

I. P. Desai Memorial Lecture : 3

SOCIAL PROCESSES AND DIMENSIONS OF
INDIAN NATIONALISM

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CENTRE FOR SOCIAL STUDIES

PREFACE

Professor I. P. Desai, the doyen of Indian Sociology, was the founder and former director of the Centre for Social Studies, Surat. He breathed his last on 26 January 1985. The CSS has decided to create an endowment fund with generous financial contributions from his friends, colleagues and admirers to carry out certain academic activities which were dear to Professor Desai. As part of the programme, we have instituted the I. P. Desai Memorial Lecture Series. The eminent sociologist Professor Yogendra Singh gave the Third lecture in the Series on 12th March 1988 at the Centre. It gives us pleasure to publish this lecture for a wider academic audience. I express my gratitude to Professor Yogendra Singh for delivering the third lecture; and to my colleagues Paramjit Singh and Biswaroop Das for editing the paper and looking after its publication in present form. We owe special thanks to Bhupen Khakhar for preparing the cover page.

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I deeply appreciate and feel honoured by the invitation the Centre for Social Studies have extended to me to participate in the lecture series in the memory of late Professor I. P. Desai. For more than two decades, I maintained close relationship with him. He inspired me deeply in my work and in my profession of sociology. Much has been written, and will continue to be written on his contributions. I would like, however, to reiterate his abiding social concerns, his commitment to the desired direction of social change and his practical approach in Social Sciences. My choice to speak on 'Social Processes and Dimensions of Nationalism in India' is inspired by I. P.'s quest for relevance. I am conscious of my limitations, because nationalism by convention belongs to the domains of political scientists and historians. Yet, I feel that a sociological perspective may not entirely be out of place.

A sociological perspective has two distinctive advantages: first, it views nationalism as a social process and not as a formal structural construct. It treats nationalism with a degree of methodological elasticity and portrays it at various levels of its functioning in a dynamic interactional setting. Secondly, sociologist's attempt is always to examine a social process in terms both of its intrinsic character and also as an element in the general forces of social transformation in society. Instead of taking an isolationist view, sociology attempts to

offer 'explanation' wherever it can, in a broad historical and culturally specific setting. It offers a blending of micro-history with macro-history and of theory with practice in society. No doubt, such effort has its hazards, specially of stepping into terrains unknown. It might also lead to oversimplification of issues that are far too complex. Yet, a sociological treatment of nationalism in India may be useful for two basic reasons : first, its conceptual formulation involves issues which are common to Indian social sciences viz the Western origin of its categories and their relevance. We have had a long debate in sociology on this question and shared experiences may have some validity. Secondly, sociologists in India have been engaged in intensive observation and analysis of diverse social processes in society, particularly those related to values and social structure, which might offer new insights into the problems related to social framework of Indian nationalism.

We come across several distinctive conceptual formulations of Indian nationalism both by our own and foreign scholars. A dominant view, that of historians and sociologists, sees the rise of nationalism in the context of British colonialism and the distortions it created in social structure and ideology of our society. These distortions refer to class character of nationalist leadership and its social, cultural and economic policies. It is said, these colonial distortions contributed to the rise of communalism, partition of the country and persistence of communal politics even after independence. Yet, it is recognised that colonial contact though subversive, generated social and economic forces that gave rise to nation-

alism and national movement in our society. In this approach, the study of relationship between social structure and cultural ideology forms a relatively weaker link. Its historiography draws heavily from policy framework and pronouncements of nationalist leadership and other agents involved in Indian national movement in order to construct a social morphology of nationalism. It focuses upon macro-historical processes, their intricate movements, their filter-down effects and patterns in society. The basic tension between nationalism and communalism, its linkages with class structure, the role class structure plays in the power structure, and the evolution of secularism as an ideology after independence are analysed at a general level. It does not however, examine these issues, as a sociologist or social anthropologist does, in the context of micro-historical processes and their given normative framework in the social structures, such as caste, community, family, kinship, locality, region and belief system etc. The indigenous cultural traditions are not examined closely in formulating social contexts of communalism and secularism and their implications to Indian nationalism. It is not able, therefore, to establish fully the linkages between the top and the subterranean levels of mobilization of nationalist consciousness and its structural tensions. Without fuller understanding of such linkages a sociology of Indian nationalism remains inadequate.

I have come across contributions of some historians and social scientists who show sensitivity to the problems of

linkages. They find macro-historical analysis of nationalism and national movement in India to be dominated by elitism either of liberal or marxist variety. Such historiography of Indian nationalism suffers according to them, by colonialist-elitism or bourgeois nationalist elitism, an 'ideological product' of British rule in India. They suggest an alternative model for understanding national movement and nationalism which derives its inspiration from structuralist theory. The model proceeds through constructing a series of binary opposites such as elite versus subaltern, vertical versus horizontal mobilization, formal (cautious) versus spontaneous sources of movement and to delineate national movement as a dialectical process. The national movement and the ideology of nationalism according to this view suffered in India from structural cleavages between the 'mass mobilization' on horizontal lines and its vertical mobilisation by elite nationalist leadership. The mass movement was located in principles of kinship, caste, class and territory, it was spontaneous in making and aimed at social resistance against exploitation. Its mobilization was not based on formal ideological or legalistic strategy, and it could change course and operation in midstream. The national movement led by elite leadership made use of such subaltern mobilizations selectively. The subalternity could not forge national movement all by itself. Yet the elite leadership, it is held, did not help forge these movements into a united front for social mobilization, due to its own class ideology. It created a structural hiatus in nationalist mobilization for large scale social

transformation. This hiatus, and the failure of our nationalist leadership according to this view, constitutes the problematic of Indian nationalism even today.

This viewpoint recognises the role of linkages between the pan-Indian and local mobilizations in the formation of political consciousness but its characterization of these linkages through notions of 'brokerage' or 'collaboration' neglects the cultural basis of such interaction in the social structure of our society. The notion of linkage is defined in rational-utilitarian terms and is devoid of cultural content. It is evident also from an assumption in this thesis that local mobilizations enjoy total autonomy or that they have a *sui generis* existence. Moreover, this view on Indian nationalism overemphasises particularistic manifestations of social and cultural forces denying pan-Indian national consciousness. Its 'collaborationist' notion of linkages between mass movements and British imperial administration, unconsciously promotes a 'pupil's progress' model of nationalism in India. The structural dissociation between the mass and the elite levels of national movements in this thesis is extended into a dichotomy between Eastern and Western social and cultural systems, and ideologies of nationalism.

This view abounds in the writing of several scholars on political culture and political system in contemporary India. Focus is on 'factional' characteristics of Indian political culture, its roots in primordial principles such as caste,

kinship and religion. The segmentary features of society are enlarged as if these were the general principles of Indian social organisation and its cultural pattern. The particularistic features are universalised without taking into consideration social institutions which serve as links between local and national levels of functioning. Despite there being some awareness of limitations of such approach to processes in Indian society, the tendency to hold to these views continues.

It is true that social institutions and groups at local levels in India enjoyed autonomy from elite traditions, but this autonomy was *relative*. Indian society through ages provided for organic linkages of these micro-institutions with the macro-organisations, such as economy, civilization, polity and administrative institutions. The dichotomy as posed between 'vertical' or elite levels of social and political mobilization and at 'horizontal' or mass levels was not absolute. For example, horizontal mobilization of caste on vertical lines into 'caste association' used to take place long before Independence. Tribes differentiated into caste-like social formations. Even the comprehension of caste distinctions through ritual purity and pollution would have been impossible without a civilizational model of 'varna' with a pan-Indian extension of meanings and symbols. Otherwise caste is only a regional entity. Comparative studies of folk cultures in geographically disparate regions show extensive commonalities of symbols, meanings and cultural contents across regions.

I might reiterate the historical role played by inter-structural autonomy of basic social institutions in Indian society. The institutions of social stratification, political administration and values and beliefs in their relative autonomy provided flexibility of responses to forces encroaching upon from outside. These could be forces of colonialism, alien cultural contacts or contemporary processes of modernization. This relative autonomy of basic social institutions continues even today, but its quality is undergoing fast transformation. In traditional India, caste panchayats could in large measure conduct internal self-administration, avoid appeals to state administration for judicial settlements, since caste enjoyed stability and strength with support from other institutions such as economy, technology and belief systems. Yet, in the past also these regional cultural traditions had a sustained and institutionalised interaction with pan-Indian institutions. Professor N. K. Bose in his study of geographical background of Indian culture, identifies several such institutions which provided linkages between local and national institutions in the past; these include : travelling mendicants, traders, story-tellers, craftsmen and artists. They came from all castes, low and high. The pilgrimage centres, fairs and festivals provided yet another nodal points of such interlinkages. Professor Bose concludes : 'Although India was, by and large, illiterate, yet there were built up certain mechanisms by means of which common intellectual and emotional elements of culture were brought to the door of the most distant communities, isolated either by geography or the promotion of social separatism'

(Bose : N. K. : 1977 : 6).

The autonomy of grass-root social institutions has been over-played in total disregard of linkages among these also as a device to under-rate the forces of unity in Indian society and its civilization possibly as a measure of colonial or imperial policy of the British administrator-turned social scientists. In such writings, 'concepts such as 'caste', 'tribe', 'village', 'community', 'family and kinship' were defined as segmentary entities, often analogous to their socio-historical equivalents in European society. The emphasis was on showing on how each of these entities affirmed the principle of segmentation and autonomy rather than being parts of an organic whole. The element of discreteness was over-emphasised and the linkages, both social and cultural, which bound these entities into an organic system of social structure and civilization was neglected' (Singh, Y : 1986 : 1).

Localism and nationalism are social processes in continual interaction in all societies that have passed beyond the elementary stages of segmentary social organisation to civilization. This stage of societal evolution is achieved through advancement of civilization, a long drawn process of growth in economy, technology, political institutions and intellectual and artistic creativity. A civilization society has to build up linkages with local or mass level institutions

level institutions and communities to sustain itself economically, technologically and ideologically. Nationalism is a process, a product of historical conjuncture of social forces through which the linkages are not only established or expanded but also qualitatively strengthened. Nationalism is, therefore, not a finished product, nor a formal structure or normative model but an organic historical process through which civilization societies strengthen themselves by qualitative differentiation from within and their superior integration organically, within a territorial boundary. Often it is the formal notion of nationalism and its ideology that turns it into a monstrosity that all civilized societies must avoid. Nationalism as a social process evolves towards maturation as Louis Dumont suggests : 'nationalism refers to the nation as a tendency inspired by its existence or as the aspiration to build up a nation' (Louis Dumont : 1967 : 47).

For nationalism as a process, aspiration is as important as achievement. The studies on France, the first European nation, show that movement from provincialism to nationalism was often a fractured and painful process. In 1864, an inspector of education, touring in the mountains of the Lozere, asked the children at a village school : 'In what country is Lozere situated ?' Not a single pupil knew the answer. 'Are you English or Russian ?', he demanded. They could not say. This was in one of the remoter parts of France, but the incident illustrates how Frenchmen gradually became aware of what it was that distinguished them from other men.

The French nation had to be created' (Zeldin Theodore : 1980 : 3). Eighty three years later, in 1951, an opinion poll revealed the persistent hold of provincialism, and ambivalence towards the culture of the capital Paris was strong. Only '42 per cent of the provincials (as opposed to 79 per cent of Parisians) knew who J. P. Sartre was--others described him variously as a street, a deputy, a painter and a dress designer' (quoted in Zeldin T : 1980 : 30). A publication in 1934 about France said that 'the clan and tribe still survive in small towns and in the countryside... People entrenched themselves in their little properties with their petty interests, and petty grievances... mistrustful of young talent... oblivious of the great problems of the world' (Ch. J. Millon : 1934; quoted in Zeldin T : 1980 : 34).

Without indepth sociological historiography western nationalism has come to present itself as a mythical model for Indian society and its many scholars. As deeper studies of its nationalism and national identity become available one gets more realistic assesment of questions of nationalism and national identity. Writing in a publication of 1979 on France, Theodore Zeldin says : 'When I examine the forces working for the creation of more uniformity and unity in the country, I find the growth of a sense of national identity to be superficial, despite the imposition or adoption of a common language, and of common ways of thinking and talking which seem to distinguish Frenchmen from all other people

(Zeldin Theodore : 1979 : viii) According to Zeldin, French national identity is the creation of classes and politicians. It was reinforced by the policy of education and the existence of army. Not class struggle but urge for social mobility, competitiveness and anxiety dominated the personal behaviour of the people in this process. Zeldin notes how : 'By 1966 less than half (44-47 per cent) of metal workers in large factories said that for them the capitalist was the enemy; in small firms only 12-15 per cent held that view (Zeldin T : 1979 : xi).

I have made these references not to pass value judgment on provincialism or nationalism but to illustrate that movement towards nationalism in any society is a process in which counterpulls of antagonistic tendencies remain active in accordance with conjuncture of historical and social forces. Humans get their maximum succour from their private life world and primordial ties. Hence nationalism should not mean in any society total abolition or death of regional or provincial cultures or group identities. Our hypothesis is that neither the structures nor the normative construct of society could offer us sufficient measure of nationalism in a country. Its strength, more latent than manifest, lies in the linkages that bind these structures and norms at various levels into an super-organic whole which has great plasticity and, therefore, endurance. The movement from particularistic ties of *loyalty* to principles of nationalism and

national identity is governed by emergence of social forces that trigger the process of modernization.

A modernization hypothesis is probably implicit in most debates on nationalism in developing societies. The relevant question is whether the model of modernization in terms of which nationalism in these societies is analysed is itself adequate or not. Most western models of modernization suffer from culturological fallacy, and historical analogues are proposed from western experiences without much regard for differences in basic values, history and social structure. Professor I. P. Desai made a perceptive remark in this context when he said that 'we should see the work of academicians abroad in terms of its relevance to what we are thinking and doing. It should not be otherway round as it has been in the past' (Desai I. P. : 1981 : 56)

Most Indian academicians we find today, are sensitive to this question. They have continually endeavoured to formulate conceptual and theoretical responses to this problem. The dilemma they face is about evolving a conceptual frame through which complex linkages between nationalism and modernization in India, that are grounded empirically in primordial and provincial structures and values could be explained through universalistic concepts and categories that are also sensitive to historical specificity of Indian process of nationalism. In simple terms, the question is can tradition be modernized? Or, would the 'cunning of reason',

the Enlightenment ideology of which nationalism is an off-shoot ultimately triumph and imprison nationalism in the iron cage of universal history? To many scholars both in India and abroad answer to this question poses crucial problems of nationalism and modernization in India. A large number of them, however, postulate opposition between tradition and modernity and between provincialism and nationalism, as conceptual dichotomies. Our contention is that tradition, modernity, or provincialism, nationalism should not be seen as reified normative structures but as social processes. The impregnable wall that isolates and divides them is *semantic* not *real*.

The structuralist theory in sociology and social sciences has encouraged the tendency among both marxist and non-marxist scholars to postulate social, economic and cultural parameters of nationalism, modernization and development etc. in logical sets of opposites or in binary terms where linkages between them are tenuous not real, syntactical not historical. Consequently, analysis of nationalism under such theoretical impulses fore-closes the possibilities of constructive reciprocity and interaction between tradition and modernity, between nationalism and provincialism and between equality and hierarchy. Louis Dumont in his treatment of questions of communalism and nationalism in India articulates this dilemma when he says that in India, 'elements such as people and territory, normatively stressed on one side, are found as *empirical* and

undifferentiated datum on the other. The orientation to ultimate values shows a more drastic and complex difference. On the traditional side, the ultimate values are found in the conformity of each element to the role assigned to it in the whole of being as such. In the modern society, they are found in the concrete human indivisible element, which is taken as an end in itself, and as the source of all norms, rationality and order; in other words, the Individual. As history shows transition is difficult, and has given rise to intermediary forms' (Dumont L : 1964 : 70). Louis Dumont recognises the significances of *interaction* between tradition and nationalism or even the existence of intermediary forms. His doubt about a smooth or even successful transition to nationalism in traditional societies is based on the diversity of the two worldviews one hierarchical, that is Indian and the other individualistic, that is western, of which nationalism and modernization are products.

One might easily notice elements of a-historicity and formalism in the views expressed by Dumont and others who approach the question of nationalism as opposition between tradition and modernity. In operational terms, this opposition exists in the dualism of what is defined as 'rational' and 'basic' or fundamental in the value system of societies. Indian society is supposed to be rooted in fundamental value system of hierarchy, and its transition to nationalism or modernization is thwarted due to lack

of primacy of rational values in social life. The limitation of this reasoning rests in its non-recognition of the fact that in real life rational values have a tendency to co-exist with basic or fundamental values. The social, political and economic processes of change in India illustrate this fact. The challenge in India is not of the transition from tradition to modernity but of the modernization of Indian tradition.

Historical experience of nationalism even in the western societies shows that crucial factors which contributed to institutionalisation of nationalism and contributed to their modernization were primarily through rational technological changes. The basic values or the religious worldview of western society only accommodated these transformations. The growth of one has not led to the obsolescence of the other. The relevant question, however, which makes a material difference between successful or not so successful transition to modernization of which nationalism is a historical by-product is how successfully rational principles are applied for the growth of society.

The Indian experience in this context clearly indicates that rational values have been widely imbibed in the uses of technology in public and private life. All sections of people covet for careers in sciences and professions. Pragmatism in political, economic and social life, is widely pursued, often outcrossing limits of principles or moral standards. In practical life, be it

also sharpening the divide between privileged and under-privileged that reinforce tendencies to communalism, regionalism and counter-nationalism. The Constitution of our republic does not envisage only legal rational order. It encompasses it in the basic values of socialism, secularism and democracy. Strengthening linkages in social system sponsored by the needs of dominant classe in society may not achieve these goals, and may lead to fractured modernization. History tells us, to be vary of nationalism that is product of such process. It leads to brutal application of state power for repression of underprivileged in society. Solution lies in a model of modernization that is consensual and aims at vigorous pursuit of goals of social justice in society. This alone will strengthen the roots of nationalism in our society.

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agriculture, trade, industry, transport or other services, adoption of modern utilitarian or rational values is common. So, if measures of nationalism and modernization are acceptance of rational values, Indian society is well on the way to this goal. These values, however, co-exist with traditional basic values and worldview. Instead of replacement there is adaptive synthesis of the rational with the traditional values and beliefs. Largely, this is how it should be. But this process of adaptive change sets into motion also counter-tendencies or negative social forces which not only serve as impediments to modernization but also threaten the processes of nationalism and national integration.

These counter-tendencies emerge from the sharpening consciousness of social and economic inequalities among groups in society. Modernization has set into motion a process of social restructuring in our society. The traditional society was based on a relative evenness in the dimensions of social, economic and political status of people at an integrated, though lower level of social order. The rational and basic values of society were integrated together due to relative stability of the former, represented pre-eminently by technology. The process of modernization upsets this balance in society. The rational or utilitarian values not only far outweigh the basic moral values of society, but expand faster and have higher degree of intensity. This coincides with emergence of high information society. In India, political participation, mass media, education, social mobility and increasing incidence of migration have intensified the awareness of

social and economic inequalities. Continuous inculcation of values of consumerism and ostentatious life style of privileged sections has negative effect upon people in general. The modern means of communication make consciousness of social inequalities carry sharper edge which distorts the perception of a rational order of society. This creates imbalance in the means-end relationship in the pursuits of life chances.

Violence, communalism, casteism and regionalism erupt symbolising these distortions in means-end relationship in pursuits of social, economic, political and cultural objectives. The process of modernization enlarges opportunities which adds to the strength of the middle classes, professional groups and political functionaries. These new classes are products of social restructuring and social mobility. A substantial segment of these new classes climbs to higher status through dynomic pathways. Ironically, this process also creates pauperization in rural areas, marginalization of peasantry and urban migration of rural poor. Not all underprivileged people that emerge in this process have subaltern identity, as not all new social climbers have commitment to rational utilitarian ethos. We witness all over the country today this process, where resentment of underprivileged is coming face to face with cussedness and arrogance of the dominant classes. Provincialism and communalism are products of this environment. If the emergence of new middle classes consolidates the processes of Indian nationalism by widening and strengthening the societal linkages in system, the linkages of territory administration, resources, market, technology and culture, it is