

DECOLONIZING SOUTH ASIAN HISTORY: A VIEW FROM THE NEW MILLENNIUM

Transfers of power, however momentous or revolutionary, tend to have an air of anti-climax about them. 'Like the complex electrical system in any large mansion when the owner has fled', Benedict Anderson has written in *Imagined Communities*, 'the state awaits the new owner's hand at the switch to be very much its old brilliant self again.' Where the inheritance is disputed, it might be added, the festival of lights may have a dark side to it. The capture of state power at the triumphal moment of formal decolonization by forces representing singular nationalism generally brought with it problems of its own in socially and culturally heterogeneous ex-colonies, perhaps nowhere more complex than in South Asia. The new owners of the stately mansions built during the colonial era may have at last laid their hands on the switchboards of the electrical mains; but they soon discovered the short circuits in many rooms of the mansion could easily blow most of the worn fuses. In the absence of effective circuit breakers, whole mansions could easily be plunged into darkness.

To push this metaphor even further, these mansions were not just edifices of brick and mortar, but contained libraries with weighty books. The extent to which anti-colonial nationalist thought was derivative of colonial knowledge is currently a matter of scholarly debate. We have sought to argue in this book that there were many contested visions of nationhood and alternative models of decolonized states in South Asian anti-colonial discourse. These have gained heightened relevance in the new millennium. The historical specificities of the post-colonial, political transition generally witnessed the smothering of diversity and the inheritance of colonial structures of state and ideologies of sovereignty by mainstream nationalist elites. But there was a promised difference. Colonial subjects, so long denied and divided along lines of religion, language, tribe or ethnicity, were to be treated to the full-blown rights of equal citizens.

The new occupants of the stately mansions and secretariat buildings busily set about their plans to modernize and streamline 'traditional' and stubbornly intricate societies, deliver a measure of redistributive justice to

the inhabitants of huts and shacks, and, in the process, iron out the problem of minorities within political systems which upheld the rule of healthy, democratically elected majorities. Where that failed, modernizing, 'neutral', post-colonial militaries could always take matters into their iron hand. Meanwhile, the older legacy of the red sandstone and marble palaces of the pre-colonial empires and their regional successor states lay in the desolate isolation of irrelevance, their libraries looted of their treasures and now enriching Orientalist collections of Western museums of learning. In any case, how could the politics and states of those branded 'oriental despots' hold any edifying lessons for post-colonial 'democrats'?

It is now emerging from scholarly research that pre-colonial empires, far from being centralized, bureaucratic autocracies, were flexible, nuanced, and overarching suzerainties. Although obviously bereft of modern democratic ideals, these empires and their regional successor states had well-developed political concepts of both individual and communitarian rights as well as political theories of good governance. The emperor merely laid claim to the highest manifestation of sovereignty, leaving the balance to be negotiated with regional sultans and local rajas, merchant institutions, as well as cities and villages. The amount of power actually vested in the different levels of sovereignty was subject to historical shifts with downward flows and seepages in periods of decentralization and fragmentation. What was non-existent, even in the heyday of pre-colonial empires, was any notion of absolute sovereignty and its concomitant demand of singular allegiance.

The idea of unitary, indivisible sovereignty was a foreign import into Asia and Africa from post-enlightenment Europe. But there was an embargo on the export of rights of citizens of sovereign states to Europe's colonies. This distortion in the international trade in ideas of sovereignty and citizenship had large implications for the quest to achieve freedom and democracy without riding roughshod over legitimate communitarian rights. The colonial state in India claimed to occupy 'neutral' ground above indigenous society which, in its view, could do no better than squabble over the sectional interests of its component parts. Through rigid classificatory schemes employed in colonial censuses and maps, the state made it harder to maintain the peaceful co-existence of multiple social identities, even though colonial constructs never wholly succeeded in shrinking the mental horizons of colonized peoples. Once colonial modernity had redefined 'traditional' social affiliations, the way was open for the construction of divisive political categories that might deflect unified challenges of anti-colonial nationalists. These were not just the larger oppositions, such as the one between Hindu and Muslim in India. Colonial powers often preferred to recruit minorities, such as Sikhs in India, in disproportionate numbers into key state institutions such as the military. The problem of assuring minority rights among the subject population became a convenient excuse for the perpetuation of minority, colonial rule.

Late colonialism in India also took to constitutional manoeuvres aimed at directing political attention towards local and provincial arenas to keep central state authority insulated from nationalist challenge. Anti-colonial nationalists, thus, became increasingly suspicious of schemes that threatened 'balkanization' at the moment of decolonization. Minorities came to be seen as only pawns in the end game of colonial empire. A grievous flaw was embedded in this perception. Aspirations for unity among different linguistic and religious communities in anti-colonial politics now came to be replaced by assertions of a singular, 'secular' or 'composite' nationalism. The more far-sighted anti-colonial activists and thinkers had always recognized the imperative of assuring rights of religious, linguistic and other communities and conceding autonomy to diverse regions. 'Particularist' identities, however much they may have been re-invented in the mould of colonial modernity, could not just be wished away but needed to be accommodated within any enlightened view of anti-colonial nationalism. Muhammad Iqbal gave voice to his sense of a distinctive identity when he asserted: 'The light of foreign wisdom does not dazzle me; the collyrium lining my eyelids is the dust of Mecca and Najaf.' Couching his anti-colonialism in an autonomy derived from faith, Iqbal maintained that: 'In slavery, neither swords nor ideas are of any use; but when belief takes its hold, chains are cut loose.'

From another part of the subcontinent, Rabindranath Tagore had tried putting the issue into perspective: 'Where there is genuine difference, it is only by expressing and restraining that difference in its proper place that it is possible to fashion unity. Unity cannot be achieved by issuing legal fiats that everybody is one.' By contrast, Jawaharlal Nehru wrote in 1938 that he looked 'through a telescope' to locate a Hindu-Muslim problem in India and could not spot it. As late as the 1920s, it had been common to forge a common anti-colonial nationalist position through negotiation among diverse religious and linguistic communities. Those who set their sights on the acquisition of power at the helm of a unitary nation-state displayed increasing impatience with articulations of cultural difference and diversity.

In socially heterogeneous colonies there was always the potential for the emergence of multiple contenders for nationhood. As the discourse of mainstream Indian nationalism turned more strident in its insistence on singularity, a sense of unease led some dissenting minorities to couch their own demands in the language of nationalism. Among the proponents of the Indian Muslims' claim to nationhood in the early 1940s there was little enthusiasm for a partitionist solution. Minority claims to nationhood should not necessarily be equated with calls for secession, which may be an option of the last resort when all attempts at negotiating power-sharing arrangements fail. The quest to be recognized as a 'nation' must be distinguished from its territorial expression in the form of a completely separate 'state'.

Post-colonial South Asian history and historiography has shown an inability to discard colonial definitions of majority and minority based on a system of enumeration privileging the religious distinction, despite being overtaken by events. In military-ruled Pakistan, the denial of democracy led East Pakistan's Bengali majority to claim to be a distinct nation. It is arguable that, as in the 1940s, here too, the initial aim was an equitable share of power, failing which the die was cast in favour of a separate, sovereign state of Bangladesh in 1971. The successful secession of Bangladesh was for quite some time an exceptional occurrence in the history of the post-World War II interstate system. The legitimacy of any given political unit or juridical state has increasingly become a key issue in interlinked campaigns for democratic rights, both in its individual and communitarian aspects and for national sovereignty. A social group denied a voice in decision-making within a particular democratic polity may either criticize the quality of such a democracy and seek reforms or question the founding credentials of the state and seek autonomy or secession.

The failure of post-colonial states to assure equal citizenship rights and to deliver on the promise of redistributive justice has brought these entities into some disrepute. As the general concept of the modern, centralized nation-state has been drawn deeper into a crisis of legitimacy, a raging battle has begun between state-sponsored and anti-state nationalisms. As secularism and socialism have increasingly sounded like hollow slogans, centralized states under siege have resorted to majoritarian ideologies, religiously or ethnically defined, in attempts to prevent their own structures from being undermined. The systematic denial of substantive rights of democracy and autonomy by existing states, as the experience of east Pakistan showed, can contribute to the birth of new nations. The rise of Hindu majoritarian 'nationalism' in India is tied to the defence of centralized state authority against a variety of regional as well as caste and class-based challenges, even though it has not succeeded in dislodging the formal secular ideology of the Indian state.

The clash between majoritarian principles and substantive democracy is taking an increasingly bloody toll as part of the conflict between incipient nations and juridical states. Instead of the unbending insistence on the singular loyalty of the citizen to the state, the time is overdue to rethink the relevance of multiple and shifting social identities for the cause of democracy. Such identities by their very nature defy capture within unambiguous, permanent or even durable constructs of majority and minority. If the function of democracy is to unsettle permanent or entrenched majorities and democratic processes are meant to ensure that majority support is earned, then the multiplicity of social identities rooted in South Asia's history can only be a boon and not a threat to democratic values and practice. These identities can only flourish within a political and state system based on layered and shared sovereignties. Sovereignty need not be the monolith

from the peak of which one flaunts authority and under the weight of which 'the Other' is crushed. Disenchanted social groups who have, of late, conceived of themselves as 'nations' are unlikely to give up this expression of their new consciousness. But they may yet be invited to form a part of multinational states of union forged from below through negotiation of terms of sovereignty among constituent peoples and nations. That in turn may heal inter-state relations still reeling from the tragedy of partition and improve the prospects of a better South Asia based on mutual understanding and cooperation in the new millennium.

The history of pre-colonial India is replete with instances of rajas, maharajas and maharajadhirajas, shahs and shah-en-shahs, reigning in relative peace having shared out sovereignty along different layers of the sub-continental polity. An emperor was no more than a sovereign at the centre of many sovereigns. It was only when disputes took the form of exclusive possession of territory that there was catastrophic war. The devastating battle of Kurukshetra described in the great epic *Mahabharata* might have been avoided if the Kauravas had agreed to cede five villages to the five Pandava brothers; instead they clung with obduracy to the slogan 'not an inch of soil'.

The Indian foreign minister, Jaswant Singh, explained that 'conceptual differences' between India and Pakistan had undermined attempts to reach even a joint statement or declaration at the Agra summit of 2001. President Musharraf had insisted that Kashmir must be accepted as the 'core issue' in any dialogue between India and Pakistan. The Indian side had retorted that Kashmir was 'the core of Indian nationhood'. What seems to have doomed the Agra talks were irreconcilable territorial claims put forth by India and Pakistan, an empirical contradiction flowing not from any 'conceptual differences' but a remarkable 'conceptual similarity' shared by the leaders of India and Pakistan on the definition of sovereignty.

South Asians learnt the modern concept of unitary, indivisible sovereignty from their British colonial masters. In 1947 by failing to share sovereignty they ended up dividing the land. Yet it would seem that the British themselves have by now lost faith in the concept of monolithic sovereignty. A drastic redefinition of the idea of sovereignty laid the groundwork for the Good Friday agreement on Northern Ireland and also paved the way for Scottish and Welsh autonomy. An ideational change of this magnitude was not easy to achieve. In a 1993 report titled *Northern Ireland: Sharing Authority*, Brendan O'Leary and his co-authors wrote: 'some political theorists, in our view wrongly, believe that sovereignty is indivisible and cannot be shared. To avoid tedious argument we have therefore used the word authority rather than sovereignty throughout – but we will not object if we are read as advocating shared sovereignty.' A conceptual shift needed to precede a breakthrough in the political logjam. The renunciation of absolutist claims to sovereignty over Northern Ireland and the yielding of political

space to new democratic arenas hold lessons for attempting to deal with other comparable conflicts. For all the difficulties that beset the power-sharing arrangement in Belfast, instead of building new walls of separation, London and Dublin are engaged in creating joint institutions and forging new spheres of cooperation under the rubric of the European Union. The best political theorists of pre-colonial and anti-colonial South Asia would have seen no cause for tedious argument over the concept of layered and shared sovereignty. There really is no reason why India and Pakistan, beset by the ghosts of Mountbatten and Curzon, should cling to a colonial definition of sovereignty on the question of Kashmir and goad their citizenry in the name of territorial nationalism on to the path of mutually assured destruction. An obsession with territoriality is not just an anachronism in today's globalized world, it is completely out of sync with the best traditions of the subcontinent's own history and political thought. If they are true to themselves, Indians and Pakistanis can do better in crafting a safer and more prosperous future for the peoples of the subcontinent.

This book – a deliberate act of transgression across the arbitrary lines of 1947 – is a small contribution in that direction. Acts of violence by 'infiltrators' across the border tend to grab the media headlines in an era obsessed with 'terrorism'. Yet the devotional strains of immortal *quawaalis* in the voice of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan continue to waft across state frontiers in South Asia and beyond. Instead of pointing nuclear-tipped missiles at each other, the peoples of the subcontinent may be able to indulge their shared passion for food and film, music and literature as well as the game of cricket, if they have a better understanding of their common history. There is much to learn and much to leave behind.