

Politics, the State and the Tragedy of Fear Connected Fragments from Europe to South Asia

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The political promise of modernity was to reduce the influence of fear across social spheres and to eventually conquer it – that this has not happened needs no retelling. Fear has displayed a fantastic durability, and its lingering ubiquity influences, if it does not indeed determine, much of the form and content of contemporary politics. As has become evident, the more modern politics has tried to capture fear, the more it has helped unleash it. This essay probes the dimensions of this contradiction in two main parts. The first outlines the conceptual and historical trajectories of the modern Western state and the problem of fear located within it. The second maps the contours of this contradiction in the politics of India-Pakistan relations. The first part becomes necessary to understand the second because it is through colonialism that the idea and the institution of sovereign statehood were introduced in the South Asian subcontinent. This essay concludes on a pessimistic note.

I
Howsoever one may wish it, the story of the modern non-Western world cannot begin in the non-West. It must start from Europe. Europe, as Dipesh Chakrabarty puts it, is both “inadequate and indispensable” for understanding the modern history of the rest of the world (Chakrabarty, 2000). In the 15th century, especially after the Ottoman forces wrested Constantinople from the Byzantine Empire in 1453, European maritime explorers left the Iberian shores in search of trade routes to the East and for exotica elsewhere. The entrepreneurial romanticism of adventurers like Christopher Columbus, Ferdinand Magellan, Vasco da Gama, Pedro Álvares Cabral et al. gave Europe its Age of Discovery, and the ‘discovered’ world the age of colonialism. As the Renaissance, the Reformation and the Enlightenment moved Europe away from mediaeval feudalism towards the modern state system, mercantile capitalism acquired colonies for its own survival. Colonialism and the European state system emerged simultaneously. Colonies became Europe’s vast experimental laboratory where institutions of modernity, chiefly those of the state, could be tested without pretensions to liberal moderation. How colonialism was justified is often a less important question than the purposes it served.

We must have a glimpse of this history because it is European colonialism which introduced modern sovereign states to the rest of the world. Scholars of the inter-discipline of

International Relations (IR) lazily ascribe 1648, the iconic year of the Peace of Westphalia, as the beginning of the state system and modern international politics. The reality is far more complicated. Sovereign European states did not suddenly emerge from the Westphalian big bang. The process – long, gradual, violent, unsettling and terribly uncertain – could have begun as early as the 12th century with the Concordat of Worms of 1122; it culminated in the 20th with World War II.

It would not be misleading to suggest that fear fuelled the development of the European state. The intellectual history of sovereign states in the European tradition deals fundamentally with violence. The crumbling away of the old order made thinkers confront anew the problem of violence and the fear of its consequences. This is evident with the early theorists of state sovereignty. Jean Bodin, the 16th-century French political philosopher and jurist, advocated consolidation of absolute sovereignty as the solution to the civil war-like conditions then prevalent due to the conflict between the Calvinist Huguenots and the Catholic monarchy in France. In *Leviathan*, published in 1651 (three years after Westphalia), Thomas Hobbes invoked the fear of a human life that is “solitary, poore, nasty, brutish and short” to reiterate the desirability of creating an absolute sovereign to rule the state. Hobbes was born prematurely when his mother heard of the coming invasion of the Spanish Armada. “My mother gave birth to twins: myself and fear”, he is supposed to have remarked. For a thinker of his fearful times, Hobbes’ writings reveal a consistent struggle to overcome them. Two subsequent thinkers of the social contract tradition – John Locke and Jean Jacques Rousseau – give us more relaxed theories of state. But they do not, because they could not, resolve the problem and fear of violence.

Why?

The social contract tradition of theorising the state has arguably been the most influential in so far as the impact of an intellectual tradition on modern states is concerned. What it tries to do with the problem and fear of violence is roughly this: it takes away the right of individuals to indulge in violent activities and assures them a peaceful life in return. It promises a life and society devoid of fear of minor harm and/or unnatural death. The collective potential for executing violence is converted into a right reserved exclusively for the state. The state’s police, paramilitary and defence forces become the realised facts of an abstract bargain. The state is accorded the licence to terrorise and kill. And in being able to claim its monopoly over the legitimate use of force rests the state’s reason for existence. Put another way, the state appropriates major agencies of fear to itself and promises conditions for what is common-sensibly understood as civil society. But the state must, every now and then, unleash this apparatus of terror to preserve that very civil society from domestic and foreign threat. It ceases to be a state if it cannot do so. It is a tempting contradiction. Because its inherent privileging of order over justice (or any other political ideal for that matter) means that each time the state feels its sovereignty is under threat, it unleashes the forces of fear to, ironically, control fear. No liberal theory of state has successfully managed to resolve this contradiction.

And precisely why is this important for our concern? The fear-state relationship presents itself at both domestic and international levels of politics. In international politics, power differentials are supposed to be the key drivers of fear – of the strong in the body politic of the weak. Thucydides' dictum from the Melian Dialogue of *The History of the Peloponnesian War* – “the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must” – is an example of this, to echo a long-cherished habit, the ‘timeless wisdom’ of realism. In the domestic realm, it is the state's concern for the collapse of order and the possible reign of anarchy which creates and sustains the regime of fear. Bodin and Hobbes both wrote in that tradition. Machiavelli's advice to his prince-ruler, Lorenzo ‘the Magnificent’ de Medici, that he must instill fear into the minds of the ruled in order to rule without fear of usurpation, was an honest, and for that reason excessively condemned, reflection on the transient nature of politics.

But this division of politics into domestic and international spheres is largely a prop for intellectual convenience. It does not so much reflect reality as it distorts it. In reality, what are generally understood as the domestic and international arenas of political activity collide and collude frequently to blur the neatly-supposed distinctions of within and without. Fear operates and influences politics at both levels. The French Revolution could be an example of this tendency. After the initial momentum had been achieved, the keepers of the Revolution had to save it from counter-revolutionaries at home and from the conservative dynasties of Europe. The Reign of Terror was unleashed to defend the values of the Revolution domestically. The Revolutionary Wars were fought to preserve it from external assault – these became the Napoleonic Wars after 1799. In all, it took seven coalitions of European powers to defeat the revolutionary and republican impulses that had begun in France. The settlement of 1815 was driven by the fear of values that would have revolutionised European politics had they been allowed to succeed. Nearly no assessment of this period can separate the play of violence into neat domestic and international spheres. The guardians of the Revolution feared losing momentum and the Revolution's post-1789 achievements. Fear of the power of the French state (and later Empire) compelled opposing European coalitions to arrest its march. Additionally, the appeal of revolutionary ideas would have caused multiple crises of order in the conservative kingdoms of Germany, Russia and elsewhere. Such domestic-international linkages are more common than scholars of IR generally assume.

II

It is time to move from the West to the Non-West, from Europe to the South Asian subcontinent. The story of India and Pakistan does not begin in 1947, though how far back it can go is best left for historians to debate. The political psychology of fear in India-Pakistan relations has its roots in the same colonialism which grew simultaneously with sovereign European states. Like many things European, colonialism too reached the sub-continental shores early, perhaps as early as the summer of 1498, when a ship from Portugal docked at Calicut. It would take a little over a century for the English East India Company to be formed, slightly more than 250 years for Plassey and three-and-a-half centuries for the Mutiny, or the Revolt. Processes set in motion after the Queen's Proclamation of 1858, when the Crown took

over from the Company, became the genesis of the subcontinent's future partitions and, consequently, of a pervasive regime of fear.

After 1858, colonialism began introducing institutions of modern statehood which had by then emerged as the most stable and normatively desirable form of political organisation in Europe. "European ideas take strange forms outside Europe", writes Ashis Nandy (Nandy, 2009). And this was so for the fate of the state in the tropics. (India, thanks to the Tropic of Cancer, is tropical only in the south and temperate in the north. But we are talking metaphor here and not meteorology or geography.) The colonial state's attempt to modernise the individual and collective lives of South Asians produced divergent trends. It fixed the identities of communities and slotted them for the small mercies of representative institutions. Soon, and we are still in the 19th century, cracks began to develop within the colonial state's two communities – Hindus and Muslims. Some who claimed leadership of South Asian Muslims asserted that democracy, reduced to a mere game of numbers, would make Muslims a permanent minority in a predominantly Hindu India. The speeches of Sayyid Ahmad Khan, especially after the late 1860s, reveal this fear of a community supposedly under siege from the political machinations of a modernity born elsewhere.

Once the element of fear entered political relations between Hindus and Muslims, attempts at erasing the recurring lines of distrust returned disappointment. The rulers of the colonial state balanced the fears of both political communities to their advantage. British rule could continue only by keeping the Muslim leadership fearful of the Hindu majority and its consequences. The continued existence of separate electorates hardened hostilities and created differences, even where none existed. There was little the secular nationalists could do to assuage the fear of the Muslim community other than reiterate elements of India's composite culture and petition the colonial state for inclusive policies.

By the late 1930s, the distrust had intensified. The result of the 1937 elections and the politics of the Hindu Right seemed to confirm the fear of minority persecution. Under Jinnah's new leadership, the minority proclaimed its wish to not remain a minority. It wanted to become a separate and equal nation. As much was declared with categorical certainty in March 1940 at Lahore. Everything else about the future of this now separate nation was kept vague and imprecise, perhaps deliberately so. The political contingencies of the 1940s – when the world was full of fear – could do nothing to reverse the plunge towards partition. When several colonial and some local formulas for power-sharing failed, partition was accepted with the hope that the two communities would exist peacefully in neighbouring states.

But partition merely internationalised an essentially domestic regime of fear. It did not resolve the problem. India and Pakistan, now two sovereign states, emerged dissatisfied from partition. The Indian state was unhappy because Pakistan was the reality of its failure. Pakistan was a stolen geography. Pakistan was a spurious ideology. Pakistan was a successful, even if inadequate, challenge to Indian nationalism during the colonial phase. Pakistan was a nation built out of fantasy. Pakistan was a claimant to a territory (of Kashmir) it never possessed. Pakistan was all that and a state which could not represent itself cartographically without acknowledging India's existence between its two parts. Partition had created a Pakistan inextricably linked to India. It was not an agreeable arrangement at all.

The Pakistani state was unhappy too. It was unhappy because it felt it had gotten an unfair deal. It was “mutilated, truncated and moth-eaten” (Jinnah’s words) even before it came into being. Kashmir did not come to it. Neither did all the subcontinent’s Muslims. India decided to become a constitutionally secular democracy. The fact of India’s secular identity rendered baseless, at least in principle, the fear of minority persecution which had fuelled the Pakistan movement. If Pakistan was the land of the Muslims of South Asia, why did more Muslims choose to stay in India? These were reasons enough for Pakistan to envy India.

Over the past six decades, this mutual dissatisfaction has shaped India and Pakistan’s bilateral relations. Wars, territorial disputes, India’s role in Bangladesh’s independence in 1971, Pakistan’s role in fomenting trouble in Kashmir and a host of other issues have kept the enmity alive.

The play of fear in India-Pakistan relations since 1947 has operated at two levels – domestic and international. Internationally, it has been guided by an asymmetrical distribution of material capabilities between the two countries. India was and has been in a position of relative advantage when it comes to material capabilities – geographical expanse, defence infrastructure, demographic strength, size and performance of the economy, etc. – that conventionally make a state powerful. Pakistan is big and powerful. But power is a relative thing. It was and has remained weak when compared to India.

If punitive capabilities are unequally distributed between two countries, as they have been in India’s favour, we are expected to see the weak crawl up to the strong for mercy and/or carrots. The weak must do so to survive the existential threat posed by the strong. By this logic, Pakistan, following Thucydides’ ancient advice, should submit to India’s regional superiority and accept the policies that flow from New Delhi’s capabilities. Conversely, the stronger of the two is expected to act the way strong states do: normal and confident, a little pompous and occasionally boastful. India has appeared all of that on occasion. But Indian policies betray the jitter beneath its apparent normalcy. For its size, and, more importantly, that of Pakistan’s, India has remained excessively preoccupied with all things Pakistani. This is so despite the fact that Pakistan does not, again because it cannot, pose India an existential threat. On its part, Pakistan knows it cannot win a conventional war with India. It has not so far. It does not have second-strike capability in case of nuclear war either. And yet it has sought to keep pace with India militarily.

None of this makes rational sense. Inherent in this oddity, which would appear endearingly puerile if it wasn’t so potentially deadly, is the lingering persistence of fear that marks this relationship. India has remained fearful of the unpredictable actions their asymmetrical capabilities may induce from Pakistan. Pakistan has been afraid of everything Indian that continues to question the very basis of its existence. They share a tragic relation of fear.

The tragic relation of fear is compounded further by a domestic preference for order over everything else. And this is the second level at which the play of fear has operated in India-Pakistan relations. Given the severe crisis of order Pakistan is currently going through, it would be tempting to offer the patriotic suggestion that India has long resolved its own crisis of order. Nothing could be further from the truth. Partition left a permanent scar on the

Indian and Pakistani states. The form of post-1947 nationalism in both countries has contained elements of bashing the partitioned other to keep the domestic house in order. That this tendency has been more pronounced in Pakistan than in India could be explained very substantially by the relative success of Indian democracy and the resources at its disposal. Additionally, Pakistan came into existence in a space that has been a geopolitical nightmare for centuries. All the paraphernalia of the British colonial state could barely infiltrate, let alone tame, the unruly frontier and tribal areas. That the Pakistan state has not performed any better should hardly come as a surprise.

For both states, sovereignty has been the performative tool through which domestic order is sought to be preserved. The sovereignty of one state has very often been asserted in relation to a perceived threat from the other. The politics of nuclear weapons is illustrative here. Both countries have frequently invoked the threat to their sovereignty from each other to justify the possession of nuclear weapons and for increasing the number of warheads they possess. It is not difficult to recall the consistency with which Pakistan's historical and contemporary personages – from Zulfikar Ali Bhutto to Zia ul Haq, from AQ Khan to Pervez Musharraf – have underlined the importance of nuclear weapons for their country's sovereignty. The temper of expression has been far more sedate and low key in India, which is largely because neither military nor scientific personnel in India are encouraged to voice their wisdom on sensitive political matters. But the general sentiment that nuclear weapons have ensured India sovereignty against all malicious designs originating from Pakistan, or a Pakistan-and-China combine, is reciprocally similar.

Sovereignty, then, has been this hallowed idea, quality or thing that both states have brandished to overcome the underlying fear of each other and of their distinct selves. But because the sovereign states of India and Pakistan remain linked by a common bond of dissatisfaction and enmity, the very project of asserting sovereign separateness runs into the political equivalent of a tautology. The more sovereign the two states try to become vis-à-vis each other, the more mutual insecurity they produce. The more insecure they become, the more they try to overcome it by investing in policies that would strengthen their sovereignty. The circle could go on indefinitely. And it's the people of the two states who bear the cost and consequences of this irrationality.

This failure to establish sovereign autonomy further deepens the tragic relation of fear between the states of India and Pakistan. Are we then condemned to perpetual despair? The answer depends on two things. First, we need to decide whether or not this condition is normatively acceptable. For reasons that cannot be elaborated here, the answer would rarely be a simple yes or no. But supposing it is not. Supposing we find this condition normatively unacceptable, we need to face a second question: is it possible to break out of this regime of fear while retaining the artifice of sovereign statehood?

Again, the answer may not be a simple yes or no. But chances are we cannot break out of this regime of fear without doing away with sovereign states altogether. We have seen earlier how sovereign states are faced with the problem of violence and fear both domestically and internationally, and how they cannot resolve the contradiction successfully. It is essentially

the same dilemma that confronts us here. Except that, in postcolonial states like India and Pakistan, the politics of sovereignty assumes an excessively hysterical form. The history of colonial subjugation makes sovereignty a prized possession. The nationalist narrative of hard-earned sovereignty and the problems of existing in a world not of one's making make any meaningful discussion on moving away from sovereignty difficult, perhaps even heretical. This is clearly evident when we consider how nervously sensitive both India and Pakistan become when it comes to any real or imaginary threat to their sovereignty. It's a different matter altogether that sovereignty is effectively traded in nearly every governmental policy, domestic and foreign.

As long as sovereign states remain the predominant and most popular frames for political refraction, we are unlikely to overcome the pervasive regime of fear. Sovereign states are not divinely ordained certainties. They are facts of human creation that have been more durable and more efficient than other competing modes of political organisation. But they are ultimately transient. Indeed, like in the past, Europe *maybe* in the process of constructing a new form of political community. But these are early days for that project. It is the paucity of our collective political imagination that keeps us enslaved to the logic of sovereign statehood despite reasonable evidence that it does human beings more harm than good.

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