

Ethno Nationalism: A Brief Introduction

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Abstract

Human beings have been engaged with the idea of nation and nation formation from time immemorial. The paper traces the work of Anthony Smith who is the major contributor in the primordialist school of thought. He raises some fundamental questions like “why are men and women willing to die for their countries? Why do they identify so strongly with their nations?” Anthony Smith is credited with developing the “ethno symbolist theory”, which presents novel ideas about ethnies as the basis of nation formation. Smith’s work stands between “modernist theories defending the recent, invented and constructed nature of nation and nationalism and perennialist theories emphasizing the permanence of nations”.

Keywords: primordialist, ethnies, modernist, nationalism

Nations and nationalism are concepts with which humankind has been associated for a very long time. Scholars world over are divided on the issue of how nations emerged. Whether the nations were perennial, imagined or had ethnic basis has been hotly debated. In the context of South Asia, the question becomes even more important as it has rich cultural history. With the growing influence of globalization, modernization has been adopted quite effortlessly. The region is a crucible in which people from diverse backgrounds live bound in power relations governed by multiple master discourses. It is a land where, “[b]oth modern and traditional value systems and institutional forms coexist side by side, though not always in harmony”. (Mishra 3) It is this discord, this heterogeneity, which creates complexity in the idea of nations and nation building in the region. Historically speaking, human beings have been prone to arrange themselves on the basis of binary of, “‘us’ and ‘them’” (Grosby 1) forging group identities. Manifestation of, “one such group is the nation”. (Grosby 1)

The primordialists analyze the role of ethnic history in the development of modern nation states. According to the thinkers of this school, “the nation is primarily the ethno nation” (Bacova 29) which stands for, “a community which unites individuals through ‘the same blood and common

fate”’. (Bacova 29) They build their argument on the premise that without the base of a strong ethnic foundation, modern nation states could not have come into existence. Anthony D. Smith is the major contributor in the primordialist school of thought. He raises some fundamental questions like “why are men and women willing to die for their countries? Why do they identify so strongly with their nations?” (Smith, 1986) He further raises the point that if nations are “invented” then how does such an invention survive for such a long period of time. Anthony Smith is credited with developing the, “ethno symbolist theory” (Guibernau 57) which presents novel ideas about ethnies as the basis of nation formation.

Smith’s work stands between “modernist theories defending the recent, invented and constructed nature of nation and nationalism and perennialist theories emphasizing the permanence of nations”. (Guibernau 58) Smith defines ethnies as, “named human populations with shared ancestry myths, histories and cultures, having an association with a specific territory, and a sense of solidarity”. (Guibernau 58) It is the ethnie, according to Smith, which acts as the, “precursors of nations”. (Guibernau 58) Anthony Smith compares Western notion of nation with the Eastern or Ethnic notion and states that in the former, nations are considered as communities driven by culture, the members of which are, “united, if not made homogeneous, by common historical memories, myths, symbols and traditions”. (Smith, National Identity, 11), while the latter put emphasis, “on a community of birth and native culture”. (Smith, National Identity, 11).

Western conception of nation required an individual, “to belong to some nation” (Smith, National Identity, 11) and gave the individual the liberty to, “choose to which [nation], he or she belonged” (Smith, National Identity, 11). While the ethnic conception considered even an emigrant, “ineluctably, organically, a member of the community” (Smith, National Identity, 11) in which he was born.

Ethnie as a formative concept of nationalism works on the notion of shared memory and culture and, “love for homeland”. (Indira 14) According to Smith ethnies can be divided into two main types namely, “aristocratic ethnies” (Indira 14) which concentrates on assimilation of cultures of lower classes through the growing role of bureaucracy and “the vertical demonic ethnies” (Indira 14) which are governed by religious communities interested in having political leverage. Elaborating Lateral or Aristocratic ethnies, Anthony Smith cites the examples of, “England, Spain, France and Sweden were able to survive over many centuries through a process of ‘bureaucratic incorporation’ (Regina). It was owing to this process that other classes, groups and regions, “of their society [were brought] into the principal ethnic culture of the state”. (Regina). Smith highlights the use of, “state apparatuses and processes to ‘disseminate and regulate’ the myths, values, traditions and symbols of the dominant ethnic core of the state”. (Regina)). Owing to this, the peripheral ethnic cultures were incorporated into the mainstream cultural identity. (Regina). Discussing, Vertical Ethnies, Smith opines, they originate when a sense of belonging in

a community is generated, “through ancestry, symbols and myths shared between the community regardless of social positions”. (Regina) Smith does not follow the argument of ethnic nationalist thinkers that there is “primordial” nature of national communities. He maintains that, “that the ethnic communities are in reality constructed and are consolidated by the modern state, but analyses that they are built by successive generations of a population out of shared memories of the past and visions of the future.” (Indira 14)

Anthony Smith while discussing the features of ethnic model, “stress[es] on descent – or rather, presumed descent – rather than territory.” (Smith, National Identity, 12) It is believed that nation is the end product of one giant, “super family” with its roots in, “east European and Middle Eastern countries”. (Smith, National Identity, 12). The major implication of this facet that all the citizens of a nation can trace their roots to one common family and are thus, “at least cousins, differentiated by family ties from outsiders”. (Smith, National Identity, 12) The other important feature of ethnic model is that, “in place of law [there is]...vernacular culture, usually languages and customs”. (Smith, National Identity, 12) This explains the important role played by, “lexicographers, philologists and folklorists...in early nationalisms of eastern Europe and Asia”. (Smith, National Identity, 12) It is through their “ethnographic research...of the myths, history and linguistic traditions of the community” (Smith, National Identity 12) that they made it possible for the citizens to

imbibe the idea of “ethnic nations in their minds” (Smith, National Identity 12). Anthony Smith defines a nation as:

“It is a named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members.”
(Smith, National Identity, 13)

Differentiating between an ethnies and a nation, Anthony Smith clarifies that the link that the ethnies shares with the territory might be “historical and symbolic” (Smith, National Identity, 40), whereas the link between a nation and territory is, “physical and actual [as] nations possess territories”. (Smith, National Identity, 40)

Anthony Smith goes on to emphasize that, nations are a result of recent, modern phenomenon as, “they have a unified legal code...a unified economy with a single division of labour...a fairly compact territory, preferably with 'natural' defensible frontiers [and]...a single 'political culture' and public, mass education and media system, to socialize future generations to be 'citizens' of the new nation. (Smith, National Identity, 69) Anthony Smith echoes Gellner’s notion that, “it is nationalism that creates national identity”. (Smith, National Identity, 71) Smith highlights the ideology of nationalism and builds it around four central tenets. The first one is that the world is constituted of nations, “each with its own individuality, history and destiny”. (Smith, National Identity, 74) The implication of the first tenet is that each nation has its own core individuality or identity, which distinguishes it from the rest. Efforts are made to create a lifestyle, which define

people of a particular area. It is done through referring to distinct history of the land, which was very glorious. This individuality and history shape the destiny of the nation in the sense that a nation is on a sound and secure historical base. The second tenet states that in the modern times, social and political power is provided by nation and, "loyalty to the nation overrides all other allegiances". (Smith, National Identity, 74) In the context of South Asia the tenet has an important implication in the sense that nations do provide unparalleled power to decide the fate of the individuals. It also provides a chance for the ruling class to pocket large amount of resources. This is one reason why political parties and leaders become sacrosanct. Their authority and words are considered epitomes of wisdom and individuals are expected to go to any length to show their allegiance to the ruling class. The third tenet as propounded by Smith states that, "[h]uman beings must identify with a nation if they want to be free and realize themselves". (Smith, National Identity, 74) It implies that the moment an individual identifies with a nation, he gets a distinct national identity. The fourth and last tenet of nationalism states that, "nations must be free and secure if peace and justice are to prevail in the world" (Smith, National Identity, 74) which implies that if nations are free and secure then only people will be fearless and confident. Smith also highlights the symbols of national identity formation like "flags, anthems, parades, coinage,...as well as more hidden aspects, such as national recreations, the countryside, popular heroes and heroines, fairy tales,...all those distinctive customs, mores, styles and

ways of acting and feeling that are shared by the members of a community of historical culture.” (Smith, National Identity, 77) While discussing the tenets of nationalism, which are the most resilient, Anthony Smith talks about, “national symbols, customs and ceremonies”. (Smith, National Identity, 77). The national symbols stand for the basic idea and principle on the basis of which nations are created and they make them observable and distinct for all the members of the community. Highlighting the importance of nationalism, Smith says that it is a concept, which is truly ubiquitous. It is nation and nationalism which as a, “phenomena are truly global”. (Smith, National Identity, 143). Nation formation has its roots in historical collective life and modern nationalists fabricate nations through whatever they can retrieve from the bits and pieces of the past. Ethnicity, thus also keeps on evolving but nowhere does it become a complete fiction.

To conclude, one can easily say that Anthony Smith minutely analyses the cultural markers of formation of nations and national identity. Through his work, it is clear that through national identity formation a strong emotional bond is established amongst the citizens of a nation with unique identity markers setting them apart from other. It is the ethnosymbolist approach which offers a distinct tool for the study of cultural indicators of nation building.

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