

RESEARCH NOTE

**NATION, NATIONALISM AND  
SOME ISSUES OF NATIONAL CONSENSUS**

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Generally, terms such as state, nation, nationalism and national integration are used interchangeably. Even social scientists and politicians do not significantly differentiate in the definitions, usages and nuances of these terms. The Charter of the United Nations also declares that for a political entity to be recognised as a nation state it must fulfill certain obligations, of which the qualifications of sovereignty, independence and fixed territorial expression are essential. A similar approach is maintained in the field of international relations the theory of international relations reserves the term nation state for a state which acquires an independent sovereign status.

However, in political science, especially in the field of political development distinct differences are maintained in the definition, practice and connotation of terms like state, nation, nation building and nationalism. A state is defined as an objective reality in a society having a legal and territorial expression of people organised under one government. The state derives its authority by "legitimate coercion."<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the state is a place where people develop their sense of nationalism and nation building activities in greater application.

A nation is broadly defined as the aggregate of subjective values of people in a society. As an abstract concept, a nation is a psychological attitude or the emotional attachment of people with their sense of belonging in a given society. Kohn defines a nation as a "state of mind, an act of consciousness .... the individual's identification of himself with 'We group' to which he gives supreme loyalty."<sup>2</sup> The idea of a nation, therefore, is a kind of consciousness relating to subjective values like race, religion, language, culture, traditions and such other common behaviours of people in a society. Apparently, these values help to maintain internal cohesion in order to differentiate from other groups on the basis of the "We-They" concept.

The meaning of nationalism is political. As Kohn observes, "the sense of nationalism is inconceivable without idea of popular sovereignty", in other words, the meaning of nationalism is assertions of citizenary rights in the affairs of state. As the sense of nation is nationalism, it is related to the consciousness of sacrifices made in the past and willingness to make further ones in the future. In other words, nationalism is "a criterion for the determination of the unit of population proper to enjoy a government exclusively its own, for the legitimate exercise of power in the state, and for the right organization of society of states," writes Snyder.<sup>3</sup>

State building is said to be the concentration of authority, maintenance of law and order, establishment of a rational administrative system. Nation building is the promotion of the sense of nationalism. Nation building is referred to as the multi-dimensional process of a society for developing "a common political consciousness." Almond and Powell refer to penetration and integration as the problems in state building, and extension of loyalty and commitment to nation building.

It is therefore attributed that promotion of the sense of nation and nationalism is possible only through the all-round development of a society. Secular policy, greater economic opportunities and greater political participation would all help in developing a common political consciousness in the society. The more opportunities provided to the people, the stronger will be the chances of nation building. Unless a society reduces economic exploitation, enhances the concept of popular sovereignty in the political process, and develops a value consensus within culturally discrete groups, the prospect of further infusing a sense of nationalism becomes a distant possibility.<sup>4</sup>

As a matter of fact, such a concept of nationalism was not popularised in the West until the end of the sixteenth century. The West realised only during the seventeenth century that the people's power was the basis of nationalism. The Western countries denied the traditional concept of a ruler such as "Whose acts are not subject to any other, and whose will cannot be overridden" on the grounds of the people's interests. They were struggling to assert people's power. Ultimately, they succeeded in receiving charters like the French Declaration of Human Rights, the American Bill of Rights, The English Bill of Rights, etc, thereby asserting the concept of popular sovereignty as the basis of nationalism and nation building. The concept of popular sovereignty gained popularity in the West as it proved successful as well as essential in developing the sense of nationalism among the people of a given nation.

In the developing countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America, despite the fact that "popular sovereignty" would undoubtedly form the basis for

nationalism, the concept did not receive much attention due to various reasons. In the first place, the traditional institutions did not work for democratic development. Second, most of the nationalist leaders tried to marry ideology with tactical consideration. Democratic values like liberty, equality, participation and secularism began to erode when the nationalist leaders changed their role from that of leaders of movements to leaders of government. Their perspective on issues and objectives changed. Third in most of the developing countries, the spirit of nation building got sidetracked due to an emphasis on state building activities, because the task of making government was equated with that of the regime's continuity. And finally, the political parties could not prove as effective as they could be to help institutionalise democracy in their countries. Most of the time, the political parties indulged in parochial and petty things rather than solving broad national issues. However, some political parties and nationalist leaders have proved effective in inculcating a true sense of nationalism among those who worked according to the goals of liberal democracy. In such countries, political institutions have become resilient against the trends of national disintegration.

The above observations prove that the spirit of liberal democracy forms the basis for nationalism. Some despots, dictators, reactionaries, and fundamentalists may not like the doctrine, but it has become universal phenomenon. The people at large have already accepted that the sense of nationalism is inconceivable in the absence of popular sovereignty. In recent years, even the communist states have realised its importance. *Marxian dictums that assert that nationalism is fraud*, liberal democracy is the bourgeoisie concept, the state and government are corrupt institutions, and their call for internationalism and weathering away of the state are all proved futile and ineffective. Evidently, the impracticability of Marxism on the issue of nationalism was realised even during 1930s. when Germany invaded the Soviet Union. The rallying cry of Stalin was "save the motherland." In recent days, the importance of liberal democracy for the promotion of nationalism has become a popular movement in most of the communist states. The political changes taking diametrically opposite turns in Eastern Europe could be cited in support of the preceding statement. Even the Soviet Union is undergoing numerous changes as it accepts the values of liberal democracy. A few community states continue to change with the application of repressive measures. However, none of the measures will prove effective in stopping the process of change.

The case of Nepal is also not much different from those societies of Asia, Africa and Latin America. Though the state of Nepal assumed its present nationhood in the second half of the eighteenth century, its politics could not

initiate for any nation building activity. Development of a common political consciousness remained a dream in the Nepali society. As the rulers were absolute and responsible to none. Their primary loyalty remained to the family interests rather than the interests of the nation. The early Shah period of 1769-1846, and the Rana rule of 1846-1951, mainly bent upon restraining the growth of political awareness among the people. The Rana oligarchy continued uninterrupted simply because it was buttressed by a policy of internal repression and an external policy of keeping the Nepali people in total isolation. But as soon as the people of Nepal became somewhat politically conscious, the Rana edifice of power simply crumbled in the revolution of 1951 despite its restrictive measures.

The 1951 revolution was an epoch-making event in Nepali politics, as it dispelled the traditional concept of political absolutism and laid a new foundation of nationalism. Like in the West, the revolution emphasised that the sense of nationalism is impossible without the birth of popular sovereignty. Especially the Nepali Congress, the first democratic party of Nepal, popularised the concept that democracy and nationalism are inseparable. Hence, all forces- the King, the Rana's and the Nepali Congress- agreed to herald a smooth and spontaneous transition from tradition to modernity, thereby entering into a general compromise for ushering in a democratic era. However, within a short span of time, the "democratic innovations" developed after the revolution of 1951 began to flounder. Retrogressive forces emerged in the Nepali society. Some of them were schooled, trained and rewarded under the Rana autocracy; some of them were reactionaries; others were royalists. Some were even leaders of Nepali Congress afraid of true democracy in the country. King Mahendra's commitment to liberal democracy was doubtful. He started mobilising the support of these groups. Eventually, giving all sovereign powers to the king, the 1959 Constitution came into operation, making a major departure from the much anticipated objectives of the 1951 revolution. The reasons were that the spirit of popular sovereignty was not viewed with favour by the king, he was unprepared to compromise his position, and the political parties were incapable of resisting the King's unpredictable moves.

The 1959 Constitution was considered nonetheless to be a compromising formula between the palace and the people, with a distant objective of developing democracy in the country. But King Mahendra was ambitious to become a King-leader rather than remain content with simple head of state in compromise with the elected representatives. Thus he disrupted the "democratic innovations" installed by the revolution of 1951 without giving reasonable time for to prove their worth.

As a substitute for Parliamentary Democracy, the Panchayat System was

introduced in 1961. The system claimed to embody indigenous characteristics of Nepal and be the most appropriate solution to problems of national integration. Like the previous system, the Panchayat System was also garbed as democratic. However, its features were completely alien to democratic norms as practised elsewhere in the world. Its mechanism of people's participation were designed so as to form a centrally controlled system completely guided by the King.

Three decades of experiment of the Panchayat System proved despite its many catchy slogans that it was completely incapable of instilling the sense of nationalism. As the system was tailored to attend to Royal wishes its institutional processes, including independent role-performance, sub-system autonomy, recruitment and participation, were all affected by active Royal leadership. The working mechanism of Panchayat System was simply perfunctory in its character. The "old role" and vested interest group maintained order, but without the concept of stability. Political stability entails enthusiastic participation of people through the sharing of power and socio-economic development. The concept of sharing of power was conspicuous by its absence under popular participation, because absolute power was vested in the King. The social policy adopted by the Panchayat System did not appear capable of dealing with the growing awareness of the people brought about by the process of modernization. Ironically, genuine economic development was not the main objective of the system. Plans formulated with preconceived notions and objectives were designed to maintain the entrenched interests of status-bound elites and vested interest groups of the society. For these groups, an integrated radical approach to development was anathema. Therefore, Nepal's economic problems in relation to nation building became mind boggling, difficult if not totally unsolvable. Under such circumstances, a tendency of alienation from and frustration with the system was natural and inevitable.

Though the Panchayat System disallowed opposition and adopted various measures restricting the fundamental rights of people, the conscious section of the Nepali people did not remain silent. They were demanded restoration of democracy through various means, sometimes with armed revolution and sometimes through peaceful demonstration. The Nepali Congress especially undertook the leadership of such activities. As democracy, nationalism, socialism and secularism were the guiding principles of the Nepali Congress, it relentlessly involved itself and tenaciously held to its principles, even after the termination of Parliamentary System in 1960. As the Panchayat System denied systemic opposition, the party in-exile was bound to adopt different strategies in which many of its workers lost their lives. Though the party faced both organizational and financial problems, it did not deviate from its

ideological goals. The charismatic personality of its leaders and the towering leadership of the party eventually led to restoration of democracy in the country.

The role of Communist Party, however, remained ambivalent. Some of the communists joined the Panchayat System, "still believing in Marxism," and others joined the system with three considerations – to provide the party with an organization within which communist cadres could operate, to forge an easy access to such administrative institutions like the Panchayats and class organizations which they had been assiduously attempting to infiltrate, and to occupy dominant positions in the national politics so as to compete with the Nepali Congress.<sup>5</sup> Adopting these strategies, a certain section of the communists successfully checked the liberal trends in the system. Even during the National Referendum of 1979, certain section of the communists boycotted it with a fear that restoration of multi-party system would be the victory of the Nepali Congress. A pamphlet stated "why bring in a wolf in the cave when a jackal is already there." However, the moderate and liberal sections of Communist Party did support the multi-party side.

As a matter of fact, the bonafide intentions of moderate communists remained clear when they joined the February 18, 1989 democratic movement spearheaded by the Nepali Congress. The Nepali people who pin up their hopes on the democratic role of Nepali Congress joined the movement from various walks of life. Similarly, the role of moderate communists during the movement was no less significant in generating tremendous head in Nepali society. Indeed, due to these reasons, the Panchayat System crumbled like a house of cards, heralding in a new era of nationalism and consensus in Nepali society.

The issues of national consensus could be of manifold variety because these differ from approach to approach. However, there are certain specific issues which are vital to all Nepali people. Such issues include the position of monarchy, socio-economic policy, national polity, internal security and external relations. Regarding the position of monarchy, its historical role can hardly be ignored. Leaving aside the tyrannical role played by this institution at times, the monarch contributes a distinct sense of national identity. During the middle half of the eighteenth century, the monarchy was instrumental in the unification of warring kingdoms into a single nation, setting aside the cold war rivalry between British India and Imperial China. Besides, the political transformation taken place in March-April, 1990, was not a "total revolution" completely delinked from the past. The political change was neither the Iranian type nor the Afghanistan one directed towards installation of fundamentalism and radicalism. It was a kind of moderate change in power structure and the nature of national polity. From absolutism, the power

transferred to the people, making them sovereign and defining democracy as the basis of nationalism. The movement proved that the traditional role of monarchy was antithetical to modernization, and its anachronistic concept of nationalism was against the sentiments of the people. As Rajni Kothari, an Indian scholar writes, "no society can live without traditions, and the challenge of modernization is to build up traditions into modernity." The role of Nepali monarchy is to work for modernity. It is a symbol of national unity, constitutional head as well as a partner to help nurture the newly born democracy in the country.

The democratic polity recognizing sovereign rights of the people is another consensual issue of Nepali society. The movement proved that nation building, as a cooperative and collective venture of all forces involving the mechanism of popular participation, should be so designed in a political system where people feel an emotional attachment to it. The conditions essential for such a situation are the provisions of integrative institutions like independent political structures with checks and balances, political parties of ideological clarity, wide electoral base, universal adult franchise, political opposition, broad representation of society, recognition of quality of people on merit principles, and above all, guarantee of fundamental rights of people. The role of political parties seem important in participatory democracy because they ought to bear the responsibilities of resolving the issues of national consensus. There has been a mushroom growth of political parties in Nepal, creating confusion on issues of national consensus, since the parties are sponsored by the conservative elements. The difference in their professed objectives and sometimes pernicious motives can disrupt the whole political process of the country. Therefore, the political parties calling themselves democrat should prove their democratic behaviour in action. Similarly, the left forces are required to extend their cooperation to help institutionalise the newly born democracy in the country.

Economic policy is another issue requiring serious attention in Nepal. The economic situation of Nepal appears to be at the brink of disaster. Nepal is one of the poorest countries of the world. In such a situation, what then could be an appropriate economic policy for alleviating the poor people?, How can equitable justice in the competition for valued resources and distribution of goods and services be provided? Generally, three kinds of policy issues are identified: the Marxist or communist mode, the capitalist model, and the mixed or democratic socialistic model. The Marxist model has proved ineffective in solving economic issues on the grounds that the economic issue as a human and psychological phenomenon does not take place in terms of material needs alone. Though the material need is one of the vital aspects, the other aspects like the sense of possession and ownership,

individuality and such other economic rights are not less significant factors attending the material needs. "Everybody's property is nobody's property and economic activities for national development could hardly be initiated without developing the sense of attachment to these. This vital aspect is missing in the Marxist model. The great hiatus in the economic condition of people created by the Marxist model in the five East European countries provides reference to this point. Ultimately, realization against the "socialised economic system" is seen even in the Soviet Union, and to a certain degree, in China too. The competitive or capitalistic model too is not applicable in a situation like that of Nepal. There are many legacies affecting to it. First the feudalistic economic structure of Nepal was not oriented towards industrialization of the country, providing the grounds for capitalism. Second, the idea of forming private capital did not develop in Nepal, because the state policy remained always exploitative of the people. Thirdly, the internal as well as external factors affected the positive growth of the Nepali economy. And, the last but not the least, capitalism is rooted in individual liberty which the Nepali people could never enjoy.

The democratic socialistic model is believed to be the most tenable model to help solve the economic issues of Nepal. As a mixed model, it comprises of the positive values of both former models. The role and responsibility of the state on the one hand, and the role and responsibility of individuals on the other are clearly defined. The role and responsibility of the state are to: dispense economic justice in the competition for valued resources and distribution of goods and services, create conditions favorable for economic activities and to mediate and bridge the increasing gap between the rich and the poor through a policy of scientific taxation and other such tariff measures. Above all, the role of state under this model is to maintain a balance between the constitutional order, security and welfare of all its people. The economic rights of the individual tie up intimately with other democratic rights. Each individual, with his own ability and performance, can enjoy economic rights. But such "self-regarding" rights limit together with "other regarding rights."

In fact, the socialistic model has become popular due to many positive reasons. First, it suggests indigenization of economic development by mobilization of local resources. Second, it suggests modernization of society with continuity and change. Third, it recommends internalization of external values to help develop the local values. And the last, with "small is beautiful" as its concept, it suggests economic development from below. Balance between ecology and society are its major concern. It therefore suggests preservation of nature for the better living of mankind. The Nepali Congress, a democratic party of Nepal, stands by this model. If the policies



of the model are sincerely implemented, it would definitely help solve the economic problems of Nepal to a large extent.

The social policy of Nepal is another issue in national consensus. The Nepali society is multi-ethnic in character, and its problem of national integration is to achieve unity in diversity. Homogeneity through centralized domination does not satisfy the disparate segments of the society. Though cohesiveness of Nepali society has not shown any ominous sign of breaking down the different ethnic groups are voicing complaints that their language, religion and culture are not receiving favourable treatment from the state. During the national referendum (1979-80), quite a few ethnic groups held conferences and campaigns for recognition of their language and cultural rights. After the restoration of democracy, intensification of such demands has alarmingly increased. The different ethnic groups are not lagging behind in articulating their concerns. The people of Tarai feel alienated from the national mainstream due to the biased attitude of the ruling elites. Similarly, the people of Mongoloid origin argue that they are not receiving equal treatment like those of the Aryan origin. The three percent Muslim segment of Nepali society is also demanding due recognition of its language, religion and culture. There are quite a number of "indigenous" people who still live in a state of complete isolation.

Till now, the socio-political system of Nepal could not provide adequate channel for the neglected sections of the society. As political institutions became ineffective and vested interest groups thrived on the social disparity, both covert and overt conflicts in Nepali society were likely to generate amount of tensions and misunderstandings. In such a situation, one could hardly bank on the resilient character of the society. Now the context is changed. A broad based secular policy and provision for articulating ethnic identity could promote integrationist trends. Its timely realisation is felt to preserve and promote social harmony among the different ethnic groups of Nepal. The success of national integration depend, to a considerable extent, upon provisions for "retention of minimum value-consensus" of culturally discrete groups of society by devising integrative institutions and behaviour.

The problems of internal or individual security are also treated as an issue of national consensus affecting the growth of nationalism. Though nationalism is an aggregation of subjective values, its fuller application is hardly possible in absence of an objective condition, that is , a nation state. The meaning of security is generally defined as preservation of territorial identity. In essence, security is the role of a nation state aimed at protecting the "vital national interests." Rostow suggests "the constitutional order" as a means for internal security and Morgenthau recommends developing "national power" as the means for external security. Combining both these

suggestions,"domestic policy resiliency and foreign policy consistency," treats Rosenau for internal or individual security and external security. Internally, security issues include devising potential capability and support bases of capability in society. Externally, it includes confirmation of symbolic outputs oriented towards maintaining balanced interactions in dealing with other nations.As stated by Rosenau, the goals, contents and style of foreign policy based on resilient domestic policy would all help solving the issues of national security.

Whether the problem of an "external threat" to Nepal's security is real or imaginary is difficult to ascertain. Some vulnerable areas such as the tyranny of geography, geo-strategic location, size, economic compulsions, socio-cultural patterns and national polity have affected the protection of the vital national interests" of Nepal. Nepal is sometimes labelled as "security shield," "buffer zone," "sphere of influence," and even a "periphery of the periphery." The theme of this paper is not when and how Nepal has faced security problems, but issues of consensus,

The meaning of security is the preservation of "vital national interest". But the interpretation of security may neither be equated merely with the guarded anachronistic explanations of the regime. Nor should it be related with nascent nationalism born out of chauvanism, fomenting hatred towards another state. This is how the security perception of Nepal has been defined. King Prithvi narayan Shah, the founder of modern Nepal, stated that Nepal is "like a yam between two huge boulders." He developed a strategy to deal with the problem: "praja mota bhaya rajya baliyo huncha"; "the people endowed with strength and courage save the country." His successors, however, failed to create the people into a potential force to counter the security problem. The Rana rule defined security in terms of the regime's continuity. Hence they accomodated British interests in a policy that remained unaltered even after the British withdrawal India. The 1950 Peace and Friendship Treaty pushed Nepal further under the "security shield" of India. The governments of the post-revolution period were transient in character. They could hardly dare define security issues in terms of popular consensus. The first ever popularly elected Nepali Congress government was in a position to define issues of national consensus by building the potential capability and developing support bases. Unfortunately, it was cut short before it proved its worth. Like the Rana rule, the Panchayati elites also defined security perceptions with the motive of maintaining the regime's continuity. Taking advantage of changes of the international situation, some calculative moves were undertaken, but these proved self-defeating. Even during the period of national crisis that started from March 23,1988, the people gave no support to the system because the system was essentially anti-people. One of the reasons

attributed to the failure of Panchayat System was its inconsistency in foreign policy arising from an immaturely defined perception of security issues.

The vulnerable areas affecting the issues of security are equally important subject even in the changed context. Brinkmanship is a regular feature of the Nepali press. Nepal has relations with a host of countries, and India and China are its immediate neighbours. The behaviour of these countries bears both the covert and overt influences on Nepal. At times, the triangular relations-India versus China vis-a-vis Nepal-have shape some security issues in Nepal. In this context, Nepal's capacity to influence other nations is limited. Nepal's priority is to maintain territorial integrity and national sovereignty. This requires Nepal's leadership to use "domestic policy resiliency" and foreign policy consistency in devising potential capability and support bases of capability. At the same time, the countries which bound Nepal geographically, with their centuries of social, religious, cultural, and economic ties, must magnanimously understand the sensitivities of smaller countries like Nepal.

Last, but not the least, an issue of national consensus is the new constitution of Nepal. Its objectives are to institutionalise democracy by recognizing the sovereign rights of people and establishing a multi-party system and constitutional monarchy. As a national democratic constitution, it will have to adapt to the ever-changing conditions of Nepali society. By securing social peace and progress, safeguarding individual rights, and promoting national well-being, the constitution will hopefully help further enhance and consolidate Nepali nationalism.

### Notes

1. Mostafa Rejai and Cynthai Enloe, "Nation States And State Nation" in *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 8 (1069), pp. 93-103, and Claude J. Burtenshaw, "Book Review On state And Nation" in *The Western Political Quarterly*, Vol. XVIII, No. 2 (June 1065), pp. 394-5.
2. Hans Kohn, "Nationalism As Group Consciousness" in Louis L. Snyder ed., *The Dynamics Of Nationalism: Reading In The Meaning And Development* (Princeton: D. Van Nostrand Company, 1964), p. 18.
3. Snyder, *Ibid*, p. 373.
4. Ananta Raj Poudyal, "Nation Building In Nepal: A Case Study Of The Post Revolution period (1950081)", "An Unpublished Ph. D. Dissertation, Tribhuvan University, 1986.
5. See Matribhumi, July 9, 1962, and Nepal Samachar, June 1, 1962. For other detail See Bhuvan Lal Joshi and Leo E. Rose, *Democratic Innovations In Nepal: A Case Study Of Political Acculturation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), pp. 454-56.