

Conceptualising State-Society Relations in Independent India* Some Preliminary Notes

JAVEED ALAM

Centre for the Study of Developing Societies
Delhi

I will start with an inadequately analysed intriguing feature of Indian politics at the time of Independence in 1947. Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of the Nation, turned against the newly constituted State in Independent India. This State, too, became highly suspicious of his moves. At the end of the long journey to Independence he could see no light; in fact, there was 'darkness' all around. Gandhi felt reluctant to acknowledge the legitimacy of the power of this State. He took cudgels on behalf of the society against the State. He went on protest padyatras, undertook a 'fast unto death', and showed his dismay in many other ways. It is easy to interpret all this as a result of his 'anarchist' tendencies. This manner of looking at the Gandhian moves does not allow us to see the significant questions that Gandhi was raising. I will come to these questions after dispelling a persisting misconception about Gandhi. It is generally believed that Gandhi was reluctant to exercise power. On the contrary, a little before his death Gandhi made a very revealing remark:

Whatever the Congress decided will be done; nothing will be according to what I say, *My writ runs no more*. If it did the tragedies in Punjab, Bihar, and Noakhali would not have happened. *No one listens to me any more*. I am a small man. True there was a time when mine was a big voice. Then everybody obeyed what I said; now neither the Congress nor the Hindus nor the Muslims listen to me. Where is the Congress going today? It is disintegrating. *I am crying in the wilderness*.

(*Collected Works*, Vol. 87, p. 187; emphasis added.)

This quite clearly shows, it seems to me, that Gandhi would have very much liked to influence the course of events. We have wrongly read his refusal to have anything to do with power at the level of state institutions. In doing so he was raising a fundamental question: where should the final authority to determine the destiny of society reside? Can the State, a coercive institution, take over the voice of the society?

Here I would like to suggest that the Gandhian refusal to be part of State power and his protests were a defiant move on the part of Society to be taken over and wholly represented by the State. The defiance was to keep the voice

of the society above the legal claims of the State. The State in India, immediately in the wake of Independence, was making moves to take over and wholly represent the society and the Nation. This was, looked at logically, a case of inversion. Before Independence, the society and the awakened nation were to give birth to the State. After Independence, by a reversal of roles, the State was to absorb the Nation and assimilate the society and wholly represent them. The reconstitution under the State of the social forces released during the anti-colonial movement and the anti-feudal struggles took place under the leadership of the capitalists and substantial landowners. This reconstituted state power managed within a parliamentary system of rule gave the justificatory claims of the State, to elevate itself, a democratic look. I withhold analysis of this change for the time being. I will instead, first, look at the consequences of the ascendance of State for the Indian society.

To see the consequences of this ascendance of the State over the Nation or of the governmental power over the autonomy of the society, let us now examine how the newly created State in Independent India was taking shape? And how it was going to prop itself up in face of the initial upheavals? Finally how, theoretically, it was going to relate to Indian society in its transformative project? All of these questions are going to impinge on how the conceptualisation as it gets worked out is going to become problematic. The problems contained in these questions get worked out slowly.

In face of the communal carnage or the problem of integrating the Princely states like Hyderabad and Junagadh and, in a different way in the case of Kashmir and the war with Pakistan, it had no choice but to rely overwhelmingly on the coercive apparatus and use force. But as far as the popular upheavals were concerned whether in Bengal or Travancore-Cochin or Hyderabad or with workers and employees and other ordinary people, it had, theoretically, two choices. It could, if it so wanted, use the popular upsurge to start the alteration of the state-institutions in a popular direction by bringing about a realignment of class and social forces then contending for supremacy. It could, alternatively, rely on the inherited colonial coercive institutions like the police and bureaucracy and the host of repressive laws to subdue popular movements. Given the alignment of forces in the Congress Party, the first option would have involved de-stabilising political initiatives. But these may have had beneficial consequences in the long run; the leadership would have succeeded in making the institutional set-up of the State relatively a more responsive one. The leadership chose not to do so. It was not simply a case of ruling class pressure; although it is undeniable that the ruling classes prefer stability and popular quittance above all else. This will be too deterministic a way of understanding the problem; if the configuration of forces foreclosed all options we can do nothing except weep at the fact of class domination. It seems to me that the moral and psychological predilections of the leadership also became decisive in structuring the choices. The fear of uncertainty and of disorder, however of a temporary nature in opting to push for the realignment of forces, was

too galling a prospect for the middle class sensibilities of the leadership, especially Nehru – the eclectic radical par excellence.

The choice made then was to rely entirely on the inherited bureaucracy and police and armed forces to contain the upheavals and beat back the popular movements or agitations. This was to have long term consequences, both on the immediate exercise of power as well as on the nature of the State in India. Let us look at these briefly. It allowed these structures of power – set-up in a manner to insulate them from popular pressure or accountability – to acquire a certain degree of permanence by making the State dependent on them in keeping control over the society. It had one immediate repercussion for State power in India. The State in India could not become the inheritor of values and aspirations of the national movement. One of the purposes of the freedom struggle was to question in a sustained manner the logic of the colonial state. What on the contrary happened was that the political leadership of the newly independent state simply stepped into everything left by the colonial power; most of it is still intact.

We thus have with us today the state institutions whose character has continued to be of a derivative nature – in the sense that they stemmed from what was to be annulled. The popular transformative impulses carried within the anti-imperialist struggles together with the goals of emancipation or empowerment of the under-privileged and disenfranchised sections of society which were so often talked about were to become dependent for their realisation on these derived state institutions. This situation contained one of the underlying contradiction behind the political economy of planned social change in India. This contradiction has many sided implications. One is the consistent failure of the State to translate what it speaks to the people as their minimum due into anything meaningfully concrete; here it is not simply the question of class nature of the State as is often averred but also the failure to attempt whatever is permissible within the constraints of bourgeois-landlord state power. After all these derived institutions are the channels through which reactionary forces work their way towards sabotage of most of what is popularly mandatory. In turn, these institutions are also the instruments which enhance the political clout of such forces. It is simplistic to say that these forces can subvert the plans or legislations because they have the political clout. What we have in fact is a much more reciprocal relation of reinforcing the iniquitous claims to power and entitlements and the Indian bureaucracy is one such institutional network which sustains the devious power of the privileged and insulates the inertia of the system from being breached.

The consolidation of the colonially derived State so soon in the life of a new nation aspiring to all round transformation had some far-reaching repercussions on the articulation of the traditional basis of Indian polity. In pre-colonial India, the norm-setting functions and the compliance mechanisms and the reprisal instrumentalities were never directly under the charge of the State. We all know about the high incidence of infant mortality of the centralised states in India. In spite of the sporadic nature of the

centralised state, we also know the more or less exacting manner of enforcement of the caste and ritual norms to insure hierarchical domination in the Indian society. The power to attain this was diffused in the village-local communities. The severity of enforcement was such that few would escape for deviant behaviour. The equation between tolerance-intolerance has been an unanalysed feature of the traditional Indian social order – unanalysed because the protagonists of Tradition as a popular resource have emphasised only the tolerance aspect of the Indian tradition. What we need for grasping some elements of contemporary situation is a much more differentiated analysis of these features in Indian society. While it is true that the Indian tradition had displayed an extraordinary tolerance towards those outside its ambit like those belonging to other religious persuasions, it was also characterised by an extreme degree of intolerance vis-a-vis those within its normative set-up. Muslims or Christians or whoever else could get away with anything but those who belonged to any of the core traditions of Hinduism faced severe retaliation for transgression. This duality of Hinduism in relation to the norm of tolerance I will categorise as *Other-directed-tolerance* as against *Self-directed-intolerance*. Now, after the encounter with world-view brought in by Colonialism, this self-directed intolerance has slowly spilled over into the social ethos. Hinduism is no longer as tolerant of Islam and Muslims or other religions which have had their origins outside India or of deeprooted dissent as it proclaims itself to be. Hindutva is only one of the organised forms in which the changed character of the Hindu traditions of tolerance articulates itself. The strains of modernity on the survival of inherited identities and the pressures exerted on the boundaries which defined the world of believers by the expanding industrial-capitalist economy and the consumer cultures are too severe for any religion to withstand without aggressive strategies; so at least seems to be the understanding of the obscurantist sections among the modernisers within this trend in politics.

The persistence of the colonial modes of governance and the reliance of the derivative State institutions on the coercive apparatus also had an unintended consequence of bringing closer together the modern State and the traditional modes of enforcement of the pre-modern polity. The inability or unpreparedness of the State to alter the institutional set-up in a popular direction, also meant that the more intransigent of popular demands had to be curbed or repressed depending upon their militancy. This functional need was allowed by the State to slip over also into the hands of those who had always carried out this requirement of class dominance. The State could in such situations assume an attitude of sweet reasonableness and allow the buck to get passed on to the 'irresponsible' elements in the society. People in old times had normally not held the State responsible for repression due to deviance. The State could even now play upon the survival of this uncritical faculty in people's thinking. This was a way of cushioning its legitimacy. This unintended consequence is not a result of culture invading the sphere of politics or tradition impinging on the modern, as a great deal of mainstream

analysis has innocently assumed. This innocence is itself a kind of ideological blinker allowing one to priss out the ugly from the sight. Here is in fact the case of power reconstituting itself by incorporating, yet again, what it normatively set out to negate. We can discern here the second level of derivation. So the state we have in India today is doubly derivative. It inherits the colonial state structure with its functioning intact and incorporates within it that which precedes colonialism. The pre-colonial authority ought to have been negated by the colonial state on its own claim as the carrier of modernity but it could afford to be indulgent towards it because it did not have to create citizens out of the people but only to make subjects out of them.

This development, as the ruling classes came to realise, became a handy instrument to protect the security of big property and its dominance in the life processes of society. This cushion is precisely the thing that the ruling classes, the political leadership and the other dominant sections need. The State as an instrument of the ruling classes need not any more carry out all the repressive functions as are required to protect the class interests of the dominant; especially so in the under-developed capitalist economies where people often are silenced from demanding even the basic needs of life. This function is carried out directly by the agents of the ruling classes. Hirelings of all kinds abound as a part of the productive sector itself and carry out the most abominable cruelties on the working people. The state can intervene and act as the minimiser of the worst kinds of terror and brutality and repression; of all our political leaders this art was perfected by Indira Gandhi. Today it has become a part of managing political defiance, much more so in rural areas vis-a-vis the toiling peasantry and workers in the unorganized industry.

This is no simple aberration. It is causally linked by innumerable chains in the structure of power fashioned by the ruling classes immediately after Independence. The political leadership is hedged all around by a reasonably well functioning democratic-electoral practice in advancing its claims to rule. In a way this is a tenable claim. The problem arises when it refuses to treat popular agitations also as other forms of democratic articulation. The State does not see any contradiction in relying on one democratic mandate to crush another form of democratic expression through its coercive instruments. This kind of behaviour of the State in India has become a long term feature and is caused by the double derivativeness of the State. Reliance on these, in the context of the urgency of popular needs and the inability of the State to hasten the pace of satisfactions (does this sound utilitarian?) gives rise to a complicated but confused agitational posture towards the existing social relations; unless, of course, the democratic movement can intervene with enough decisiveness to clarify the situation for the people and hold the State in check. People in such a state of mind hit out in various ways at the social relations which define their existence. The State finds it in its long term interest to let the dominant sections or the ruling classes handle the situation on their own. Yet it can move in to restrain these same forces when

they cross certain limits. It acts, to emphasise again, to minimise terror. Thus it ensures goodwill for itself – a negative kind of 'legitimacy' In this sense the non-institutional coercion is not an aberration.

The electoral democracy operating within such a non-institutional coercive frame-work does not require of the State to have much of legitimacy, as understood in political theory, to extract democratic electoral consent. All it needs to do is to act as a buffer between the people and the predatory ruling classes in situations of the 'third world' – social discriminations, inherited forms of oppressions, and so on over and above modern forms of exploitation. It often succeeds in transferring consent from one ruling class formation to another in terms of much minimal functions. I therefore find many exercises looking for the increasing or decreasing legitimacy in terms of the criteria in theory used in advanced liberal democracies of the Indian State as suspect academic endeavours.

The State does not find it difficult to get away with all this because in India there is no 'civil society' in the strict sense of the term. Civil society, after all, is a secularised public sphere made up of atomised, egoistic individuals thrown into the competitive world from the decomposed communities of the dissolving feudal orders. And these individuals as citizens with entrenched rights also learn to act together in the public sphere for a variety of causes.

In India inherited communities have not yet got dissolved in spite of capitalist developments in the society and the growth of bourgeois aspirations among the people. Yet a public space has emerged, an arena of open contentions, struggles, positions, denunciations, and so on. But because of the persistence of the traditional communities trying to preserve their boundaries under conditions of bourgeois aspiration, this public space has become a fragmented one. The message and its receptivity do not have an unhindered flow in society but are obstructed at the shifting boundaries which define the communities. The content of the message can get or be made vitiated as it crosses the community boundaries, herein lies the calculation of interest, egoistic, no doubt, but the egoism is not yet attached to the individual but to him as a member of a certain community. This became evident in the way the question of 'merit', 'efficiency', 'competence', etc. came into the public arena as issues of debate. The ruling classes go on manipulating these spaces to forge shifting alliances based on these communities and pit these communities and the hatchet men within them against one another. And it is in this that we can discern an objective complementarity between the modern State and the coercive instrumentalities of the traditional polity.

Having looked at this issue of how the reliance on a derivative state allowed for a different mode of articulation of traditional basis of power in Indian society in some detail, I now want to examine another side of the state-society relations.

Of equal importance, let us go into another implication for the structuration of the political process when the State comes to be the only

mechanism for the legitimate articulation and possible realisation of the transformative social goals. Let me go a little closely into this for its many-sided implications.

Together with the assumption of state-power, the Congress set about assimilating the society, in its entirety, into the State. The liberal notion of the autonomy of the society was at no point explicitly rejected nor is there any evidence that it was in a thoughtout way suspect. But the way the strategies of economic transformation of society, social well-being or the empowerment of the oppressed and the under-privileged, enhanced entitlement for the marginal were conceived, the autonomy of the society and of its varied impulses – democratic and egalitarian – were to express themselves through the voice of the state and secondarily through the channels and under the conditions approved by the State. All this would express itself in many different ways but if we look at the women's question, the tribal problems, the demand of the less formed and oppressed nationalities, the terrorised untouchables – all of whom remain even today marginal to the 'national mainstream' – the voice of the state is to be accepted as the sole authentic voice. The State supposedly knows better what these groups and strata need or require than what they can ever know about themselves. Those who speak on behalf of the State, apart from their class limitations in relating to the people, are successful men placed in a patriarchal ordering of social relations and as such are cut off from the day to day world of the people. It is quite conceivable that the voice of the people may be wrong but if people are to be treated as Subjects then at least an open, sustained dialogue with them is the minimum that is required.

In day to day practice such a way of relating to the people constituted an indirect denial of the autonomy of the society. Any spontaneous expression of aspirations or discontent in the shape of agitations, even without militant overtones, challenging the legitimising claims of the State became suspect in the eyes of the government. When such movements or agitations were led by the radical opposition these were often treated as anti-national. A queer term, 'politically motivated', was inserted into the political vocabulary in India to deride such movements.

This did, one can conjecture, incalculable harm to the social attitudes to politics in the Indian society. Popular movements could have been taken as, to use a term from cybernetics, the feedback to constantly correct the course of state action. But the way popular movements were insensitively treated and people forced into defeat by the naked display of the might of the State, made them withdraw into their private worlds, a world inhabited by their kith and kin surrounded by the inherited beliefs and culture. It was there, in this world of 'primordality' and pre-reflective socially received notions, that they recomposed, in silence, their life as something livable. Such a world of social existence – in face of defeat, exasperation and hopelessness – became a refuge for them and provided a basis of sustenance and by necessity of articulation of their discontent. Over the years, with the sheer magnitude of

stagnation in the socio-economic life in India remaining unchanged, we have been witness to more and more of this phenomenon becoming prevalent in Indian politics. This withdrawal of the ordinary people into their respective communities slowly eroded the possibilities of sustained secular politics and the Indian State, in the absence of a secularised society, as the sole voice of the secular positions had also to make a retreat or compromise, leaving the political terrain more and more open to the obscurantist forces. It is a fact of some importance, often not clearly noticed, that the more wanton forms of communal politics becoming pronounced in the recent phase are a systematic extension of this withdrawal of the ordinary people into their respective communities. People on the move, that is how I read Indian politics, with strong emancipatory hopes develop a greater propensity to overcome the limitations into which they are socially made to live. The systematic choking of the social voice by a State suspicious of an autonomous society badly undermined such a propensity among the people.

Let me elucidate this suspiciousness of the State vis-a-vis popular and nationality based agitations in more concrete terms, through an example which, I believe, is highly illustrative. How was the newly formed State in independent India aspiring to a democratic life relating to Gandhi's suggestions and reservations and criticisms, to his agitations and fasts, and so on, the point with which I started this paper.

The State leadership was in no way capable of moving against Gandhi nor could it explicitly denounce his moves. But it has by now become quite established that large sections of the ruling classes and the political leadership in India were either feeling a sense of loss and incomprehension at his moves or were finding him an obvious nuisance. His views were being viewed as of damaging consequences for the stabilisation of the power of the new State. Gandhian protests were, as I have pointed out, the defiant voice of the society refusing to be assimilated by the State.

If this is how the State was to view the voice of protest from the 'father of the nation', then one can well imagine how it would be disposed towards other radical popular movements especially in the shape of militant peasant and working protests and nationality assertions. Very large sections of the masses were in stir. They were all demanding an end to all that was autocratic and feudal and iniquitous in its social content. They were asking for new entitlements to lands, and other resources and making claims on power. All this was clearly in tune with Congress proclamations when it was articulating anti-imperialist and anti-feudal concerns during the freedom movement. Congress now looked at everything in terms of stable political life for the 'nation' and it saw this stability in terms of the legitimacy of the State.

On such a conceptual foundation the State tried to build itself up. It justified the claims in terms of its transformative projects. It asked for time and demanded stability. In varying degrees people waited hoping for a certain, better future. Little was realised; far less than was possible within the constraints of the bourgeois-landlord rule. The derivative state institutions

proved far too inadequate to handle the problems and State thought it has set for itself. We have already seen how the State was forced to beat a retreat and the consequent withdrawal of the people into their communities and with that the erosion of the secular and progressive foundations of politics.

Within the larger failure of the secular-transformative programme, the inability to solve the peasant question and handle the nationality aspirations gave rise to two further consequences. The failure of all major land reform initiatives after the abolition of the zamindaris and other big landed estates, recreated the rupture between the peasant masses and the politics represented by the State, a rupture which was an enduring feature of the pre-Gandhian politics but its reappearance after Independence has been steadily widening as the State in consolidating itself has leaned heavily on the big propertied classes. This has knocked out the one important cushion which permitted a great deal of stability inspite of the other failures of the State. A free wheeling politics as between all kinds of unstable political formations with a propensity to unprincipled alliances has become a regular feature of the political life of the country.

I will not go here into the peasant question and its repercussions for the politics as this has been analysed rather adequately by many others. Instead I intend to look into, briefly, the implications of these developments for 'national unity', or rather, how the State in India tries to handle it. The assimilative attitude of the State towards the 'nation' (as also the society) has resulted in a single, monolithic definition of nation, nationalism, and national unity being imposed on people belonging to diverse linguistic-cultural groups and other communities of people who live in Indian society. This monolithic definition is not a recent creation of hindutva as is assumed but with a different set of meanings and content it has also been the basis of secular politics in the country. From pre-Independence times the secularist nationalist leadership has refused even to countenance the possibility that different people with varying 'national compositions' would have different notions of what it means to be an Indian. It has thoughtlessly insisted on treating India as a nation in the sense in which Portugal or Sweden or Germany are nations. This kind of a transferred a priori understanding of what it means to be a nation is obviously out of tune with the specificities of India. It has come to be met with varying degrees of resistance in different parts of India.

The Nagas or the Tamils or the Malayalees or the Punjabis and the different communities within these nationality groups may have very different notions of what it means to be an Indian. India is too vast and diverse a country to be able to live with a single, imposed conception of nation or nationalism. When this is done it not only meets with resistance but also activates the pre-independence memories of the relations of the regional awakening with the pan-Indian nationalism. It is clear on a careful reading of the nationalist history of India that many regions or the communities within these regions had unstable or shifting relations with the all-India nationalism. All this may become a cause of new forms of tensions within the

Indian 'union'. To refuse to recognise these is to invite confrontations between India and some of these regions.

After all the logic of nationalism can be easily turned around. Nationalism cannot accept any kind of domination by an outside force. Third World anti-colonialism earlier and anti-imperialism now is theoretically tenable on such a foundation. Any type of nationalist awakening can reasonably claim that if it is not right for India to be dominated then it is equally not acceptable for the Assamese or the Oriyas, as they view themselves to be nationalities, to be dominated by a force which is external to their nationality. This logic can also go further down in the way national relations are being perceived in the Indian society. The Bodos or any other group which feels oppressed in Assam may argue the same way so long as the feeling of national oppression persists. Different kinds of tensions can arise out of this; most often these can be handled as 'regional' problems. But in a certain situation the same logic can extend into demands for secession. A number of secessionist movements have been built on such foundations.

It is my contention that the normal types of federal tensions or similar regional problems can be understood and explained in terms of political economy – uneven development, lop-sided economic transformations, disjunction between industry and agriculture, etc. – but secessionism is not easily explainable in terms of simple economic criteria. What seems to me to be crucial is the previous history of the relations of the regions or of the communities within them with the pan-Indian Nationalism. The hypothesis I am advancing is a falsifiable one and there is a need to carefully examine this. To the extent this can be validated, it also forces on us the need to re-assess the way the Indian State built itself up on a particular conception of the relation of the State to the society or the nation over which it presides. In face of the problems faced by the society and the crises of the 'nation', the only direction suggested by this analysis is the democratisation of these relationships.¹

* Presented at a seminar on 'The Indian State' organised by the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla.

¹ Having finished with what I had to say on this problem, let me add a caveat – a kind of string of reservations – about the way analyses of the State in India is often pursued. It has two standard formats. At one level we have looked for, in an elementary way, the class character of the State; a very useful exercise but in itself not very adequate because the same class forces can give rise to very many different kinds of politics and the strategies of extracting compliance from the people. The other kind of analysis has often concerned itself with questions of high theory; the notion of the autonomy of state, or whether it is really the autonomy of the State or that of politics, and such other questions; worthwhile endeavours but, high theory in itself can not throw much light on the specificity of a State within a certain, real society. At a level of applications, high theory can illuminate only when we know something in a determinate way about a state/society; knowing, of course, is not possible without a philosophical outlook which we all carry within ourselves in varying degrees of clarity. The attempt in this paper was to cut loose from both these dominant, prevailing modes. It strived, on the other hand, to comprehend some of the leading traits of the State in India as it constituted itself after Independence, these traits as they manifest in the day to day functioning also show the pretense of the State. It is yet to be seen whether this can throw any better light on the problem; hence the suffix, Preliminary Notes.