TRADITION, NATIONALISM AND NATION-BUILDING IN SOUTHERN ASIA

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The role of tradition in national integration, in the newly independent states of Southern Asia is both functional and dysfunctional and tends to operate in many contradictory directions. Almost all these nation states, called into existence after the end of the second world war, consist of old societies, each with its own rich and variegated past, endowed with distinct cultural personalities and records of cultural self-expression. Many elements of these cultural traditions have survived to the present day and the tradition is a living force that contributes to the shaping of the destiny of each state in the present and the future. Not even in areas of the most intensive western impact has it been possible to uproot this tradition entirely. It has thus lived on in various shapes and guises, transmuted perhaps, modified significantly sometimes even out of recognition, but there is no doubt of its powerful presence in these societies. Whatever policies the leaders of these nations seek to pursue in national integration, popular participation in government, restructuring of society or economic growth—the potent force of tradition must be understood and admitted as a basic fact of life.

There is a large body of literature that looks at the interrelation between tradition and modernity in various problem areas of national integration and economic development in relation to south and southeast Asia.[1] The purpose of this essay is to look at the role of tradition in the growth of nationalism in the era of nationalist struggle against colonial rule and to pursue the problem into the era of the nation-state and the consolidation of the nation, with the known examples of some of the states of southern Asia. The states chosen to illustrate the issues that have been considered are India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka (Ceylon) and Malaysia.

For a greater part of the 19th century, in the first stage of the growth of nationalism in the colonial territories of Asia, a western model was followed. Nationalism went hand in hand with liberalism and secularism and the ideal society and state were individualistic, democratic, egalitarian and unitary. Nowhere were these ideals embedded in early nationalism as in India, the pioneer nationalist movement of Asia. The early Indian liberal nationalists had no use for the past, which they considered dead wood, to be buried and forgotten. India had decisively turned its back on the past with the British conquest. The founding fathers of Indian liberal nationalism consistently decried revivalism, trends towards which were becoming visible in the last quarter of the 19th century and they considered these attempts at revivalism the enemy of nationalism and progress.[2]

This concept of a decisive break with the past was an even more prominent feature of Ceylonese nationalism where it continued even after independence. Both the Indian and the Ceylonese liberal nationalists had a model of nationalism and modernization adopted from the west. In both cases they were looking forward to the future and saw the past as irrelevent to this future. They had both no necessity for mobilization of large masses of people who had not been exposed to western ideas. They operated as a closely knit, ideologically united group of elites from different parts of the country. They were so much enamoured by the ability of members from various regions, ethnic and linguistic groups and religious communities to come together that they felt that this horizontal linkage was what mattered most to the forging of a strong nationalist movement and eventually to nation-building.

In Ceylon the entire nationalist movement was conducted on these assumptions. Any problems that arose between communal groups were sorted out between elite leaders of these groups. The successful achievement of independence in 1947 with these ideas still predominant further strengthened such a concept of nationalism and the party that assumed control of government, the United National Party, was formed on the basis of a horizontal integration of a thin crust of westernized professional and commercial elite drawn from all ethnic and religious groups of Ceylonese society.[3]

A broadly similar situation prevailed in Malaya during the period of the transfer of power from the British. Though western impact was less intense and the wider implications of western nationalist ideology were not consistently worked out, the assumption of a secular, forward-looking, liberal nationalism was clear in the formation of the Alliance of existing command parties as a broad nationalist front to prepare for the transfer of power. Again, as in Sri Lanka, tradition and culture were not vocally used for purposes of political mobilization. These assumptions held good for a good decade after independence[4].

In opposition to the liberal, secular nationalism of the western model arose the powerful ideas that sought to base nationalism on the solid foundations of a society's traditional past. They saw the modern phase of nationalism, not as a novel, essentially different phenomenon, causing a break with the past, but rather as an extension of this past, a rebirth of the old society, its renaissance in a new form. Again, it was in India that these ideas were developed into a well-rounded philosophy and nationalist movement built up on its foundations which carried out the struggle for independence for half a century.

In India, as subsequently in other societies where cultural nationalism spread, the first stage of this movement sees a revival of traditional religion and traditional culture and the fostering of a pride in their antiquity. This trend was assisted by the rediscovery of elements of the high culture and an awareness of the peak periods of achievement of that people. Thus Hindu reformation movements such as the Arya Samaj, the Theosophical Society, and the Ramakrishna Missions and Vivekananda Societies were a necessary prelude to the redefinition of nationalism that they soon produced. Under the influence of these socio-religious movements, there soon arose a group of political interpreters of the new nationalism and a band of its militant practitioners. The traditionalists sought to look for a connecting link in India's evolution from past to present and saw it in the continuity of its religious tradition. Specifically, the *Dharma* or the moral order in Hinduism was eternal and contained the essence of the Indian spirit. This spirit or soul was equated with the modern concept of nation, which was therefore nothing new to the Hindus, who had been aware of it and experiencing it all along. It was now stifled as a result of foreign domination and had to be nurtured and rejuvenated with the expulsion of the foreigners.

The traditional foundations of nationalism served towards a vertical integration, bringing into the process of nation-building whole groups of peoples unaffected by and isolated from western rule. It enabled the message of nationalism to be carried across to them in a manner they appreciated and in an idiom they understood. The success in political mobilization of the rural masses, after the propagation of this form of nationalism, was dramatic. From the last decade of the 19th century, increasingly, non-English educated peoples from towns and villages were brought into nation-consciousness and participation in nationalist political activity. With the advent of Mahatma Gandhi, who carried this almost to perfection, the results were phenomenal. Not only did he posit the goals of nationalism in traditional terms, he also fashioned a methodology of political action in terms of a traditional ethic. He often referred to independence as *Rāmrājya*, or rule of Rama, the incarnation of the Hindu protector deity Vishnu. The

means of achieving this independence was *satyāgraha*, or struggle for truth, set in terms of an individual pursuit of the ideal for truth, and *ahimsā* that would lead to the goal of salvation as *moksha*.

The use of religious symbols and worship forms was an important element in this integration and mobilization. The earlier religious nationalists were quite open in the use of Hindu worship forms to stir up nationalist activity. One of the early expressions of this was the Ganesh *poojas*, inaugurated by Bal Gangadhar Tilak in eastern India. In Bengal the potent cult of Kali, the mother goddess, was brought in to support nationalism. In both cases, the religious fervour that was attendant on the worship served the cause of nationalism and produced a frenzied militancy in the first decade of the 20th century that often led to violence. Gandhi was more subtle in the use of religion. He attempted to integrate at the plane of spirituality and morality rather than of sectarian worship. But the very physical appearance of Gandhi and his life style, together with his political idiom was such as to infuse Hindu sentiments among his followers who saw him as a Hindu ascetic saint leading them to the promised land of freedom.

Another aspect of traditional nationalism was the use of the past to create nation-consciousness. A pride in the past, a satisfaction in its achievements, was an essential tool in the effort at integration. It was important to infuse the idea of continuity of the body politic and the body social. It was also important to infuse a belief in the ability of a people to stand on its own feet. One of the great handicaps the nationalist movements had to fight against was the utter apathy, the great diffidence on the part of the subject people, and the consequent inability to conceive of anything other than permanent subjection and dependence. In many areas the will to survive was gone and a subjection of the body had been followed by a senility of the mind and spirit. Lacking the ability of the western-educated classes to seek to compete with the west on its own terms, lacking a belief in the viability of their own traditional political and social systems and values, they were completely withdrawn from the world of nationalist politics. They were in a position to be manipulated on behalf of imperial interests against the incipient nationalist movement by strong-willed imperialists such as Lord Curzon (Viceroy of India 1899—1905) or clever manipulators like Lord Minto (1905—1910).

Pride in the past and an identification with it was thus an essential methodology of the new nationalism. This was done by a selective interpretation of history, by emphasising and placing before public view peak periods of past achievement and by parading before them hero figures from past history, some of whom were fresh in folk memory. In the case of Hindu history, with its long and many-

hued past, it was difficult to recreate a universally agreed historical period in which all could share equally. Hence the image recreated was more a concept of a historical past, a sampling of various cultural achievements over a wide time span. Thus the Vedic age, the age of Upanishads, the age of Mauryan political hegemony, of the Gupta Hindu synthesis were selected as these peaks of memory and their characteristics were idealised and presented before the people. Qualities desirable in the modern social context were ascribed to them. These qualities were monotheism, personal devotion to God, abstract speculation on creation and the ultimate reality, social equality between groups and individuals, high social status of women, high levels of literacy and education.

In periods of the recent past, it was possible to revive memories of historic personalities. Thus many who fought against foreign invasion in the various regions of India were made the object of a personality cult, some with deification and veneration of the great and the good common to Hinduism. The most potent of these cults was that of Shivaji, the 17th century Mahratta ruler who fought against the powerful Moghul Emperor Aurangzeb to keep alive an independent Hindu Kingdom in western India. Other hero figures included those Hindu princes who had resisted Islamic expansion in one form or another in the various regions, rulers who had fought against the expanding British power and more latterly heroes of the Mutiny of 1857. They were heroes of traditional Hindu India, well known to the most illiterate of the rural masses with whom they could identify in a way they could not with the westernized political leaders of urban India.

Likewise, when the Islamic nationalist movement of India got going, the integrative forces of religion, traditional culture and historic memory were to assert themselves. The Muslims had a more direct link with the traditional past and a historic continuity from the establishment of Islamic power in India with the foundation of the Ghaznavid principality in 1021 A. D. The secular aims of the nationalist movement led by M. A. Jinnah and his immediate following of English-educated professionals was matched by the theocratic ideals of the *ulama* and the religious leadership of the Islamic community. The historical consciousness of the Indian Muslims was more sharp and was kept alive by a historiography which specialised in biographical writings of great warriors and founders of Islamic power. A number of hero figures could be raised for popular consciousness and used to rally opinion and integrate people.

In Sri Lanka, the use of tradition to integrate a people occurred much later, some years after independence. But when it did occur it followed the same general principles as in India. The religious culture of a community, Buddhism in this case, provided the basis of the search for unity. This was combined with a delving into the

past to assert elements of continuity and of an erstwhile greatness as a rationale for present militancy. The continuity was provided by the establishment of the Buddhist faith in the island in the 3rd century B. C. and the conversion of the Sinhalese people to this faith. The preservation of the Buddhist faith in Sri Lanka, the ensuring of its continuous existence became the dynamic of Sinhalese history and the destiny of the Sinhalese people. Hero figures from past history and peak periods of power and cultural achievements were brought back into popular memory by popular writing and propaganda. The existence of a continuous tradition of Buddhist historiography made this possible and plausible. Defenders of Sinhalese political power and supporters of Buddhist institutions became folk heroes of the modern age. By this means was brought about a successful mobilization of Sinhalese political power and a unification for common goals of a diverse and segmented people who had so far not been brought into national consciousness or the political process.

We have then two models of nationalist integration: the one successfully bringing together a thin layer of people horizontally from across different groups in different regions of the country, and the other also successfully bringing together several hierarchies of groups of a society vertically. It is undoubtedly true that the latter is the more potent form of integration, displacing the former type rapidly whenever they come into conflict. Two instances of such conflict may be noted. In the Indian case, we see a bitter competition for the leadership of the nationalist movement in the period 1890—1910 between two wings representing these two models. It was dramatised in a personal conflict between the two leaders Gokhale and Tilak. The eventual outcome was the victory of the traditional and cultural nationalism over liberal, secular nationalism. Likewise, in Sri Lanka, the 1950s saw a bitter conflict between religio-cultural Sinhalese nationalism and liberal nationalism fought in a different context when the masses had been enfranchised. Here the victory of cultural nationalism was even more overwhelming, with a decisive repudiation of the liberal model in 1956 and the fundamental social changes that followed. In the Malaysian case, a somewhat similar situation appeared in 1969, when an upsurge of cultural, ethnic nationalism led to the repudiation of a broadly liberal, secular nationalism that preceded it.

Thus whenever the tradition-oriented, religion — and culture — based forces of nationalism confronted liberal, secular and western models of nationalism, they have easily been able to knock the latter over. But a more complex problem arises where conflict develops between these cultural nationalisms that have to coexist within a nation-state. If the subcontinent of India were occupied exclusively by Aryan Hindus, or Sri Lanka was a totally Sinhalese Buddhist state, or Malaysia was

populated solely by Malay Muslims, then the traditional cultural forces would be very potent forces of national integration. The problem is that all these are multi-racial, multi-religious, multi-cultural societies which would be hard put to it to find foundations of a common culture and a common tradition. In the event, the era of traditional nationalism has been one of intensifying conflict in all these nation-states.

The greatest polarization and the most dramatic conflict took place in the Indian subcontinent. Two traditions, two cultures, two historical pasts confronted each other in the 20th century and the conflict could only be resolved by the partition of the subcontinent. The Islamic tradition separated itself out to form the nation-state of ˈPakistan, leaving the predominantly Hindu element as the foundation of the state of India. But this was not the end of the story. The Hindu/Muslim dichotomy was only one element in the traditional cleavages in Indian society. There were many others, both within the broad body of Hindu tradition as well as within the Islamic tradition and these were now to assert themselves.

Historical consciousness, consciousness of the identity of tradition feeds on itself and gathers momentum as it develops. What appear as blurred images, vaguely formed identities move into sharper focus as the process goes on. As the historical consciousness of a people becomes sharper, levels of identity and of separateness emerge. What appeared at one stage an integrating, unitary tradition can dissolve to reveal a multiplicity of traditions underneath it. Again the classic example of this would be the Indian case. Indian religious nationalists chose the Hindu ideal as the framework for the integration of the majority of Indians professing Hinduism. This introduced a tendency to look back at the past for inspiration and guidance. The past of various regional cultures in India became sharper and emerged as more powerful guiding and integrating factors. This was a great spur to regionalism which in turn strengthened the consciousness of a language-culture that had taken root and flourished in a region. In this way regionalism flourished and was given a further boost by the linguistic re-organization of the states of the Indian Union in 1956. Powerful regional cultures in India today are those that have lengthy historical traditions of independence and cultural achievement. Tamil, Telugu, Marathi, Punjabi and Bengali regional cultures have strong foundations for national identity of their own and some of them have emerged at various times to threaten national unity.

The case of Pakistan also provides a good illustration of the impermanence of a particular traditional framework in the development of nationhood. Pakistan was formed on the basis of an Islamic religious identity: that the Muslims of India were a separate nation and should be grouped into a separate nation state. In spite of the

almost insurmountable obstacles, the country was partitioned in a sea of blood and a nation-state came into existence composed of two historical entities in the northeast and northwest of India separated by over a thousand miles of hostile country. Only the bond of Islam held the two units together, which in the euphoria of the Islamic nationlist struggle of 1940—1947, appeared as lasting and permanent. Soon, however, other elements of tradition began to assert themselves. The most powerful of these was the language-culture identity. The more homogenous Bengali-speaking people of Pakistan began to discover that the religious and the cultural loyalties conflicted often and irreconcilably. They discovered that the cultural tradition that had been passed over in the religio-political movement was a stronger integrative factor for their people; that when the two loyalties conflicted, the cultural and linguistic identity gave them much greater emotional satisfaction than the religious. And when this was compounded by an economic exploitation from the western region, the stage was set for a most violent nationalist conflict with the government of Pakistan. The most recent of the nationalist movements of southern Asia resulted in the creation of a new nation in the Indian subcontinent, the state of Bangladesh. From the point of view of cultural tradition, this is perhaps the most integrated of South Asian nation states.

In Sri Lanka, the traditional culture orientation of nationalism also proved disintegrative of a territorial Ceylonese nationalism. The emergence of Buddhist Sinhalese nationalism in the 1950's triggered off a process of conflict. It was very exclusive, keeping out other communities in the state. It was a tradition of conflict and hegemony, of the assertion of Sinhalese supremacy over challenges from the other major community in the island, the Tamils. The inevitable result was the alienation of the Tamils and their exclusion from this form of nationalism. They went on to construct a traditional framework for their own nationalism and separatism. The hero figures among the Sinhalese were those who had successfully fought against the Tamils and repulsed their invasions. The fact that this happened after the achievement of independence complicated matters. In India the conflict between the Hindu and the Islamic traditions was sorted out before independence. In Sri Lanka the identification of the Ceylonese nation with Sinhalese nationalism occurred after independence, with no solution for the Tamils except the ultimate step of secession. Predictably, Tamil traditional nationalism grew in response to the strength of Sinhalese nationalism. A past was recreated of independent and individual existence in their own territorial homelands in the north and the east of the island. The identity was predominantly a linguistic and cultural identity with appeals to the antiquity and purity of Tamil culture and its implantation from very early times on Ceylonese soil.

Implicit here was the rejection of exclusive Sinhalese claims to the island as the home of the Buddhist faith. That is to say, there were two traditional nationalisms on this tiny island home.

Malaysia in this respect provides a different version of the problem of indigenous traditions. There is only one cultural tradition indigenous to the territory of the Malay peninsula and that is the Malay Islamic. The other traditions, such as the Chinese and the Indian, though old in themselves, are new to the territory of Malaysia. But this does not prevent the people, in their search for a traditional identity and a traditional nationalism, from reaching out across the seas for the culture of their original homelands. The liberal, non-sectarian, western model nationalism had the advantage of muting the tradition of each of the communities and thereby of playing down the differences and the separateness. When Malay nationalism began to strengthen itself by looking back to the roots of its traditional past, problems of national integration were raised. Separateness and differences were emphasised. The Malay cultural past was something the others could not identify with and merely served to remind them of a past that they had left behind in their countries of origin. Tradition thus functioned as disintegrative and fissiparious even more than in the other states discussed above, where diverse traditions had at least the quality of having existed in hostility or in isolation in the same territorial region for centuries. Here the traditions were strangers to each other, with no common links which could be seized upon to foster integration. This was the reason why tradition based nationalism had not been an important element of the political scene in Malaysia during the independence movement or for some years after independence.

It appears that tradition oriented nationalism poses different types of problems in colonially subject territories from those in independent nation states. When traditional cultural nationalism asserts itself in independent states, it may lead to the hegemony of one such tradition over others in the nation-state. This hegemony, or attempted hegemony, leads to stresses and strains within the state, of conflict and even of dismemberment of the state. However, in situations where more than one cultural tradition and the nationalistic upsurge that feeds on it can coexist peacefully, without the attempted imposition of one on the other, then a stage of equilibrium may be said to have been reached in that nation-state. The way may be paved for national integration by the removal of potentially disintegrative forces. It could be plausibly argued that India has reached this stage.

The retrogressive nature of cultural nationalism springs from its backward-looking character, its attempt to recreate a mythical past and to deny the changes that have taken place in the intervening years. This spurs it to attempt to establish hegemony systems as was possible

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and was achieved in past history. The leaders of cultural nationalism face the impossible task of trying to match a mythological golden age with the realities of contemporary political and economic power and the balance of inter-communal and international forces. In its most extreme xenophobic form, it spends itself trying to achieve the impossible, creating a great deal of instability and unrest in the process. But when cultural nationalism is 'tamed' by some forms of radicalism or by progressive social philosophies, then their dynamism could be channelled in a reformist direction. It is possible to use the vertically integrative character of traditional culture to get an entire people to move towards meaningful goals in a state. The push towards change comes from below and is not imposed from above. This in turn can be utilized in the direction of national integration and social modernization.

In India, for example, Tilak, the leader of the traditional nationalist movement, had far more potential as a social reformer than did the liberal Gokhale, though unfortunately he did not choose to exert himself along these lines. Mahatma Gandhi achieved a great deal in the change of attitudes towards untouchability by working through the framework of tradition.

The achievement of power and the confrontation with the realities of the exercise of power also 'tames' cultural nationalism and moderates its aims. The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (D. M. K.) in India was for long potentially secessionist movement threatening the unity of the Indian republic. The attainment of political power by this party in the state of Tamilnadu in 1967 diverted its attention to the operation of a political system and to attaining its cultural and nationalist goals through this system. After two successive administrations, it has successfully achieved these goals, removed some of the major causes of grievance and has in fact settled down as part of the establishment in an all-India context. The same could also be said, with some modifications, about the force of Sinhalese cultural nationalism in Sri Lanka. It won power in 1956, enacted some major reforms achieving its aims, failed in others, and spent itself in the process. It was subsequently moderated by Marxist socialist forces, which infiltrated this nationalist movement and took over its leadership. Its aims were thus modified, and economic and social goals took precedence over cultural and religious revival.

The dynamism of a cultural tradition in the modern state is difficult to gauge. It lies beneath the surface and one cannot estimate the depth of its roots. Quite often when traditionalist nationalist movements surface, their intensity is breath-taking. It is important, though disconcerting, to note that in almost all the phenomena of traditional cultural nationalism noted above, the movements took contemporaries by surprise and swept all before them.

NOTES

1. Some examples of these are: Lucien W. Pye and Sidney Vertra *ed.* *Political Culture and Political Development,* Princeton University Press, 1965; David E. Apter, *The Politics of Modernization,* University of Chicago Press, 1965; Clifford Geertz *ed., Old Societies and New States,* The Free Press, 1963; Lloyd I. Rudolph and Susanne H. Rudolph, *The Modernity of Tradition : Political Development in India,* University of Chicago Press, 1967.

2. The large corpus of published writings and speeches of S. N. Bannerjea, G. K. Gokhale and M. G. Ranade are full of these ideas. Significant excerpts from these are provided in Wm. Theodore de Bary, *Sources of Indian Tradition,* Columbia University Press, pp. 673 – 703.

3. This interpretation is broadly agreed upon by all our commentators on the Ceylonese political process. See e. g. Howard W. Wriggins, *Ceylon: The Dilemmas of a New Nation,* Princeton University Press, 1960 *passim*; R. N. Kearney, *Communalism and Language in the Politics of Ceylon,* Duke University Press, 1967, pp. 20 - 40; S. Arasaratnam, *Ceylon,* Prentice Hall, 1964, pp. 1 - 20.

4. The main authority on this period, while emphasising the importance of communalism below the surface, notes the integrative role of the Alliance. K. J. Ratnam, *Communalısm and the Political Process in Malaya,* O. U. P., 1965, pp. 209 - 215.

5. An abundant literature exists on the ideas of this nationalism. The original writings of its innovators can be seen in brief in de Bary, *Sources of Indian Tradition,* pp. 705 - 732. Interpretative writings include B. Majumdar, *Militant Nationalism in India and its Socio-religious Background,* Calcutta; A. Tripathi, *The Extremist Challenge,* Orient Longmans; D. Argov, *Moderates and Extremists in the Indian Nationalist Movement,* Asia Publishing House; S. Wolpert, *Tilak and Gokhale,* University of California Press.