

# THE NATION STATE IN CRISIS AND THE RISE OF ETHNO-NATIONALISM

Stanley J. Tambiah

## Introduction

To put it somewhat starkly, and ignoring many nuances, there are two models of nationalism that are in interaction as well as contention in many parts of the world. Each model has its benefits and its costs, and our existential task at the close of the twentieth century is to find a way of reconciling both and of finding a new synthesis in the political life of collectivities of people.

There is the nationalism of the *nation state*, which, historically was conceived and first substantially realized in Europe, particularly in Western Europe. There is another form, which I shall label "Ethno-nationalism" which has originated separately in many parts of the globe. It has had, and continues to have, its European formulation and presence in parts of Germany; and today it exists in more distinctive and similar ways in many other parts of the world - in Africa, the middle East, South and South East Asia, and in Latin America. Ethno-nationalism in its varied forms is most definitely not solely a western construction. Being more general in its impulses, it has independently emerged in many different sites, though today global processes may push them towards convergence.

The charter of the nation state, our first model, has been widely sought to be transplanted by its European progenitors, in their global role as imperial powers, on to their dependencies and colonies of the Third World. The transplantation was especially active and speeded up at the time of decolonization after the Second World War. Its impact on, and dialectic with the social forms and practices of these erstwhile colonies, has in fact brought into prominence an intensified form of ethno-nationalism as a regional reaction against the excessive or unwelcome centralizing and homogenizing policies of the nation state. In Eastern Europe, a similar imposition after the First World War of a nation-state blueprint on a terrain differentiated by linguistic, religious and ethnic cleavages, followed by a subsequent imposition on the same terrain after the Second World War, of authoritarian communist regimes, has been succeeded today by an outbreak of ethno-nationalist claims that are competitive, divisive and violent as well as euphoric and full of promise for the participants.

It is this historic meeting, collision and dialectic between the project of nation state making, and counter claims of ethnonationalism that provides a focus for this address. A thread that runs through it is that what is happening in the countries of South Asia (and in many other newly independent third world countries) is not very different from what is happening in Eastern Europe and the newly founded Commonwealth of Independent States.

## The Nation State as a Historical Construction

The Western European model of a secular nation state was predicated on the ideals proclaimed by the French revolution on the one hand, and on the other, on the universalist claims of Enlightenment rationalism. Essential components of this nation state were the separation of Church and State and the virtual privatization of religion, the conception of citizenship based on the formal equality of all individuals who are its members, the jurisdiction of the nation state as valid in the territory that it covers and that is defined by its frontiers, and finally, the arguable notion that politics is a secularized domain of activity shaped by its own objectives of power and by its own logic and rules.

The secularization of politics carried distinctive entailments which are worth underscoring. In Western European history the separation of Church and State, and the relegation or confinement of religion to the private domain, were linked to the stimulation given to the scientific revolution. Experimentation by certain trends in Protestant Reformation thereby also in the long run had opened the door for God to become otiose or distant with regard to the pursuit of science. The scientists' religious beliefs and attachments, if they had any, were supposedly irrelevant in establishing the laws of science.

Historically, the development of the Western nation state was linked to the launching of the industrial revolution, and the impulsion of capitalism as an expansionary force, creating wide ranging and interlocking markets for goods, creating labour markets with relatively free mobility of labour geographically, and progressively erasing parochial boundaries. Capitalism was a dynamic homogenizing agent in the newly industrializing countries. It also generated the expectations and hopes of a



continuing economic expansion, despite “temporary” slumps and downturns.

The expectation of economic growth and expansion generated aspirations for social mobility, cultural homogenisation, and more egalitarian distributions of wealth.

We may also introduce to this heady mix another tendency: the drive to create a national culture, usually around a common dominant language (which gains precedence over other dialects or minority languages). (Switzerland is an exception in this respect.) The growth in literacy rates, linked to expanding educational facilities and opportunities, and the implosion of cheap printing (what Benedict Anderson has called “print capitalism”) are other integral components of the Western success story.

Thus we may say in sum that in the creation of the Western nation state, political integration, continuous economic expansion, and frequently linguistic homogenization for administrative purposes and for ‘high’ cultural productions went hand in hand. The concepts of nation and state were fused in an entity, the bounded nation state. And in the end, above all, national identity required from the citizen loyalty to the state conceived as a secular entity. This was the ideal, typical construction, claiming normative authority, whatever the deviations in actual fact.

Now, since the secular nation state has been advocated by many Western theorists and third world intellectuals and political leaders as the bedrock on which modernization and economic development can be raised, it is extremely relevant to bear in mind two warnings.

Firstly, the West European nation-state was established as the end result of certain specific developments, and many social upheavals, internal strains, revolutions, and divisive wars between states. (We tend to forget this when we are impatient with the problems of governance and economic development in other countries).

Secondly, there is the possibility of a fundamental fallacy being perpetrated when an attempt is made to impose an historical construction such as the nation-state, formed on distinctive soil, on a dependent world as if its realization is a *necessary stage in Universal History*. This supposition derived from Enlightenment assumptions might have a near “hegemonic” domination in global affairs. (As we shall see later, within Europe itself this claim was questioned and contested and that is why we shall later be concerned with the ideas of Herder).

What happens - and indeed how do we perceive, represent and interpret what happens - in many parts of the world where the chain and configuration of events that led to the realization of the European secular nation state have not taken place, or are actively resisted as harmful (as for example in Iran by Shiite Fundamentalism or in India by Hindu nationalists)? Is it now time to shift from

the language of “obstacles” to “development” to the language of active subaltern “resistance” to it?

While trying to sort out these issues, it is important to note that the other side of the Western model of the secular nation-state is its aggressive nationalism, and its imperialist expansion and penetration into what became its colonial dependencies. So it would seem that liberal democracy at home in Western Europe and the United States could assume the fierce shape of authoritarian rule abroad, the exploitation of native labour and resources, and the inferiorization, if not erosion, of the cultures of the colonized. (There seems to have been a linear path connecting Napoleon’s expansion in Europe to the French, British and Dutch empires in Asia and Africa.) Marxists explained these processes in terms of capitalism gaining a new lease of life through colonial exploitation. This inferiorization and threat of cultural extinction in large part impels the rise of Islamic fundamentalism or Buddhist nationalism or Hindu nationalism and other such reactions, and their taking a retaliatory attitude to the West - its exercise of economic affluence and domination, its political supremacy, its alleged consumerist values, its celebration of sexual eroticism, its erosion of family durability, and so on.

### The Three Phases of Independence

Keeping in mind that their political objective was the establishment of nation states, I would like to delineate three phases in the political history of a number of third world countries like India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Guyana, and Nigeria, which received their independence soon after the Second World War. The characteristic issues of each phase are stated in terms of the ideological rhetoric and distinctive labels used by politicians and academic commentators alike. (I do not intend these phases to be taken as discontinuous shifts but merely as showing different emphases.)

1. The first stage is the actual “decolonization” process itself, when Western imperial powers, following the Second World War “transferred power” to local elite groups. While the colonial period created certain dislocations, decolonization itself was preceded and accompanied by violence when, as was the case with Algeria, the colony fought a “war of liberation”. In other countries such as Sri Lanka and Burma, the transfer of power was more peaceful though not entirely without the staging of civil disobedience movements and other forms of resistance, as, for example, those mounted in India by the Indian National Congress or in Malaya by the Chinese communist guerrillas.

2. The second phase, spanning the late 1950’s and gathering momentum in the 1960’s, was characterized by optimistic and even strident claims made in these newly independent countries concerning their objectives of “nation making”, strengthening “national sovereignty”,



creating "national culture" and "national identity" and achieving "national integration". The slogans of the time accented "national dimensions", and in doing so played down and wished away internal diversity and social cleavages in favor of the primacy of nation - states as the accredited units of the United Nations and the modern world system. Interestingly, Franz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1968) belongs to this phase with its programmatic celebration of "national literature" and "national culture" in the African states, newly delivered from the chains of colonialism. Fanon proclaimed the need "to fight for the liberation of the nation, that material key stone which makes the building of a culture possible" (1968;233).

This phase of optimistic nation building was enacted as the work of "national coalition governments," examples of which were Nehru presiding over a monolithic Congress Party; Cheddi Jagan, an East Asian, and L.F. S. Burnham, a Creole, in the early 1950's heading the People's Progressive in Guyana; Tunjku Abdul Rahman presiding over the Malaysian Alliance, again in the 1950's, and D.S. Senanayake at the same time over the United National Party in Ceylon. Political parties seemed willing to collaborate rather than emphasize their separate interests and their special constituencies.

This phase was also marked by confident expectations of expanding economic horizons, instanced by faith in economic planning and growth, and the spawning of "five-year-plans" funded by foreign aid, whose smooth flow it was hoped would make the world safe for capitalism and democracy.

3. In a dislocating, and sometimes disconcerting manner this hopeful expansive phase of nation building has been put to the test, seriously questioned, imperiled and even reversed in the third phase, from the 1960's onwards, by the eruption of ethnic conflicts. The divisiveness has revolved around issues of language, race, religion and territory. Accordingly, there has been a shift again in slogans and concepts. "Ethnic Groups" and "Ethnic Conflict" are the salient labels for talking about these events. The terms "plural society", "devolution of powers" "traditional homelands," "self-determination"-old words given new force and urgency- have begun to frame the political debate and academic analyses. The central policy authority, the state, which in the previous phase of nation building and economic growth was designated as the prime actor and central intelligence in initiating, directing and controlling the country's future and historical trajectory, is now, after years of escalating ethnic divisiveness and pluralistic awareness, counselled to be "a referee" adjudicating differences and enabling regional cultures and societies to attain their "authentic" identities and interests.

In our present phase of ethno-nationalism, characterised by the politicization of ethnicity, there are two salient

features. The ethnic groups *qua* groups demand and bargain for collective entitlements (the concepts of individual rights and individual identity are secondary here), and it is usually a majority group that demands affirmative action on its behalf to put to right an alleged historical injustice, thereby once again giving a new content to affirmative action that is usually undertaken on behalf of depressed minorities and underclasses.

What I call ethno-nationalism relates to the generation of regional or sub-national reactions and resistances to what is seen as an over-centralized and hegemonic state, and their drive to achieve their own regional and local socio-political formations.

Now let me enumerate four issues that have posed problems with regard to nation-state making and "modernization" in newly independent and so-called developing third world countries, and which have increasingly generated the politics of ethno-nationalism. They are four rocks on which the nation state project has foundered.

1. In a country with plural languages, what shall be the language or languages of education and administration? A post-colonial problem that has plagued countries such as India, Pakistan, Burma, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, which have their own written languages and literary capital, is the replacement of English by *swabasha*. The ramifications of this language issue are many.

2. Closely related to the foregoing, is the "modernization" program that has entailed the launching of ambitious literacy programmes in the context of a population explosion, and the creation of large numbers of educated or semi-educated youths seeking employment in economies slow in growth and unable to accommodate them. It is this category of unemployed youth in urban sites that has been in all countries the most visible and activist participant in ethno-nationalist movements and ethnic riots.

3. A major divisive and contentious issue, generated by economic development and modernisation in countries of low income and high population density and rural under-employment is large scale population movements and migration that cause dramatic and speedy changes in the demographic ratios of peoples in a region who perceive themselves as different on the basis of ethnic origins, religion, length of residence and so on.

Myron Weiner has proposed two hypotheses concerning "the social and political consequences of internal migration in a multi-ethnic low-income society":

1. "that the process of modernization by providing incentives and opportunity for mobility creates the conditions for increasing internal migration."

2. "that the modernization process nurtures the growth of ethnic identification and ethnic cohesions."



The second proposition is specially true when migration and collision of groups produces "competition for control over or access to economic wealth, political power and social status": when there is a strong notion of "territorial ethnicity", the notion that certain ethnic groups are rooted in space as *bhumiputra* (son's of the soil), especially among the indigenous folk of the region into which migrants are coming; and when migration changes the demographic balance and the mix of ethnic groups within a given space.

We frequently witness two kinds of migration that produce quite different results.

- a. Migrants belonging to a particular ethnic group may move in from the periphery to work in subordinate positions to the ethnic group or nationality predominating in the core region. This situation results in a "dual labour market," and applies to Turkish and Greek guest workers in Germany, Moroccans in France, Mexican labour migrants to the U.S., who frequently become depressed minorities victimised by discrimination.
- b. Quite different outcomes ensue, when the population flows in the opposite direction, that is when it is the migrants who have skills and capacities superior to those of the locals, and enjoy affluence and social prestige.

This second situation can become particularly acrimonious and contentious, especially in post-colonial and post-independence times, when power shifts to, and is exercised by, the most numerous, usually the local "sons of the soil," who then wish to displace these successful so-called "aliens" and newcomers. Frequently this thrust coincides with the "indigenous" or local population producing its own educated youth who aspire to move into occupations held and enterprises managed by the migrants. Such moves to displace people in favored positions is particularly acute when the avenues of employment in the modern sector are not expanding fast enough to incorporate the number of entrants among the locals into the ranks of the middle class. When such bottlenecks occur, the successful migrants are viewed as obstacles to the social mobility and well being of the indigenous majority.

Examples illustrating this are found, in North East India, in Assam and Tripura and elsewhere: the collisions between the local hill tribes and the incoming West Bengali Hindu and Bangladeshi Muslim migrants; in Pakistan, the animus against the Muhajir who migrated to Sind after partition, and became prominent in Karachi; in Uganda, Idi Amin's expulsion of Indian merchants and professionals; in Fiji the tensions between the Fijians and the Indian immigrants. With the dissolution of the USSR we find that many Russian professionals and administrators, who were sent or migrated to the various

non Russian Republics, are faced with similar displacement by the "indigenous" populations.

4. The fourth issue pertains to the degree of viability of secularism as specified in Western Nation state philosophy in civilizational contexts of the sort prevailing in many parts of the world-in-the Middle East, in South and South East Asia (and elsewhere)- where many persons reject the relegation of religion to the private domain, and are earnestly committed to the idea that religious values and beliefs must necessarily inform politics and economic activities. The vexed issue is how to implement this world view in a context where multiple religions with their distinctive practices and with followers of different numerical sizes are co-present in the same political arena. It has been asserted that India has been the home of a conception of secularism, different from the Western, that holds that the State rather than excluding religion from politics is exhorted to be even handed in its dealings with multiple co-existing religions which give direction to the lives of its congregations. Mahatma Gandhi who once said that those who want to separate religion from politics understand neither, is held to be the quintessential proponent of the finest distilled wisdom of India that religions must co-exist in a spirit of tolerance and mutual respect within the same polity. (In earlier times such precedents were allegedly set by two celebrated Indian Emperors, Asoka, whose "righteous rule" was touched by Buddhist values of tolerance and non violence, and Akbar, the Moghul Emperor who ecumenically reached out to Hinduism.)

These were indeed glorious precedents and moments. But recent developments in India in the form of Sikh fundamentalism and the cry for Khalistan, and in the form of Hindu nationalism propagated and propagandized with great effect by such organisations as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), and which generated the recent Ayodhya temple dispute (the Babri Masjid-Ram Janmabhumi dispute), have rejected the Nehruvian version of secularism and are severely putting to the test India's capacity to negotiate a viable relation between a unified polity and divisive sectarian regio-politics. There are similar developments in other neighboring countries, including Sri Lanka.

The conundrum that faces many of us South Asians is this; while we all should make the effort to comprehend and appreciate the reasons for the rejection of Western secularism by certain religious communities, we also have to face upto the issue of what policy to put in its place in an arena where multiple religious communities with their divergent political agendas contest each other and make claims which threaten to engender discrimination and inequality among citizens who in principle must enjoy the same civil rights, and should live in peaceful co-existence. ■