethnic nationalist movements indicating the crises of the nation are largely regulated through the global multinational capitalism. For overthrowing the nation states from within, without provoking the nationalistic sentiments against the aggressor. This mission is executed through putting nation states into docks for their alleged violation of human rights, peace-keeping norms and other so called international strictures. This is war carried through proxy to undermine the sovereignty of the nation states. In a condition of neo-colonialism, such proxy wars are launched by the powerful nation states against the weaker nation states in order to subvert the emancipatory potentials of the subaltern classes in the erstwhile colonised countries and now the post-colonial countries.

Since the dominant structural logic remains unchanged throughout the world in the era of neo-colonialism the subaltern classes will lose strategically if they subvert the nation state from within, because by doing so, they will be strengthening the neo-colonial design of the subversion of the nation states and hence will get reduced to be an instrumental force in the hands of neo-colonialist forces. Paradoxically the subaltern classes can misdirect their emancipatory potentials in subverting the nation states, but, this will not only lead to perishing of their cultural and other identity claims, it will also lead to a complete de-politicisation, de-culturisation and de-territorialisation of communities to throw them up into the vortex of identityless de-humanised mass of people, lost

and bullied as refugees of neo-colonial world order.

The possibilities of gain, even in such a bleak scenario of neo-colonialism are real for the subaltern classes only if they can adopt a correct revolutionary strategy in fighting the neo-colonialist forces and their cohorts at home. According to Kaviraj, "It is rarely that a clear line of casualty and moral empowerment runs from a single homogeneous self-understanding of a people called its nationalism". The subaltern classes should pursue a continuous strategy of immanence and transcendence in their defence and resistance from within and without. It is only then the nation as concept can ensemble not only a pluralistic and democratic strategies of struggle but also, it will become a rallying point for the multicultural subaltern classes the world over. It will be so because the palimpsest of the struggle of modern identities against the primordial and fuzzy identities of the transition from feudalism to capitalism has its historicity in the emergence of the nation: under colonialism, post-colonialism and neo-colonialism. This historical task was accomplished the world over in the period from 1780-1880 or more prominently from 1830-1880 AD. It also coincides with the century of revolution (Hobswam) and the century of nation building (Bagehot). The collective endeavour of these modern identities was based on the principle of democracy, in which the rule of majority, protection of the rights of the minority were accepted as the ways of life. Along with that, the legal possibility that a political minority of today can win electoral majority in future and thus, peaceful change in governance was accepted as the *vox populi* of a democratic order. Reduction of democracy to one party rule, domination of culture, nation, religion and ethnicity remain contradictory to democratic and secular principles of life. Ethnicity, which presupposes a permanent majority and a permanent authority over the polity is antithetical to the modern concept of democracy and rule by legitimacy and consent. Ethnicity, for its primordial nature of absolute allegiance to inheritance and fixed life world norms was appropriated by the most autocratic regimes of the world (Idi Amin of Uganda) and used as a means of repression of other ethnic communities as are the numerous cases of ethnic cleansing in former Yugoslavia and also in other parts of the world. Ethnicity is also appropriated in the form of creating both power hierarchies and

heterarchies in the uneven field of ethnic relations within a polity. Therefore, ethnic discourses can only manifest within the dominant discourse of power to get appropriated by legitimising the hegemonic rule and exhausting the emancipatory potentials of the subaltern ethnic groups. In the absence of a revolutionary consciousness articulated through the revolutionary struggle of the subaltern, the majority continues to operate in their daily life by appropriating their common sense as the organ of mobilisation. If the elites succeed in augmenting a section of the intellectuals (traditional intellectuals) in the design of their class rule over the majority then it tries to spread a false consciousness of ethnicity as the ruling logic of hegemony.

Nationalism in its progressive phase was not only a democratic and secular category but it was also the most liberating one. It presupposes and also bestows confidence in the unending ingenuity and creativity of the social individual along with ever changing nature of human relations including the relations of production. The political economy of the nation building process reveals that nation had not been a possibility so long as human beings remained chained into the fetters of the pre-capitalist social formations and they were not free to move vertically over classes and status and horizontally over the territorial imperatives of the fiefdom. It was based on the secular and democratic principles of freedom of entry into every status, class and identity subject to individual's capability, labour and skill. Contrary to this, the categories like community and ethnicity undermine the nature of ever changing nature of human relations and also presuppose the unending nature of human inheritance, birth, loyalty and kinship ties. Therefore, such identities and their transformation into nationality is retrogressive.

The critique of nationalism and its substitution/displacement with categories and entities like ethnicity, community and other primordialities will also mean a critique and substitution of rationality, enlightenment, and objectivity by superstitions, myths, and mysticism. Because ethnicity remains incomprehensible without ethnos having an *ousia* and polis constructed around the being, the historicity of which is dependent on the logos of the primordial identity.

The concept and categories like popular and grass root, people

or even subaltern etc outside the enlightenment discourse with its pivot around the nation make it ungrounded without a political ontology and thereby degenerates into the hauntology of ethnic nationalism. At the same time, negation of categories like nation in bad faith, in favour of undecidables like ethnicity (shorn off its political ontology) can even lead the radical historians to the pathology of adventurism, subversive to the omnibus resemblance of Mussolini's condemnation of "teleological" idea of progress and Hitler's exaltation of the German "Volk" (people), masses over 'hair splitting intelligence'.

Ethnicity to ethnic category is not what class is to class consciousness. Contrary to Paul Brass's argument, ethnicity is not a transformative category, rather transmutative in alternative narratives in the social symbolic, the circulation of which is triggered by hegemonic articulation. Ethnic movements are hyperbolic expressions of ethnic consciousness, the material bases of which are rooted in the domestic modes of production diachronically incorporating a mimesis of dominant modes of production, in order to cover up the in built process of marginalisation of the entire ethnic community alongwith the marginalised sections of the community. Therefore, ethnic movements are counter revolutionary in nature by subverting the class solidarity at the political economic levels.

The nobility of local narratives, local discourses and deconstruction of the universal/rational into smaller wholes based on the constructs like ethnicity have its disastrous consequences both politically and also from the point of view of human liberation. Instead of emphasising the pessimism of spirit (intellect) and optimism of will, it rests on its opposite: optimism of spirit (intellect) and pessimism of will. The critique of nationalism/nation by the post-modernists, in effect, is an invasion into the historical merger of ethnicities into a whole based on class consciousness and transformative zeal, because post-modernism in its attempt to create multiple centre of power undermines the revolutionary potentials of counter hegemonic struggles to create an alternative centre. Instead, post-modernism subverts the potentials of creating revolutionary centre by giving rise to subversive centres in the margins that bypass the core of hegemony just in order to subvert the coming together

of various marginal identities into a centre of revolutionary struggle. Therefore, the post-modern subscription to ethnic discourse is doubly subversive to the revolutionary struggle: multiple centres at the margin strengthen the hegemonic centre by diffusing the dominant ideology at the sublime state of ethnicity and from these multiple centres of diffused hegemony the construction of a counter hegemonic revolutionary centre can be effectively subverted. This double subversion inaugurates an irresponsibility to the other and relegates an ethnic identity to the pathology of magnifying an imagined enemy in the form of xenophobia, chauvinism and exclusivism. Contrarily, it ensures the fragmentation of communities on ethnic lines with corresponding withdrawal from the communicative action of the political discourse. The whole phenomenon can be ascribed to the interplay of decentering of will and pontification of spirit.

Finally in the aftermath of the communal partition of India, the praxis of toleration, dialogue and communicative communitarianism remain the only viable alternative to the monologue of construction of a dominant Hindi-Hindu-Brahminical (Karviraj) ideology and construction of religious ethnicity leading to auswitzes like December 6th, 1992 with all its attendant fascistic ramifications (where crimes and butchering of human rights are idealised in the simulacra of global holocaust). Also an attendant consumerist society with hypersensational jouissance of aesthetics of violence is the society that reproduces the plots of violence through its decentered ethnic discourses.

What is the Choice?

The choice is very clear. The nation has to go. But where? To the forces of globalisation or to the spirit of ethnic nationalism? The choice is both absolute and relative. It is not academic but practical. The exercise of nation building from above: creation of elites (Brass) must be deconstructed by the forces of solidarity and cohesion from below for full and better realisation of their specific qualities in their concrete relatedness such that the identity envolved thereafter should make it normatively possible that not only political minority of today wins the political power tomorrow but also the process of remaindeering a minority under the virtue regime of majority is

staved off permanently by accepting the rights of a cultural and political minority in full autonomy to the extent of the right to self-determination. Right to self-determination does not mean subversion of class solidarity because it reverts back the identity into further domination, like in neo-colonialism. This is feasible by uniting all the forces against the subjugators of forces of production within the nation state in which the subaltern classes unite them from below. For this purpose, all the cultures and languages need to be contributive in evolving cognitive pedagogy of the subaltern at the cultural front. At the political front, the class solidarity should be arrived at as a necessary condition for widening the class base from limited material production to the production/reproduction of culture and aesthetic reproduction of identities. By doing this the appropriation of sovereignty from the elite nationalist to the forces of nationalism from below within a national boundary is a must for accomplishing the task of revolutionary transformation of the society. It is only then what evolves as a nation will be able to fight a double edged battle both against the global finance capital and the ethnic subversion from within. Thus it will contribute to generate a greater universal identity symbolising the specific and productive relatedness comprising polarity of uniqueness and generality in one and the same text. In this process ethnic nationalism serves as the hegemonic mythology (Roland Barthes) that condenses and sublimates the forces of building the nation from below. Moreover, the myth of ethnic nationalism reifies itself at the level of global simulacra of finance capital.

Globalisation is inevitable. At least in its feigned mimesis of the social reality at the periphery and its simulation of a global hyperreality it produces dissimulation of ethnic identities as well as the nation. Under the logic of late capital, the capital acquires a global character by localising the labour and the raw materials and thereby objectifying the neo-colonial market relations within the national boundaries. The process is an one sided deterritorialisation of capital and territorialisation of labour as the only dominant global contradiction that sets the rules of new international disorder, in which political crypticism presents itself as the feigned historical reality. Hitherto, this has resisted "the workers of the world to unite" lest it also forbids the 'humans of the world to unite'.

REFERENCES

1. Theodor Adorno, Message in a Bottle, *New Left Review*, 213.
2. Aijaz Ahmad, Reconsidering Derrida Spectres of Marx and Deconstructive Politics, *New Left Review*, No. 208.
3. Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, New York, 1968.
4. Michael Belling, Nationalism and Richard Rorty: The Text as a Flag for Pax Americana, *New Left Review*, 202.
5. Paul R. Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism Theory and Comparison*, Sage Publication, New Delhi, 1991.
6. Iam Chambers, *Border Dialogues Journey in Postmodernity A Comedia*, Routledge and Kagan Paul, London, 1990.
7. Paul Conneerton, *Critical Sociology*, Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth, 1976.
8. Stephen Crook, *Postmodernisation: Change in Advanced Society*, Sage Publication, 1992.
9. Fred Dallmayr, Postmetaphysics and Democracy, *Political Theory*, Vol 21 No. 1, Feb. 1993.
10. Vivek Dhareshwar, Postcolonial and Postmodern, Economic and Political Economy, July 29, 1995.
11. John Dunn, Introduction: Crisis of the Nation State, *Political Studies: Special Issue*, Vol. 42, pp 3-15, 1994.
12. Terry Eagleton, Ireland's Obdurate Nationalism, *New Left Review*, 213.
13. Nancy Fraser, From Redistribution to Recognition Dilemmas of Justice in 'A Post Socialist Age', *New Left Review*, 212.
14. Norman Geras, Language, Truth and Justice, *New Left Review*, 209.
15. Frigga Haug, The Quota Demand and Feminist Politics, *New Left Review*, 209.
16. Al Gidicks, Dialectics of the Irrational, *The Insurgent Sociologist*, Vol. 13, No. 3, Spring 1986.
17. Paul R. Hirst and G. Thompson, Globalisation and the Future of the Nation State, *Economy and Society*, Vol. 24, No. 3, August 1995, pp. 408-42.
18. Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780 Programme, Myth, Reality*, Cambridge University Press, 1994.
19. Istvan Hont, The Permanent Crisis of a Divided Mankind: "Contemporary Crisis of the National State", A Historical Perspective *Political Studies*, Vol. 42, Special Issue, pp. 166-231, 1994.
20. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Duke University Press, 1990.
21. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or the Logic of Late Capitalism*, *New Left Review*, 146.
22. Sudipta Kaviraj, Crisis of the Nation State in India, *Political Studies*, Ibid. pp. 115-129.

23. Krishankumar, Civil Society British, *The Journal of Sociology*, 44/3 1993.
24. Imre Lakatos et. al (ed.), *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*, Cambridge University Press, 1986.
25. Raymond L.M. Lee, Modernisation, Postmodernism and the Third World, *Current Sociology*, Vol. 42, No. 2, Summer 1994.
26. Joseph McCarney, Shaping Ends: Reflection on Fukuyama, *New Left Review*, 202.
27. Francis Mulhern, The Politics of Cultural Studies, *Monthly Review*, Vol. 47, No. 3, July-August, 1995.
28. Arun Patnaik, Gramsci's Concept of Common Sense, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 30th Jan. 1988.
29. M. Rayan, Marxism and Deconstruction, *Inquiry*, Vol. 38, No. 3, September, 1995.
30. G. Salemohamed, Derrida and the Marxian Promise, *Economy and Society*, Vol. 24, No. 3, August, 1995.
31. Margaret R. Simon, The Narrative Constitution of Identity, *Theory and Society*, Vol. 23/5, Oct. 1994.
32. James R. Simmons, Economic Theory of Democracy Revisited and Revised, *New Political Science*, Fall No. 23, 1992.
33. Evanthia Sofianou, Post-Modernism and the Notion of Rationality in Economics, *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, Vol. 19, No. 3, June 1995.
34. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge University Press, 1989.
35. Stephen K. White, *Political Theory and Postmodernism*, Cambridge University Press, 1991.
36. E.O. Wright, Class Analysis History and Emancipation, *New Left Review*, 202.
37. David Webberman, Foucault's Reconceptation of Power, *The Philosophical Forum*, Vol. XXVI, No. 3, Spring 1995.