

Economics and the Two Concepts of Nationalism*

Prabhat Patnaik

The [Westphalian peace treaties](#) in 1648 which ended the thirty years' and the eighty years' wars in Europe are considered to have ushered in the era of nationalism and nation-States in that continent. But the concept of "nationalism" that emerged there was a non-secular majoritarian concept, which invoked both Christianity, and a sense of "otherness", shading into oppression, towards various domestic minorities.

Such nationalism did not preclude colonial conquests directed at other people. Within months of the Westphalian treaties, Oliver Cromwell's army had conquered Ireland and confiscated most of its land. And Spanish conquistadores had brought in vast amounts of gold looted from the "new world" in the years just preceding the Westphalian treaties. The nationalism that emerged in Europe in the aftermath of the Westphalian peace therefore entailed not only the oppression of hapless domestic minorities but also the conquest and subjugation of distant lands, and acute rivalry between major European nation-States in the pursuit of such subjugation, resulting in wars among them, often through proxies, in those distant lands.

This emerging "nationalism" in Europe, which was a bourgeois nationalism, championed above all by large mercantile capital and expressed inter alia in the doctrines of "mercantilism" was, by its nature, a quest for hegemony over other people. The so-called peaceful coexistence of different nation-States within Europe was accompanied by intense conflicts between them overseas. And at the economic level the objective which this nationalism set for itself was: how do we increase the wealth of the "nation"?

Classical political economy was no less concerned with augmenting the wealth of the nation of its origin than the mercantilists. It saw wealth however as consisting not of gold and silver but of the capital stock that a nation possessed. But how did it justify the quest for an increase in the wealth of the nation, since, even according to its own theory, an increase in this wealth brought tangible benefits only to the class of landlords, neither to the workers nor even to the capitalists? It obviously saw something valuable in a nation's possessing a larger capital stock, a larger work-force and a larger output, which are all markers of national power and national standing. Classical political economy, in short, even though it rejected the mercantilist conception of what constituted national wealth by substituting capital stock for gold and silver, did not reject the mercantilist notion of why an increase in national wealth was desirable. It too believed, like the mercantilists, that an increase in the wealth of a nation was desirable because it augmented the nation's power.

The Westphalian idea of the peaceful coexistence of nation-States in Europe was obviously jettisoned not just because of revolutionary wars such as the one following the French Revolution, but also because of acute inter-imperialist rivalry such as what characterized the first half of the twentieth century; but no matter whether in periods of war or of peace among the nation-States of Europe, bourgeois nationalism was always characterized by the internal oppression of the minorities and the external subjugation of colonized peoples. These two traits were heightened in the period of ascendancy of finance capital starting from around the beginning of the twentieth century and reached pathological levels under European fascism, but they constituted

a perennial hallmark of bourgeois nationalism (and constitute a feature of the current bourgeois “internationalism” in the metropolis, which corresponds to the era of hegemony of international finance capital, and which, notwithstanding the fact that inter-imperialist rivalries get muted, does not violate bourgeois nationalism in this broader sense).

The nationalism that informed the anti-colonial struggle in third world countries like India in contrast was one that actually aimed to liberate the people from the state of subjugation that bourgeois nationalism of the metropolis had inflicted upon them. This nationalism therefore had a different origin and a different set of characteristics. It was marked by at least three basic differences compared to the bourgeois nationalism that had emerged in Europe.

First, since it sought to throw off subjugation by a powerful colonial power, it was necessarily inclusive, seeking to unite as many people as was possible in the struggle against imperialism. It invoked the concept of the people as a whole constituting the nation, even as it forged the concept of the nation itself in the course of this struggle.

It was therefore not a majoritarian religious nationalism of the post-Westphalian kind, but necessarily a secular anti-imperialist nationalism, which actually sought to rise above any religious “nationalism” by struggling against the latter. Whether in Egypt or India, or Indonesia or Algeria, a secular nationalist anti-colonial movement had to engage in a struggle against religious fundamentalism, and other divisive forms of “communalism”. (In fact imperialism was to use this very contradiction later, and exploit religious and “communal” forces for “rolling back” secular nationalist movements, and governments that had emerged out of such movements; but the outcome of such “rolling back” as shown by the recent experience of the middle east has not always been to its satisfaction).

The second difference lay in the fact that inclusive nationalism of this kind presented an economic agenda to the people that emphasized as national goals not so much the growth of capital stock or of output per se, as the elimination of poverty, hunger and misery to which they had been pushed because of colonial subjugation. Its focus was not national power and the creation of national wealth towards this end, which bourgeois nationalism had emphasized, but the alleviation of the people’s misery.

Indeed such an economic agenda constituted the very condition for the growth of this secular nationalism. In India for instance the growth of the anti-colonial struggle acquired unprecedented vigour when the peasantry that had been pushed into crisis and distress during the Great Depression of the 1930s joined the ranks of this struggle; and this joining was facilitated by the Karachi Congress resolution that presented a picture of free India where such distress would not be allowed to recur.

The third difference lay in the fact that the agenda of this inclusive nationalism did not entail hegemony over other people. On the contrary, since the anti-imperialist struggle had to be fought against an extremely powerful enemy, the emphasis was on solidarity with other third world liberation movements, with making common cause with other oppressed nations rather than launching a programme of oppressing other nations.

One should not of course idealize this anti-imperialist nationalism. Within this stream there were persons, even leaders, with religious fundamentalist attitudes; and since the

bourgeoisie was often a constituent of the anti-imperialist struggle, and in countries like India even established and retained its hegemony over this struggle, elements of “bourgeois nationalism” seeped into this anti-imperialist nationalism as well. Indeed many have seen in the attitude of the post-colonial Indian State towards Kashmir and the North-East a desire for hegemony that is no different from what had informed bourgeois nationalism in the European metropolis. But notwithstanding the admixtures that did exist in practice, this anti-imperialist nationalism was conceptually and self-consciously different from the bourgeois nationalism of the metropolis.

This distinction between the two concepts of nationalism is important precisely because in India bourgeois nationalism of the kind that had marked post-Westphalian Europe is now replacing the anti-imperialist nationalism that underlay the freedom struggle and the formation of the post-colonial Indian State. This transition from one type of nationalism to another gets completely lost if we do not draw a distinction between the two.

The fact of this transition however is obvious as much in the apotheosis of GDP growth as the national objective, even to the point of attempting to dispossess peasants, to abridge the rights of workers, and to cut down welfare expenditures on the poor, as the means supposedly for achieving this objective, as in the insecurity and sense of exclusion that is pervasively felt by the religious minorities and even the oppressed castes and women under the new dispensation. And it is obvious too in the constant reference to India’s emergence as a big power in the international arena.

This transition to bourgeois nationalism has also been associated with a downplaying of anti-imperialism, and of solidarity with other oppressed peoples of the world, to the point where India’s decades-long opposition to Israeli occupation of Palestine, and even boycott of Israel at one time, is now replaced by closer cooperation with that country, including on “security” matters.

The adoption of neo-liberal policies was a major milestone in this transition to “bourgeois nationalism” from an inclusive anti-imperialist nationalism. The origin of the process of re-definition of the nation’s objective, as consisting not in the welfare of its people but in its emergence as a major power, dates back to the introduction of neo-liberal policies, when every issue began to be looked upon in terms of its possible impact on this objective. Indeed a senior UPA minister had once even remarked that “corruption” could not be tolerated in India because it stood in the way of India’s emergence as a major power!

But the transition from an anti-imperialist nationalism to bourgeois nationalism is not easy in a country like India. An essential condition for the full-blown emergence of bourgeois nationalism in a country like India therefore is that it should acquire an additional prop; and this consists in communal-fascism. When post-Westphalian bourgeois nationalism of the European kind has to be carved out of a society that has already experienced the strong presence of an anti-imperialist nationalism, it requires a specific “counter-revolution” which can be best effected by those forces that were opposed to the anti-imperialist nationalism in the first place, the forces of divisive “communalism”, or “communal-fascism”. Paradoxically therefore the flowering of bourgeois nationalism on the ashes of an anti-imperialist nationalism requires the intervention of communal-fascism. This is what we find in India.

The refusal to draw a distinction between these two kinds of nationalism takes a variety of forms, each potentially damaging to the people's struggle for liberation. The most obvious form which characterizes many ultra-Left groups is to say that hegemonism, authoritarianism, communalism and casteism were as much a part of the "so-called anti-imperialist struggle" as they are of the current dispensation, that the so-called anti-imperialist struggle was simply a Hindu upper caste movement that merely succeeded in carving out some space for the emerging bourgeoisie recruited from this background. A strand of this argument, which would be a carryover of the hostility to the anti-colonial struggle that many of the leaders of the "social reform movement" had expressed in the pre-independence years, would even suggest that from the point of view of the dalits and other oppressed segments, the post-colonial dispensation has been no better than the colonial one (possibly even worse).

And a variation of this theme is what Perry Anderson argues in his book *The Indian Ideology*, namely that it was immanent in the anti-colonial struggle, which invoked majoritarian religious imagery as a means of mobilizing people, that it would ultimately give rise to a Hindu supremacist regime. What is striking about these arguments is their suggestion that such a supersession is inevitable within the given conjuncture, whence the only conclusion that can be drawn is that they perceive the overthrow of the imperial order within such a conjuncture as a necessarily futile exercise.

We have here a convergence between imperialist historiography that plays down the sweep and the significance of the anti-colonial struggle, and an extreme Left historiography for which there is no concrete progress of any kind unless the ultimate goal of equality is achieved in one stroke. Real historical progress or retrogression, in which there can be concrete class intervention through theoretically-informed praxis, and which therefore is the product of the play of class forces, is seen by such extreme Left historiography entirely in moral terms: as either "good" or "bad". And since the ideal by its nature remains elusive and unattained, the judgement of such historiography about history is invariably that its movement is "bad", which then precludes any scope for productive praxis. This historiography in short is theoretically disarming from the perspective of praxis. It represents anger without praxis.

The refusal to distinguish between the two concepts of nationalism takes yet another form which is quite prevalent in Left circles in the advanced capitalist world. This debunks all "nationalism" as being inevitable progenitors of reaction. Authors belonging to this strand of thought, whether or not they express themselves against the anti-colonial nationalism of yore, would see any praxis based on an anti-imperialist nationalism in today's context of "globalization", praxis that would entail for instance a degree of delinking from such "globalization" as a means of ridding the country of its baneful consequences, as being a reactionary move. Here again the only corollary that follows is a moral disapproval of imperialist "globalization", but no meaningful praxis that can liberate the people from thralldom to it.

True, as internationalists we must not apotheosize any nationalism. Even anti-imperialist nationalism must not only be informed by internationalism but must also be seen as part of a transition to an authentic internationalist order free of the hegemony of the metropolitan capitalist economies. But to deny the progressive role of anti-imperialist nationalism in this process of transition to an authentic internationalism is to disarm the people both against imperialism and against the

communal-fascism-sustained bourgeois nationalism that is making an insidious entry into societies like ours with the blessings of imperialism. It would leave open the scope for minority fundamentalisms of various kinds coming on stage as a reaction to such majoritarian communal-fascism, which would be a panacea for social disintegration.

*** This article was originally published in the Peoples' Democracy, Vol. XXXIX No. 24, June 21, 2015.**