

Interrogating Ethnic Studies

by BHUPINDER BRAR

I

'Ethnic' groups have existed always and almost everywhere. This is something that social sciences recognise readily and routinely these days. However, no one sufficiently explains why in the recent years interest in the subject has turned into an obsession. Does it have to do merely with the way the world has changed over the last few decades, or does it have to do at least as much with the way mainstream social sciences have started viewing the world? What exactly is the nature of power/knowledge relationship here?

Secondly, given the ever increasing abundance of writing on the subject, what has never ceased to amaze me is how little there is in terms of conceptual clarity on the notion of ethnicity. What we are offered is an excessively open-ended list of what could go into the making of 'ethnic' identities: race, religion, colour, language, cultural practices and much else, in any combination and with any of these factors becoming dominant. I am not convinced that much is additionally gained by giving all such identities a generic name rather than calling them by their easily available and far more specific names such as racial, religious, linguistic or cultural identities. Also, such an open-ended list would imply that an ethnic group is any community whose members are conscious of a collective identity which they share and which distinguishes them from other communities similarly conscious of their respective collective identities. One obvious problem with this definition would be its circularity.

Putting together the two sets of problems I have posed above, an obvious question would be: why are social sciences so vague about something they

are so obsessed with? Or one could reverse the order and ask the following question: why are social sciences so obsessed with something they are so vague about?

The usual answer to these questions would be somewhat as follows. The obsession, it will be argued, is explained by the size, scope and spread which ethnic assertions and conflicts have acquired world-wide in recent years, whereas the vagueness occurs because of the analytical inadequacies, which are only too natural, given the enormity and unprecedented sweep of the phenomenon under study. In short, the world has changed and the social sciences are trying to cope with the change.

How convincing is this answer? How much has the world changed? My own reading is that the world has not changed so much as has the way social sciences view the world. Ethnic assertions, conflicts existed even earlier, in all probability at the same scale as now, but they were viewed differently at different times, depending on what the sociology of social sciences was at a given time and, I suspect, also what the politics of social science was.

II

In this context, one can easily discern three phases in social sciences.

The first phase was an offshoot of what has come to be known as Orientalism, a cultural stereotyping by the Western students of non-western societies. To them the internal differentia and nuances of these societies appeared far less significant than their common "otherness", their pre-modern "tribalism", their frozen ahistorical cultural practices. In other words, ethnic identities were to be understood not in terms of what they were

– seen that way they were not one thing but several – but in terms of what they had all and equally failed to become: modern nations. Below the positive but amorphous definition of ethnicity, there was a fairly precise though negative and parasitic definition. Ethnicity was what those who were nation-minded saw in those who were not nations.

This way of looking at ethnicity did not betray merely the arrogance and conceit of the colonial powers, it also facilitated their claim to retain colonies, to act as 'trustees' of the 'premodern' (primitive) people who were incapable of governing themselves. The view therefore persisted until decolonisation was forced on these 'mother' countries.

The understanding of the first phase was reversed in the second phase. The logic of decolonisation was overtaken by something even more powerful: the logic of bipolarity and cold war. What mattered now was the ideology which a newly independent state pursued and the military bloc it joined; what mattered little was how it handled its 'internal dynamics.' In order to align the world along the ideological, political and military lines, it was necessary to play down racial, social and cultural diversity. All states were therefore accorded the status of nation-states (witness the formation of *United Nations*), relations among states were sought to be studied as relations among nations pursuing 'national interests.' The 'nation'-states were thereby left free to handle whichever way they preferred the problems of 'national security.'

Social sciences paved this way of arranging the world by inventing an entire discipline of 'nation-building.' This was a clever way of admitting what was

only too obvious to the naked eye. The fact was that regardless of where they were located – in the First World, the Second World or the Third World – many, even most, states were anything but nation-states. Social sciences then invented a telos for these non-nation states. The telos consisted of economic and technological modernisation as well as of becoming nations through ‘political development’. Traditional societies – agrarian, tribal, ascriptive and backward – were to become industrial, modern, urban, secular. In the process, traditional identities were to dissolve and nations were to emerge. In some cases, this would happen faster than in others, depending on how favourable ‘objective’ factors were and how far-sighted the leadership, but nationhood was the most natural, desirable and ultimate teleological end for all states. There was, in short, a conceptual linearity postulated even though actual history might follow a more twisted path.

We have now entered the third phase. In this phase, social sciences appear only too keen to admit that they were mistaken in their belief about the teleological inevitability of nationhood for all societies. The experience of the last fifty years has shown, they argue, that industrial capitalism is no melting pot for social groups, that statist command economies do not produce nations based on proletarian solidarity, and that anti-imperialism, whether radical or reactive, is no ready recipe for nationhood either. Social sciences want to claim today that, having learnt from their past mistakes, they have now given to ethnic identities their rightful place in their theoretical nature.

We need to have a closer look however at how rightly has this ‘rightful’ place been given. Apparently, this is a result of the fact that, having abandoned the modernist, rationalist and universalist perspective, social sciences have today embraced a postmodernist, relativist, pluralist and culturist perspective. Some critics allege that postmodernity has in

the process ended up celebrating the premodern. But were it merely that, it would still have retained a notion of linearity, only with the arrow now pointing in the other direction. What has happened in fact is something altogether different. What we have today is the total abandonment of linearity. Ethnic identities are not vestiges of the past. They are primordial, and therefore essential and perennial. Nationalism is now viewed not as a teleological destiny but as a project, a social and political construct, the desirability and viability of which are questioned.

Is this ‘epistemic’ move all that innocent? Has it merely coincided with the end of the cold war, the bipolar race of two super powers to align states behind them? Does it not have something to do with the ideology of globalisation? Is the swing of social sciences to essentialise ethnicity not a way of robbing third world states of their ‘nation-state’ status, and thereby their right to ‘self-determine’ their economic destinies? Is the essentialisation of ethnic groups not a way of addressing and approaching them over the heads of the states in which they are located, and turning them into consumers of material and cultural commodities produced by producers with expanding global reach?

I raise these questions because the postcolonial world continues to exhibit the syndromes of dependency and underdevelopment not only in the economic and technological fields but also in the field of socio-political theory. It is therefore of utmost importance for social theorists in the postcolonial states to realise how uncritical and indiscriminating we continue to be in our import of concepts and perspectives.

III

I might be accused of reading too much conspiracy in the renewed zeal with which western social sciences now study the ethnic phenomena. After all, is it not in the interests of the postcolonial states themselves that they develop an indepth

understanding of what is arguably the most destabilising factor for them all?

My response to this question would be that postcolonial states certainly need to understand the ‘ethnic’ dimension of their societies and politics but from a perspective of their own. That is so because their location in the contemporary world is irrevocably determined by something peculiar to them, namely, the agonising experience of being colonies and the history of anti-imperialist struggles. It is indeed impossible to know what the course of their socio-political history would have been if colonial intervention had not occurred. Would the ethnic identities have remained frozen for ever in a timelessness perpetuated by ‘Asiatic mode of production’? Or would they have evolved a momentum of their own, growing or fusing independently into something like the nations which rose in the West?

Be that as it may, we know that these societies were not allowed the options of timeless freeze or self-propelled linearity. Colonialism intervened and several peculiarities were introduced, some deliberately and others perhaps unwittingly. These peculiarities were then compounded by the postcolonial state and what is often called the postcolonial condition. All these make me suggest the notion of ‘warped linearity.’

The warping occurred at several levels. First, it occurred in the way the idea of nationhood arrived in these societies. It is certain that at the time of the colonial intervention, these societies were neither nations which had already been formed, nor were they growing into nations on their own as had happened earlier, for example, in Western Europe. Secondly, whereas central and East European societies had in their close proximity role models which they could try to emulate, to the Asian and African societies the modern idea of nationhood was unfamiliar, and remained so for quite some time even after the colonial intervention.

These societies assumed and asserted nationhood primarily because their

colonial masters had declared that only nations were entitled to self-determination. Nationalist ideology was sought to be injected from above as a prerequisite for gaining freedom. The move proved productive but was not without its insurmountable difficulties. In British India, for example, while everyone used the vocabulary of nationalism, the leaders of freedom struggle could not agree on how many nations there were in the country: one, two or a few more. At any rate, once the subcontinent had been partitioned, the leaders on both sides assumed that they now led nation-states which would remedy whatever marginal anomalies remained through measures aimed at 'nation-building'. If more than fifty years later what we still have are far from perfected nations, very few are willing to recognise the basic problem. Bluntly put, the problem is that while nationalist assertions could lead to freedom, freedom does not necessarily lead to nationhood. Unable to face this, we generally tend to blame the inadequacy of 'nation-building' measures or blame successive governments for 'lack of firmness' in dealing with 'anti-national elements.' Such attitudes give further impetus to some already existing tendencies, of economic and administrative centralisation on the one hand and majoritarian homogenisation on the other. That is naturally resented and resisted by marginalised regions and minorities, and sets in motion an endless chain of reactions.

The chain reaction causes the second level of warping. It occurs in the way 'ethnic' identities come to locate themselves in the postcolonial states. In one sense, what these identities do is only a mirror-image of the warped phenomenon of nationalism we have discussed above. Driven by the urge for autonomy and self-control, and told that only nations have the right to determine their own destiny, postcolonial ethnic groups started doing in the second half of the century what anti-imperialist movements were doing in the first half:

claiming nationhood in order to claim autonomy and statehood.

But what is warped is not only the way in which monolithic 'nationalism' and ethno-'nationalism' position themselves vis-a-vis each other. Equally warped is the way in which each has come to be constituted in postcolonial societies. If the claims of monolithic nationalism are obviously false, internal purity and cohesion which ethnic groups project is also equally suspect. The fact of the matter is that when religious, racial and linguistic diversities confronted the homogenising forces of unified administration, markets and communication networks, unleashed over a long historical span first by the colonial and then by the postcolonial states, different segments of populations ended up with identities which had been hammered and twisted out of their original shape, then welded together rather haphazardly, but rarely melted completely to be moulded afresh. These identities did not make for orderly nations, but they also lost internal purity and cohesion of the pre-colonial ethnic identities.

IV

Postcolonial populations today have identities which are neither national nor ethnic. Difficult to define and unwieldy to handle, they pose challenges of governance to the states they inhabit; but they are no gentler on the populations themselves. One day people are euphoric, drunk on nationalist or ethnic passions; next day they are the hapless victims because someone else, equally drunk on the same passions, has overrun them.

Yet one thing must be clearly understood. There is just no way these populations can go back to the comfort of their past, uncomplicated identities. No matter how uncertain and tortuous the path, there is only one way they can move: forward. And as I see it, the way forward forks in the following three directions:

(1) Postcolonial populations may become in future what they have failed to

become in the past: neatly ordered nations, their boundaries coinciding with the territorial boundaries of the present-day states. Many of us might see this as the ideal solution and wish that this happens, but this in reality is the least likely scenario. Integration of domestic markets, expansion of transport and communication networks, spread of education were expected to forge nations but have not; promises of equal share in a bright common future have been belied; charismatic leaderships no longer exist; and the post-war global consensus favouring state-determined 'nations' over nation-determined states has collapsed.

(2) Transformation of the nationhood-claiming ethnic identities into cohesive 'nations' resulting in the fragmentation of the present day states. This is a scenario that many support but many more dread. If we go by what has happened in recent years in many parts of the world, the scenario is not entirely unlikely. In case it does materialise, the postcolonial world will be in for a long term political instability, for no one can be sure how and when the self-propelling and self-perpetuating process of fragmentation will ever stop. Also since the nationhood-claiming ethnic identities are internally as centralising and homogenising as the states they seek autonomy from, multiplication of the number of states is unlikely to solve any of the basic problems which the populations face.

(3) Postcolonial states and populations move into what one might refer to as post-nationalist discourse. In essence, it involves derecognising national self-determination as the sole principle for forming states or securing their integrity. Post-nationalism will not resolve the impossibly tangled issue of conflicting identities but dissolve it by making it politically irrelevant. A parallel here can easily be drawn with secularism. Secularism does not resolve religious issues either; it simply makes them irrelevant for the relationship between state and social groups.

This, I suggest, is the best course for all

those who consider both options 1 and 2 neither viable nor desirable. The first step in moving towards post-nationalism would involve shifting of the principal basis on which state claims legitimacy and asserts authority. Were the postcolonial state not to claim that it represents a nation and its national interests, it would simply not matter whether the state is national, sub-national, multinational or supra-national. It would be a good state or a bad state depending on how efficient it functionally is in establishing rule of law and maintaining

order, securing the lives of its citizens and respecting their human rights, promoting development and welfare, etc. The state will be like a corporation, whether municipal or multinational, which provides services not to nations but to its 'clientele' and is judged in similar terms.

This foundational shift in the claims made by the state cannot but in turn fundamentally affect the claims of nationhood-claiming ethnic groups. There will be no distinct advantage left in aspiring or claiming to be a nation. It

would simply not advance its case for a separate statehood if the state of which it is presently a part is a good state judged by the criteria suggested above. On the other hand, if the state of which it is presently a part is bad, the ethnic group will not need to prove it is a nation in order to justify its move to secede. Nationhood will not be the basis of demanding or withdrawing political obedience.

Bhupinder Brar is Professor of Political Science, Panjab University, Chandigarh

Critical Observations on Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's *Anandamath* [1882]

by AMIYA P. SEN

It would indeed appear to be somewhat ironical that a work which became virtually synonymous with militant nationalism in India and greatly contributed to Bankimchandra's fame as a novelist is generally not rated very highly within the general corpus of his writings. In terms of either sophistication in plot or literary artistry, it compares rather poorly with Bankim's other novels such as *Durgeshnandini*, *Bishbriksha*, *Mrinalini*, or *Krishnakanter Will*. Its immediate impact on contemporary Bengali or Indian life too was quite negligible. The civilian Romesh Chandra Dutt once made the apt remark that the patriotic cry of *Bande Mataram*, extremely popular during the anti-partition agitation in Bengal, was seldom, if ever, used during the time that it was composed and made public through the novel. For instance, it does not seem to have been used during the two major public controversies of the period viz. the Ilbert Bill agitation and the contempt case involving the nationalist leader Surendranath Bannerjee. Dutt was also to make the point that the 'evil notoriety' that the song acquired during the *Swadeshi* days was far from the intention of its author. "That

Bankimchandra himself foresaw or desired any such use of it", Dutt wrote, "is impossible to believe."

In 1908, in a book titled *Indian Problems*, a fellow Bengali, S.M. Mitra observed that Bankim composed the novel 'in a fit of patriotic excitement, after a good hearty dinner which he always enjoyed'.

There was in fact, a school of thought which maintained that the idea or the imagery employed in *Anandamath* was specifically focused on Bengal and Bengalis. Here, Bankimchandra was seen to be the founder of a healthy Bengali provincialism, not as palpable in the writings of earlier writers, poets or novelists such as Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay, Rangalal Bandopadhyay or Hemchandra Bandopadhyay who were more enthused by the heroism of the Rajputs and the Marathas. The so called 'Santans' of *Anandamath*, on the other hand are typically Bengali in their values and sensibility and use cultural ideas or artefacts that are palpably drawn from traditional Bengali life. This, incidentally, was also the opinion of knowledgeable European writers and observers like Henry Cotton and George A. Grierson. The latter, in particular, also made the

interesting point that the metaphor of the country as the 'Mother' was in fact quite untypical of traditional Hinduism. The poet Kalidas for example, likened the country and the world to the 'Father'/'Fatherland' viz. *Jagate Pitorou Bando, Parvati Parameswara*.

We know for a fact that *Anandamath* was begun at a time when Bankim was transferred from his charge at Hoogly to Howrah. This coincided with certain unpleasant experiences as soon after he joined his new charge, Bankim ran into some trouble with his superior, C.E. Buckland, the District Collector. This was also a period of personal tragedy as his father, Jadav-chandra, also a member of the sub-ordinate bureaucracy, passed away. There are moreover, various explanations about the possible inspiration behind the work. The well known historian B.B. Majumdar believed that Bankim was inspired by the rebellion led by Vasudev Balwant Phadke in Maharashtra in 1866-67. The historical linkages between mal-administration and popular rebellion as evident in the case of Phadke and as depicted in *Anandamath* however has historical precedents. In the Persian classic *Siyar-ul-Mutakhkherin*, the