

Book Reviews

Paul R. Brass. *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison*. New Delhi: Sage Publications. 1991. x+358 pages. Hardbound. Indian Rupees 325.00.

This book is a collection of nine essays. Except for the last chapter, all the essays were written between 1978 and 1990 and are extensions of an earlier work, *Language, Religion, and Politics in North India* (Cambridge University Press) published by the author in 1974.

Two main arguments constitute the theme of the book. First, that ethnicity and nationalism are social and political constructions of modern conditions rather than reflections of primordial identities. Second, that both these constructions are related to the role of a centralising state. They depend upon the kinds of alliances that are made between the state and the regional or other non-dominant élites. As such, ethnicity and nationalism are seen as the outcome of interactions between the state leadership and the élites from non-dominant ethnic groups, especially the groups on the peripheries of such states.

The volume presents a combination of theoretical arguments, illustrated by case studies. Although examples are cited from across the world, illustrations from India comprise the core of the analysis. This is done because, according to the author, India constitutes the most diverse of modern multi-ethnic states. As such, it qualifies as the best example of the two-way as well as the multiple alliances that, according to him, are often made between the centralising and the regional or other non-dominant élites of the ethnic groups engaged in conflict or cooperation. In such situations, however, Brass sees the possibility of state leaders being either neutral or identified with one of the ethnic groups or seeking to divide ethnic groups in order to secure their own power-base within particular regions.

The chapters on theory have been interspersed with chapters that illustrate the theoretical arguments. This, however, has the effect of compartmentalising the two. The retention of entire essays, in the same form as published earlier and in a sequence that alternates illustration with argument, tends to diminish the clarity of the presentation.

The author critiques the Marxist, neo-Marxist, and consociational models, which are shown to have explained the formation of ethnic identity in a plural society on the basis of (class and cultural) differences. As distinct from these models, he supports the 'instrumentalist' rather than the 'primordialist' criteria of ethnic identity formation.

Reference to alternative literature on the subject may have been useful in this connection; Phadnis (1989), Anderson (1983), and Tonkin (1989), for instance; and later Verkaaik (1994) and Barth (1993) (who has done the pioneering work on ethnicity in anthropology and returned to the subject in recent years), like Brass, treat ethnicity as a modern social phenomenon. However, they attach more importance (than does Brass for instance) to the primordial identities that provide the criteria

which is selected, symbolised, and interpreted to create the ethnic boundaries which meet the needs of the given context. According to the latter authors, the history of a people provides the criteria on which basis the shared identity is imagined and reinforced by a culturally powerful discourse. As such, although the ethnic boundary of a group is not seen as a fixed structure that merely reproduces a historical form, yet it does not elude the reflection of the past either.

Brass believes in the possibility of the state to be a somewhat neutral arbiter in the resolution of ethnic conflicts. In supporting that contention, it may have been important to refer to Verkaaik's postulate. Elaborating on Barth, who has defined the state as a specifiable third player in the process of boundary construction between groups, Verkaaik has illustrated the possibility for the state to be the second set of players in the struggle for political power (which may range from different degrees of political representation and autonomy to actual secession). It may, therefore, have been important to incorporate the case of an ethnic group demanding independence, where the latter sees the state as its rival, and in relation to which it defines its ethnicity.

Finally, Brass attaches fundamental importance to the role of the élite in the constitution of ethnic groups. Whereas the élites invariably play some role, and often a crucial one, in ethnic boundary construction, the needs of a given social context may also compel the emergence of a leadership from among the dominated group, and the élites may not necessarily figure in that emergence. For instance, the emergence of the Mohajir identity in Karachi was primarily the outcome of the deprivation and insecurity felt by the immigrant population of that city. The leadership of this group emerged from the middle class, which felt the constraints of the situation most stringently [see Abbas Rashid and Farida Shaheed (1993)]. As such, the Mohajir identity emerged (in 1979) before the boost it received from the martial-law regime (in 1983). Moreover, it has been perpetuated since, despite the role of the martial-law regime (in 1985) and, subsequently, of other governments that have sought to weaken the organisation of the group.

The book treats a subject of much relevance to the current world context and contributes towards an understanding of the social forces which shape the modern world, and have a bearing on the structure and stability (or otherwise) of contemporary states. Chapter 9 (which is new) discusses three models whereby the phenomenon of ethnicity is explained. Moreover, some of the essays in the volume were written about the same time when they do not pre-date similar observations made by other scholars. Brass, therefore, figures among the researchers who have worked extensively on the subject. As the book regroups the works of the author on ethnicity in a single volume, it makes his writings on the subject readily accessible, constituting, as such, useful reference material.

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