NATIONAL AND ETHNIC QUESTION IN THE PRESENT ERA

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The present trend in the world polity is towards a proliferation of ethnic collisions and conflicts, formation of new nation-states, subnationalist aspirations leading to greater autonomy within the territory of nation-states, and supranationalism and unipolarism, which erode many of the powers of the traditional nation-states. To decipher these seemingly contradictory trends it is necessary to unravel the concepts of ethnicity-nationality and nation in their concrete historical development and take a look at their manifestation in the present world order.

NATION, NATIONALITY AND ETHNICITY

The world's human population is distinctly divided into a very large number of 'peoples' or ethnic groups,[1] as they are now being called [ethnos (Greek): nation]. Indeed, the division between compatriots ('ourselves') and the foreigners/barbarians/savages ('others') is as ancient as the existence of humankind on this planet. According to this perception, human beings are divided into groups historically forming communities having by and large a common descent or myths of a common descent (though mixed ancestry within such communities is common enough), sharing cultural features such as language and religion and a set of common beliefs and values, and living on a specified territory or having an imaginary association with it. All these elements give rise to ideas of 'national'/'ethnic' character and peculiarities and serve to demarcate the group from 'others' similarly constituted and recognised as such.[2]

However, though forming a unity, these groups of people are by no means always homogeneous, and have their own internal stratifications, divisions and hierarchies on the basis of clan, gender, age and, with increasing historical development and complexity, on the basis of caste/occupation and class as well, which may take on more antagonistic forms. Hence for the anthropologist, K S Singh, ethnos includes castes and classes.[3]

But there are social scientists, like Mahmood Mamdani, who find the term 'ethnic group' to be just another evasive and fuzzy concept invented by imperialist scholars to fudge politically important distinctions between the socio-economic formations of tribe, nationality and nation. According to him, following Morgan and Engels, tribal society organised on the basis of kinship had no class differentiation and hence no state superstructure, because of the relatively 'primitive' mode of production and lack of surplus wealth. The rise of classes and the state followed improvements in production techniques, the resulting increase in wealth giving rise to differentiation within the group and the institution of private property. Tribal society gave way to society based on nationalities. The development of nationalities thus went hand in hand with the rise of classes and the state.[4] Nationalities arose on the basis of the fusion of many different tribes.

Each of the classical West European nations is a fusion of various tribes. France is at once Celtic, Iberic and Germanic. Germany is Germanic, Celtic and Slav; Italy is a mix of even more tribes and the British Isles as a whole are a mix of Celtic and Germanic peoples.[5]

The present-day concepts of nation, nation-state, nationality, national minority and so on are linked to the development of capitalism in Western Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries. In Western Europe capitalism more or less demolished the feudal economic and political structures to establish its own domestic market within a given territory. Democratic and structural reforms replaced earlier pre-capitalist institutions. Western nationalism based on market and commodity relations was individualistic and not community based: capitalist industrialisation and its superstructure replaced the *Gemein-schaft* (community) with the *Gesells-chaft* (a society of free, atomised individuals).[6] According to Anthony Smith, western nationalism was 'civic territorial,' based on the idea of a people sharing a common territory, subjected to a common set of laws, and participating in a common civic culture—the so-called civil society.[7] The ideology of the republic affirmed individual citizenship treating religious, ethnic, linguistic and philosophical affiliations as personal matters, with the state guaranteeing the equality, fraternity, solidarity and freedom of citizens.[8] Guaranteeing all this, the state wanted to replace or be a counterweight to all other loyalties of religion, nationality, or ethnicity and above all of class.[9] Western nationalism—as its industrial structure—was rational and liberal, looking forward to a future where all should enjoy the rights of man.[10]

Typically, though not always, a nation emerges based on an ethnic community (nationality) that furnishes it with its distinct cultural identity. However, the relationship of ethnic groups/nationalities to the nation is a complex one. Not all ethnic groups have historically evolved into nations. Sometimes, under specific historical circumstances, several ethnic groups/nationalities have come together and united themselves within the boundaries of the political community of the nation: the United Kingdom, Belgium, Finland, Switzerland, Spain and Netherlands are examples of this kind. They have federal, decentralised, autonomy ensuring institutions in place to safeguard the interests of each ethnic cultural group against encroachments by others, though these have by no means always been sufficient and did not completely eliminate the possibilities of inter-ethnic tensions and conflicts due to some form of domination/subordination and inequalities among the various ethnic groups constituting these nation-states. On the other hand, the German and English-speaking communities got divided into several nations.

According to Anthony Smith, in contradistinction to the concept of some social scientists, a nation is not necessarily a state but it is not just an ethnic community/ies. It must occupy a homeland of its own, at least for a long period of time and in order to constitute itself as a nation and to be recognised as such, it also needs to evolve a public culture and desire some degree of self-determination.[11] Smith's approach to the concept of nation is in synch with that of Ernest Renan, who expressed himself on this topic in his celebrated essay:

"What is a Nation?" Renan did not think that ethno-linguistic criteria were essential components of nations, nor did he set much store by the later-day conventional Stalinist criteria of a common economic life, or even territory and geography that indissolubly linked the formation of nations with the rise of capitalism. His concept was sharper and wider: "A nation is a spiritual principle, the outcome of profound complications of history... Two things constitute this ...spiritual principle... One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form...the nation, like the individual, is the culmination of a long past of endeavours, sacrifice and devotion."

Who would and can deny that Tibet, for example, constitutes a nation on these above terms and richly deserves the right to self-determination? From this perspective, nations are not necessarily linked always and inextricably with modernity, that is, with the development of capitalism and the need of the rising bourgeois class for a unified market, which uses already existing or invents new suitable myths, symbols and institutions to this end.

And if nations (Hobsbawm called them proto-nations) predate modernity, can it not be that they will not wither away totally in the future, but remain in new and vestigial forms as yet unimagined even when far-reaching revolutionary structural changes in the socio-economic system have taken place, whereby differences on the basis of ethnic origins, religion, colour, language and so on lose their edge, caste-class differentiations are eliminated and there is genuine democratic participation in a socialistic, communitarian society? Like the family, affinity to one's national/ethnic origins may linger on because it may still serve some basic affective/emotional/psychological cultural and ecological/environmental needs.[12]

It was in the 19th century that nationalism in Western Europe, which hitherto had contained a positive democratic content linked to self-determination rights, i.e., the right of a people to form their own state and govern themselves within the continent of Europe, began to take on a narrow, chauvinistic and rabidly expansionist tinge. This was particularly the case in the nations of Central and Southern Europe and in Japan, where the process of capitalist development took place later. Here, also because the national unification happened, as in Germany, largely under conditions when there was already a working class movement, a socialist movement, the compromise with the feudal forces was greater. As a result, the authoritarian element predominated against the liberal democratic element and the emphasis was on linguistic ethno-nationalism, which was hence often anti-foreigner. The word 'nationalism' itself appeared at the end of the nineteenth century to describe groups of right-wing ideologues in France and Italy, who agitated strongly against foreigners, liberals and socialists. They were the precursors of the later fascist movements in several countries of Western Europe and in Japan.[13] The chauvinistically inclined word 'nationalism' replaced the earlier democratic 'principle of nationality.'

In this period of the growth of monopoly capital, the amalgamation of finance capital with industrial capital and the heated competition for markets and colonies, the number of nationalist movements grew, not only in Europe—

particularly in Eastern and Northern Europe—but also in the colonial part of the world against the domination and rule by the imperialist West European nation-states. Not only that, within already established nation-states some regional populations began to mobilise politically as 'nations': for example, the Basques in Spain and the Welsh and Scots in the UK. Zionism calling for a Jewish homeland also came up during this period. The implication of such a trend in already established nation-states was that the assimilative capacity of early capitalism to integrate regions into a nation-state was waning due to the competition among nation-states and other internal contradictions of the capitalist mode of production.

It was also a period of great mass migrations within and between states and of increasingly exclusionary mindsets emphasising differences between 'them' and 'us', of the refusal of the receiving nation to always accept the assimilee fully. Often it was sectional working class pressure that actually excluded or tried to exclude foreigners from labour markets against their employers, who gained from cheaper labour.[14] The expectation that smaller nationalities and languages regarded to be unviable would disappear did not always materialise particularly during this phase. Majorities and minorities were created because of either the refusal to assimilate or the refusal to be assimilated. Those uprooted and integrated into foreign labour markets had reasons for consolidating their own national identities and consciousness in the foreign countries. The racist bourgeoisie, while benefiting from the cheap migrant labour, had every reason to play a game of divide and rule and also benefited from the xenophobia so created among the general working people.

Xenophobic chauvinistic nationalism became widely prevalent among the petty bourgeois sections also. It readily appealed to traders, farmers and independent craftsmen and some farmers threatened by industrial economy. The foreigner came to symbolise the disruption of the old ways and the capitalist system which was the source of this disruption. Anti-semitism too came up in this background. There were Jews among the bankers and entrepreneurs, who competed with small shopkeepers and gave or refused credit to farmers and small artisans. The late 1900s thus saw the growth of a variety of narrow nationalisms built on chauvinism, xenophobia and the idealisation of national expansion, conquest and war. Even in England there was a wave of anti-alien hysteria.[15]

After the First World War, which essentially resulted out of inter-imperialist rivalry, there was an attempt through the Peace Settlement of the Great Powers to implement the principle of self-determination of nations in Eastern Europe and Eurasia and as far as possible to draw frontiers on linguistic-ethnic bases. This attempt of the imperialist powers to form states on the basis of ethnically and linguistically homogeneous populations resulted in the mass expulsion or extermination of minorities. Such genocides took place even during the war, as the massacre of Armenians in Turkey that took place in 1915 and the expulsion of about 1.5 million Greeks from Asia Minor, where they had lived since the days of Homer. Greece expelled 400,000 Turks in retaliation. On the other hand, many of the new states constituted in Eastern Europe were multinational in nature and thus carried the seeds of inter-ethnic strife and faced the danger of

disintegration: these were, for instance, the states of Czechoslovakia, Poland, Romania and Yugoslavia.

In Central Europe, the Hitlerite extermination of Jews in Germany was an extremely barbarous attempt to create an ethnically homogeneous nation. The element of barbarism was to emerge many times in many places in the course of the twentieth century including in India. The barbaric assault on the rights of other nations and nationalities in Europe gave rise to a counter anti-fascist nationalism that had internationalist moorings. During this period Communists were heavily involved in these nationalist movements in their respective countries as part of a world-wide anti-fascist united front. The anti-imperialist national liberation movements in colonial countries were a strong contingent within this world-wide anti-fascist united front. The Communist International played a key role in this strategy. Therefore it is pertinent to see how the national question has been dealt with in the International Communist Movement.

MARXISM AND THE NATIONAL QUESTION

Any nation that oppresses another forges its own chains—Karl Marx

Marx offered neither a systematic theory of the national question, a precise definition of the concept of a nation, nor a general political strategy for the proletariat in this domain.[16] Mostly, only concrete statements with relation to specific cases were made by Marx and Engels. Subsequent historical developments have necessitated more precise formulations on this front as well as further development of theoretical positions and strategies. This task was largely first undertaken by Lenin.

Marx and Engels writing in the early period of capitalist development in Western Europe were initially overoptimistic about the ability of capitalism to assimilate various ethnic groups into nation-states for the sake of a homogeneous market. They thought that national differences were disappearing more and more, but subsequently formulated their position more cautiously and took note of an opposing trend, which was making itself felt even in their own time.

In his essay "On the Jewish Question" (1843), Marx observed that: "the state abolishes, in its own way, distinctions of birth, social rank, education, occupation when it declares that birth, social rank, occupation, are non-political distinctions, when it proclaims, without regard to these distinctions, that every member of the nation is an equal participant in national sovereignty... Nevertheless, the state allows private property, education, occupation to act in their way, i.e., as private property, as education, as occupation and to exert the influence of their special nature. Far from abolishing these real distinctions, the state only exists on the presupposition of their existence..." (Marx/Engels: Collected Works, Vol. 3. Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1975).

To these distinctions between citizens of a republic one can add those based on ethnic origins/nationality and religion as being of particular weightage, and which the bourgeoisie, especially in the later stages of capitalism, has no particular interest in abolishing. Fostering and basing itself on internationalism without regard to specificities related to ethnic identities became in their view the task of the proletariat, realisable only by this class:

While the bourgeoisie of each nation still retained separate national interests, big industry created a class, which in all nations has the same interest and with which nationality is already dead."

(K. Marx: *The German Ideology*, 1845 in: Marx/Engels: Coll. Works, Vol. 5)

"But in every country the proletariat has a sole and common interest, a sole and common enemy, a sole and common struggle. Only the proletariat can abolish nationality, only the vigilant proletariat can make the brotherhood of nations possible..." in short, "only the proletariat has no father/motherland because it is excluded from full membership of the nation. The proletariat represents the dissolution of classes and nationalities in contemporary society. The ultimate goal of the proletarian revolution is a classless and nationless society. Inasmuch as the antagonism between classes within the nation vanishes the hostility of one nation to another will come to an end. Nationalism is the natural stepping stone to internationalism." ("Aus dem literarischen Nachlass von" Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Ferdinand Lasalle, Stuttgart, 1902, Vol. 1, p. 408).

In his later writings, particularly in those on the question of Ireland, Marx showed that the bourgeoisie tends to foster and even increase national antagonisms. This is because the struggle to control markets creates conflicts between the capitalist powers; the exploitation and oppression of one nation by another creates national hostility. National chauvinism is also one of the major ideological tools used by the bourgeoisie to maintain its domination over the proletariat.[17]

However, the basis on which the proletariat is supposed to overcome national identities according to Marx carries economistic and eurocentric overtones. He claimed that the internationalisation of the economy through the capitalist mode of production, the emergence of the world market that has destroyed industry's national base by creating the universal interdependence of nations, the standardisation of industrial production and corresponding living conditions helps to dissolve national differences and antagonisms. In the face of actual national divisions and hostilities, and the question marks raised today with regard to the desirability of standardised industrial production such an approach also appears to be simplistic in the extreme. These are points that need further investigation and elaboration but can be dealt with only within the framework of a critique of communist ideology.

Nevertheless, Marx's position regarding internationalism as a goal for the proletariat should retain its validity even if nations and nationalities continue to exist and are not totally abolished under socialism and communism. The socialisation of production on an international plane can pave the way, though certainly not in a mechanical fashion, for the solidarity of various peoples of different ethnic, cultural and economic backgrounds. It provides the possibility for them to come together and build solidarity in a common struggle against wage labour.

With regard to the Irish question, in the early phase Marx was in favour of autonomy within a union with Britain and believed that the solution of the Irish question would come through a working class victory in England. Later, on the basis of unfolding events, he began to see the liberation of the Irish as a pre-

condition to the liberation of the English proletariat. The emancipation of the oppressed nation would weaken the economic, political, military and ideological bases of the dominating classes in the oppressor nation and contribute to the revolutionary struggle of the working class of that nation. And it is only on the basis of such support for the national liberation struggle of the oppressed nation that unity can be forged between the working classes of the two nations.

Lenin, in contrast to Rosa Luxemburg and other Social-Democrats of his time, was able to develop Marx's positions on the national question into a coherent theory and strategy for the working class movement of his time. Unlike Rosa Luxemburg, he was able to work out a dialectical relationship between internationalism and national self-determination. Unlike most of the other left ideologues he saw beyond the economic, cultural or 'psychological' dimensions and incorporated the crucial political dimension, that is, he incorporated the right of political secession, the right to form an independent nation-state, because an 'autonomous' nation does not enjoy rights equal to those of a 'sovereign' nation. He asserted that only the freedom to secede made a free and voluntary union, association, co-operation and, in the long term, fusion between nations possible. Only this recognition and corresponding actions could overcome the hostility and suspicion of the oppressed and bring about international unity and solidarity.

For Lenin, the national liberation struggles of oppressed nations, as democratic movements, were to be considered as allies of the proletarian socialist movement, though in a position of subordination to it. This meant that if a republican movement turned out to be led by reactionaries the Communists would not support that particular movement without foregoing support in general to republicanism. For him, the right to national self-determination was only a conditional and not an unconditional or absolute right. He never supported autonomy for national sections within the Communist Party, a demand which was put forward by the Jewish Bund and by Lettish and Caucasian Social-Democratic parties within the Russian Social-Democratic Party. He always held the clear view that Marxism was incompatible with nationalism and upheld internationalism in the form of the fusion of all nations in a higher unity. For him, the principle of national self-determination therefore could be accepted only with full consciousness of its relative, conditional and temporary validity, and with eyes firmly fixed on the final internationalist goal.[18]

Lenin's theoretical positions and practical approach contrasted significantly with those of Stalin articulated particularly in his (in)famous article: "Marxism and the National Question". Stalin upheld the general Marxist position, also endorsed by Lenin and other Social-Democrats, that the ultimate goal of socialism was the replacement of the division of the world into "nationally delimited communities by the principle of the 'international solidarity of the workers'." He stated that the aim of socialist policy was to break down national barriers and to unite the peoples "in such a way as to open the way for division of a different kind, division according to classes", away from diversion to national issues. At the same time, he also put forward a much quoted but extremely rigid and economistic definition of a nation, which is refuted by reality. According to such a definition of nation, Georgia before the second half of the nineteenth

century would not be a nation because, being divided into independent principalities, it had no common economic life. By the same criterion, Germany prior to its unification did not constitute a nation either!!

Moreover, Stalin refused to theoretically allow the possibility of the unity or association of national groups scattered within a multinational state. Lenin, on the other hand, vigorously defended the freedom of association no matter if the members of a nation were scattered in different parts of the country or globe. He also failed to make a sharp distinction between Great-Russian Tsarist oppressive nationalism and the nationalism of oppressed nations. He, in fact, most severely criticised the Social-Democrats in oppressed countries who did not stand firmly in the face of the nationalist movement.[19]

Notes :
1. Some social scientists estimate these ethnic groups to number around 5,000. See, for example, Pascal Boniface: The Proliferation of Nation-States, *The Hindu*, March 30/1999.
2. Cf. Urmila Phadnis, pp. 14-15; also see David Miller, p. 19.
3. See K.S. Singh.
4. Mahmood Mamdani: Nationality Question in a Neo-colony. A Historical Perspective. *Economic and Political Weekly*, July 7, 1984, pp. 1046-7.
5. See Renan.
6. J. Pathy, pp. 7andl.
7. See Anthony D. Smith, Chapter 1.
8. See Michel Foucher, p. 10.
9. See Eric Hobsbawm, 1987, p. 149.
10. Cf. Hans Kohn.
11. See Anthony D. Smith, p. 12.
12. See Pathy, J. op. cit, p. 4.
13. See Hobsbawm, op. cit., pp. 142-4.
14. Ibid., p.153
15. Hobsbawm, 1992.
16. See Michael Lowy and EH. Carr (pp. 414-35) for a summary of the Marxian approach to the national question.
17. Michael Lowy: Marxism and the National Question, in: Robin Blackburn (ed), pp. 136-37.
18. See E.H. Carr, p. 432.
19. Cf. Lowy, pp. 153-4.

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