

NATION-STATE, SECURITY STUDIES AND THE QUESTION OF MARGINS IN SOUTH ASIA

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Introduction

"Like in most other regions of the world," says the introductory note of this conference, "debate and research on security in South Asia have traditionally focussed essentially on the nation-state and external threat perception. Security studies in the region have also remained isolated in nature, and uni-dimensional and military oriented in approach." As an outsider to the discipline of security studies, I share this concern. In this paper, I will try to elaborate that concern through a critique of the nation-state and nation-state politics in South Asia. The main thrust of this critique is towards constructing a plea on behalf of the margins of the nation-state: give space to margins of the nation and the state in social science commitment.

Let me begin by making a somewhat generalized observation about nation-state and its margins. The creation and marginalization of margins of the 'nation' has been one of the most pervasive practices of the modern nation-state. One of the most valuable historical insights that can be derived from Michel Foucault's writing is marginalization practices embedded in the process of modernity, and the nation as, both the subject and the object of modernity. South Asia's history of modernity is also a history of increasingly violent encounters between the centers and margins of the nation and the state. In the dialectic of the practice of marginalizing the margins, the nation-state has also brought margins to the center of its own problem of continuing historical validity. Sri Lanka dramatically represents this particular historical predicament of the nation-state. And indeed, Sri Lanka's political agenda today is largely decided by means of the dynamics of the war taking place between the center and the margin. To add to the irony of it, what would happen today in the geographical margins — in the battlefield in Wannu jungles — can shape the political agenda of the center tomorrow.

Even a cursory glance at counter-state insurgencies, developed in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal, rudimentary as well as well as protracted, would open our eyes to one incontrovertible fact about the modern South-Asian state: armed insurgencies against the state are the rule among ethno-political politics in social formations that are marginalized and excluded from the center of 'nation-space.'¹ The politics of power usually functions within a logic of

inclusion and exclusion. But politics of modern state power is particularly vicious in its inclusion-exclusion logic, because unlike the pre-modern state, the modern state is grounded on an extremely rigid set of conceptual as well as material resources.² Sovereignty, territory, national security, citizenship and political loyalty are concepts which are as inflexible and overwhelming as South Asia's huge bureaucracies, large standing armies and powerful planning commissions. Just one example would illustrate this: the notion of sovereignty as understood and practiced by the modern South Asian state is simply Austinian, even Hobbesian in its application. If not, how could most South Asian states have turned their territorial margins into graveyards of small 'nation' communities? The nation-state, in its most pernicious form, demands not only the loyalty and obligation of the individual citizen, but also the total surrender of communities the terms of which are defined at the center, by the center and for the center. Any attempt at re-negotiating these terms of the political contract by the margins, at the margins and for the margins would be immediately perceived as disintegrationist, separatist or anti-state.

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A Detour

It is a social law of power that the marginality of the marginalized can be felt, experienced and understood only by the marginalized. Marginalizers cannot comprehend the phenomenology of marginality. The ontologies of the marginalizer and the marginalized rarely meet. This social law of margins is acutely present, in a variety of forms and at a multiplicity of sites, in power relations within the nation-state. Let me anthropologize this law of social margins of the state by referring to two of my personal experiences which are, of course, infinitely insignificant compared to the events of the nation-state that occur every day throughout South Asia. Sometime last year, in 1997, I was on my way to Madras from Calcutta on an Indian Airlines flight. Seated next to me was a middle aged, well-dressed man who, as I learnt, was an Indian citizen from the state of Meghalaya. He told me that he was a senior official of the state bank of India, working in Nagaland. He was flying to Madras with his family to escape the ferocious winter in Nagaland. He started telling me how he and family would be treated in Southern India as 'foreigners' and that he was prepared to accept that indignity, because the Meghalayan people would very often encounter this particular treatment in the rest of India. Once in Delhi, he told me,

some one — a proper Indian citizen — had asked him where he was from. He had said from Shilong. The immediate response from his interlocutor: "What do you think about the Tigers? Do you think they really go for a separate state?, or something to that effect. The proper Indian had confused Shilong with Ceylon, although he inadvertently referred to a factor commonly shared by both Shilong and Ceylon, ethnic insurgencies. Many a times, this senior Indian bureaucrat from the margins of India has been treated as a foreigner in India — as a Chinese visitor, as a Tibetan refugee, and in the most unlikely case a Ceylonese. This politically very articulate man told me how Indian citizens from north-eastern states of India are constantly being treated by 'authentic' Indian citizens as foreigners, as non-Indians. As I gathered from him, many 'proper' Indians cannot come to terms with the fact there are can be 'Chinese-looking Indians.' In fact, he told me, quite stoically, that most mainstream Indians he knew of did not understand how people from north-east felt when they were perceived, in perfectly casual and chance encounters, as non-Indians and foreigners. In encounters like this, there is very little sense one can make by saying that national integration and nation-building are incomplete projects in India. Nation-building is actually complete, because it has created the margins, in the geographical margins of the modern Indian state. It has also created a cruel casualness about marginalization of communities which is so powerfully present in the practices of the nation-state during the past fifty years.

Security and Insecurity

Let me cite another example, from Sri Lanka. Not long ago, I was driving in Colombo with a friend who happened to be a member of the Tamil community. When we were approaching a military check-point, we were signalled to stop. A soldier on duty asked for our identity cards. Having briefly examined my ID, the soldier asked a question which was quite innocent as far as his world view was concerned:

"You all are Sinhalese, aren't you?" This was one of those profound moments when a young man in military uniform, carrying an automatic gun, radically deconstructed the Sri Lankan nation-state and all its conceptual attributes — ethnicity, nation, language, citizenship, national unity and integration. This was also a revealing ethnographic moment for an academic interested in security as well as insecurity studies — the extraordinary link established between the citizenship and the physical appearance of the individual. The 'security' which I felt as a member of the majority Sinhalese community and the 'insecurity' experienced by my friend as a member of the Tamil minority community are not just individual experiences.

There is a profoundly complex relationship between the center and the margins of the nation that has been inscribed in our bodies, in our skin complexion, in our shape of the skull and in the way we speak the 'official' language. What would have happened if the marginal-

ity of the margined were exposed at that moment of ensuring the nation's security? It was a moment when the margined had to hide his own identity and hide behind the identity of an 'authentic' citizen. Who, except the margined, would have felt the enormity of the violence of that moment?

As demonstrated in the anecdotes I just related, the nation-state has a centrifugal innocence the violence of which could be felt and experienced only by those in the margins. Insensitivity to margins is a perfectly un-innocent — in other words, acutely violent — practice of the modern nation-state.

But who would have comprehended, in the process of post-colonial state formation, this practice of violence and violation of communities in the margins of the state? Believers in the sanctity of the majoritarian nation-state have repeatedly and consistently demonstrated a particular incapacity to precise that marginalization of communities would eventually threaten the very foundations of the center that is created through institutions specific to the modern state — theoretically refined constitutional mechanisms, developmentalist public policy, elaborate bureaucratic control, highly mobile military might and open as well as subtle practices of exclusion. The individual experience of an Indian or a Sri Lankan existentially located in the margins is only a microcosmic representation of the practice of the modern state, a practice which can be discerned as a specific pathology of nation-state politics.

Security Studies and the Nation-State

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I don't think I will be stating anything new when I make the claim that the dominant paradigm of security studies is foregrounded on the sanctity of the centers of modern nation-state. This argument has been made by many critics of the discipline of security studies. The point I wish to make as an addendum to that critique is that the sanctification of modern nation-state and

its centers is an academic practice based on a certain historical fallacy concerning the eternity of this particular form of the state which is history-specific. The only exception to this sanctity rule is, as repeatedly demonstrated in Indo-Pakistan relations, the perception that the breaking-up, or at least weakening, of one nation-state would serve the security interests of the other. The irony is that at the heart of South Asia's security studies is this particular exception. Insecurity of nation-states and their centers constitute the core of security regimes as well as security studies. As far as the India-Pakistan axis is concerned, one elementary, yet paramount, point comes to the fore: that security studies cannot liberate itself from the prison house of the nation-state so long as it fails to de-sanctify the borders of the nation-state.

Central to the South Asian nation-state as well as South Asian security studies is a belief in the inviolability of the geographically

defined territorial borders of the 'nation.' Bundled together within the geography of the territory are a host of anxieties concerning the survivability of the nation. Fixed territory is a defining characteristic of the modern state; but fetishism of territorial borders has been a particularly generic practice of the South Asian nation state since its formation, as demonstrated in the border wars between India and Pakistan and India and China. Indo-China relations, Indo-Pakistan relation, Indo-Nepal relations, Indo-Bangladesh relations — these are key words in South Asian security studies. They are also a discourse of territorialized geographies.

The anxieties of insecurity are so embedded in the very being of the majoritarian nation-state that the demands for structural reforms of the state, pointing to the re-constitution of the existing mode of power-sharing, are easily viewed as representations of disintegrationist desires that warrant resistance, denunciation and delegitimization. Most of the social science inquiry in South Asia is an accomplice to this project of the state.

South Asia's social science disciplines that deal with the state and the nation have largely evolved as biographical sites of the nation state. For instance, for political science inquiry, if there was any 'vision' for the future, it has been primarily conceptualized within the framework of nation-building and political modernization. All the epistemological tools of this inquiry were defined by a practice of hyper-historicization of the nation-state. What it means is that the form of the state which South Asia inherited from its encounter with Europe has been accepted as an eternal, natural form of political association. Even a casual encounter with young foreign service officials of South Asian states would be an enlightening experience with regard to how the political consciousness of the cadres of the state has been totally shaped by a belief in the neutrality of the territorially rigid nation-state. And no wonder that many researchers in the field of security studies have a tendency to consult retired foreign service officials.

Anxieties About Borders

The disciplinary agenda of security studies in South Asia is, in a sense, an enunciation of elite anxieties about territorial borders. In each state, there are powerful communities of coalitions that share and are animated by these anxieties. They have transformed those anxieties into public policy, defence strategies and quasi-theoretical categories of nation. In my own thinking, desanctification of territorial borders would open up unprecedented possibilities for a new paradigm of security for South Asia. Flexible borders and the state should not be treated as a privileged synthesis exclusively reserved for advanced capitalist nations. Backward capitalism in South Asia has made a fetish of territorial borders,

within as well as between states. Under the logic of globalization, flexible movement of human and material capital among nations would enable South Asia to reap benefits from a new historical opportunity for rapid capitalist growth. But, who will explore these new historical possibilities? Economists and planners, like security studies experts, continue to see the world through the prism of the state with strictly demarcated territorial boundaries.

My argument is that the social science preoccupation, including that of security studies, should cease to play this intellectual role of being an accomplice to a dying form of the state — the majoritarian nation-state. Yet, intellectual liberation from the nation-state is not easy. There are two fundamental reasons for this difficulty. Firstly, the counter-nation-state discourse has essentially emerged from among the communities of the margins and therefore that discourse finds no legitimacy whatsoever in the mainstream political or social science thinking. Counter-nation-state practices have also been horribly violent, profoundly anti-liberal and astonishingly heartless

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just like the practices of the nation-state. The nation-state has, at least, the conceptual apparatus of rule of law and liberal democracy that can be easily deployed to veil its horrendous practice. Secondly, our basic theoretical categories in political science and international relations, from which security studies derives its ideational sustenance, are so outdated in a historical sense that they simply cannot cope with the organic new developments within the nation-state. We need to only look at the

way in which the entire intellectual world view of our undergraduates, who study political science and international relations, is shaped. Almost all text books privilege the existing form of the state with no critical insights into the alternative possibilities of political association among communities in a mode other than the nation-state's present form. Students, some of whom may later become experts in security studies or join the foreign service, are seldom taught that states are history-specific political formations. Their political consciousness is totally de-politicized when it comes to the possible alternative forms of the state. It is not an accident that there are no political science or international relations text books used in our undergraduate studies, written from the perspectives of the margins. The marginalized, paradoxically, don't write political science or IR text books. They write mostly propaganda tracts and formulate emotionally appealing slogans. Rarely do they withstand the rigorous test of social 'scientific' interrogation. Indeed, their critique is a critique of despair, of irrationality and of arms which cannot enter university teaching curricula.

Liberating Security Studies

I think, the problem with security studies, as least partly, is that we are discursive prisoners of the nation-state narrative of human fate. We don't realize that we are prisoners, because we don't see an alternative world outside. As a result, we don't even

possess a political language to re-imagine an alternative form of the state. When I make the statement that security studies should cease to be an accomplice to the crimes of the nation-state — which I have described elsewhere as a dying historical form of political association — I have to stop there and feel bewildered because, I have no access to a discursive resource base which would enable me to verbalize my thoughts. I can only make an outrageous and scandalous claim about political history of humankind: the nation-state, as a historical form of political association, has come to end. South Asia exemplifies this fascinating and profoundly exciting moment in the history of state formation. The emerging forms of the state are not yet clear. We can either wait and accept what may come or make an intervention in shaping its form and content.³

A dispassionate look at the politics in South Asia may enable us to understand some rudimentary forms and embryonic formations of the possibilities of the future state in the region. One is the formation of mono-ethnic mini-states. This is one of the most disquieting scenarios for the academic community of security studies in South Asia; yet it is on the historical horizon. Its villainous heroes are already there, in all over South Asia and they are probably, in a quasi-Hegelean sense, unconscious tools of history. Another is the transformation of the existing states into confederations of semi-autonomous 'republics' in which the notion of state sovereignty would be radically de-centered. I use the term 'republics' in a slightly Aristotlean sense to denote and accommodate the emergence of civil society as the most vibrant sphere of political action and activity in South Asia. A third is the transformation of the present group of states in South Asia into fully- or semi-antagonistic, hyper-militarized entities. Recent developments in Indian and Pakistani nuclear politics give some credence to this scenario with which the security studies community might feel exceedingly comfortable.

I don't think the discipline of security studies has an autonomous space of its own. Its space is defined and determined by nation-state

politics. But if the practitioners of security studies are serious about the legitimacy and relevance of their own vocation, I would say that there are two options. One is to abandon the discipline altogether. The second, more sensible one would be to move away from its nation-state centrism in order to:

- i. Recognize the nation-state in its present form as a historically contingent phenomenon.
- ii. Acknowledge that politics during the past fifty years has changed the state and that the state has brought the margins to the center of the process of change.
- iii. Return to some of the old notions of the state to re-imagine the state as a flexible political association of sovereign communities and not as a trans-historical, unchangeable entity imprisoning human destinies.

Notes

1. I borrow the formulation 'nation-space' from Homi Bhabha's essay, "Dissemination: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation," in *The Location of Culture* (1994), London and New York: Routledge.
2. For a critique of the conceptual apparatus of the modern nation-state in relation to the experience of Sri Lanka, see Jayadeva Uyangoda, 1998, "Biographies of a Decaying Nation-State," in Mithran Tiruchelvam and Dattathreya C. S. (ed), *Culture and Politics of Identity in Sri Lanka*. Colombo:ICES.
3. When I teach political thought to undergraduate students, I occasionally feel that the greatness of political thinkers from Machiavelli to Marx was precisely the fact that they did not simply wait in uncertainty until new forms of the state evolved through war, violence and conflict. They intervened to shape the shape of the emerging state. But who are we to undertake such grand historical projects?

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