International Journal of Politics and Media

3(1) (2024) 17-21

OPEN ACCESS

RESEARCH ARTICLE

DOI:10.26524/ijpm.3.4

Across Modernity and Tradition: Satyajit Ray's Subtle Contestation of the Nation-State

Ishan Fouzdar [a]*

[a] MA International Relations and Area Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India.

Corresponding Author: Ishan Fouzdar
MA International Relations and Area Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India.
Email: ishanfouzdar@gmail.com

Articleinfo
Received: 10 March 2024
Accepted: 18 May 2024

Keywords: Modernity, Satyajit Ray, Sequential Modernity, Bengal Renaissance, nation-state.

How to cite this article: Ishan Fouzdar. (2024). Across Modernity and Tradition: Satyajit Ray's Subtle Contestation of the Nation-State, International Journal of Politics and Media, 3(1), 17-21 Retrieved from https://ijpmonline.com/index.php/ojs/article/view/49

Abstract

Modernity deserves a place amidst the two or three words that, according to Raymond Williams, were the most complicated in English language. In this article, I unpack the term, argue that it pervades the discipline of International Relations (IR) and demonstrate its contestation in the work of Satyajit Ray. I start with the second task first by sketching the normalization of the idea of the nation-state in IR and show how this idea forms a point in the constellation of modernity as described by the modernisation school of development. I argue that this constellation-view is reflective of the mainstream theorisation of modernity which views it as a package. From here, I undertake the former task of unpacking the term for which I rely on the works of Sudipta Kaviraj. Finally, as Kaviraj contests the mainstream theorisation of modernity by putting forth a new framework ('sequential modernity'), I demonstrate how the films of Satyajit Ray performed a similar and subtle contestation of the same. By examining his movies such as the Apur Sangsar and Pratidwandi, I argue that Ray symbolised the 'Bengal Renaissance' which stood for syncretism and coexistence. Drawing on Bengal's intellectual class' openness to cultures worldwide, I conclude this paper by highlighting the need for theorizing beyond the Hobbesian view of anarchy prevalent in IR.

1. Introduction

Lindsay Anderson once remarked that watching Pather Panchali was akin to 'going down on one's knees in the dust, into the heart of Indian reality and human condition' (Dasgupta, 2001). There have been several interpretations of this remark. However, I focus on Ray's portrayal of 'Indianness' in his movies. While Ray's work has been associated with the portrayal of abject poverty in the newly independent India, this study taps into a different aspect of Ray's oeuvre. It asks what made Ray's movies quintessentially 'Indian' and how, in this portrayal of 'Indianness', Ray contested the constellation of modernity, which included the nation-state.

A question would be how Ray portrayed the nation-state in his cinema. However, another question ought to precede this query: what is the nation-state? This question has drawn scholarly attention since its coinage in the Treaty of Westphalia (Campbell, 2004; Croxton, 1999). While nation and state have individually been defined as the socio-cultural and politico-legal halves that make a whole, Giorgio Agamben came up with a more succinct definition: 'Nation-state means a state that makes nativity or birth (that is, of the bare human life) the foundation of its own sovereignty' (Agamben, 1995, p. 116).

Furthermore, this idea is central to the theorisation in international relations. The fact that the discipline is called 'inter-national' demonstrates the degree of importance attached to the 'nation ' As one dwells into theorisation, it will be noticed that Realism and Liberalism and Constructivism uncritically adopt the nation-state as their unit of analysis. While Constructivism and Liberalism make space for international institutions and non-state actors, the nation-state arrangement itself is never questioned. International relations has developed as a discipline which dwells upon the relationship between states and non-state actors without stepping back to examine the nature of these entities.

Furthermore, the relationship between states and non-state actors is influenced by the nation-state principle. The idea of anarchy, which has become central to Realism and Liberalism, with some contestation from constructivist thinkers, hinges on the assumption that nation-states are neat, impregnable units which are not governed by an overarching authority in the international arena. The absence of an overarching authority is equated with the Hobbesian state of nature, and it is argued that nation-states behave in absolute self-interest, making the international realm ceaselessly chaotic and cruel.

This study argues that Satyajit Ray's work, specifically his movies, subtly contested the nation-state. In addition, the contestation complicates the image of anarchy as constructed by IR theorists. Does the absence of overarching authority necessarily lead to a ceaseless struggle for power? I argue that Ray's work opens frontiers for contesting the Hobbesian construction of anarchy by depicting India's openness to

cultural confluences. Ray's work points towards the rich literature on cultural confluences and migration, which have dominated the history of humankind. If the absence of overarching authority leads to anarchy, how did the Mediterranean become a zone of cultural and epistemological exchanges leading to the fruition of the Greek civilisation? I argue that Ray's work can be an entry point towards the contestation of the nation-state-led construction of modernity.

2. The Nation-State and International Relations

I argue in this paper that Ray's work involved subtle contestation of the nation-state. To make this argument, two exercises become necessary: firstly, to survey the literature to comprehensively understand the idea of the nation-state and how it became the international organising principle, and secondly, to unpack my usage of 'subtle' in the thesis statement. In this subpart, I undertake the former task.

The nation-state has attained a reputation for being a sensitive issue due to its linkage with identity. The word nation (natio) dates back to the Roman Empire, where its formal meaning stood for people united by birth. However, it has been noted that in Roman and mediaeval times, it was used to refer to the people of the same town or area (Zernatto, 1944). Over the years, a nation has come to define a single homogeneous unit of people sharing historical and cultural roots. According to Richard Handler, this homogeneous and static conception of identity was rooted in the impregnable Westphalian state, which dictated it to be bound in space and time, with neat beginnings and ends, and acquiring a territory (Handler, 1996).

A nation-state, therefore, emerged as an entity which derived political legitimacy from the will of the nation. If the state is considered a politico-legal body, the nation constitutes its 'self.' Nationalism is, therefore, a 'doctrine of political legitimacy, which proposes that the basis for legitimate authority is a nation or a people' (Summers, 2014, p. 29). As natural and ahistorical as it reads, this is a modern secular idea which took shape as sovereignty shifted from the Church to the King and finally, the People, accelerated by the Protestant Reformation and stamped in the Peace of Westphalia (Bartelson, 1995; Rokkan, 1975).

The logic of the nation-state is steeped in the idea of collective self-determination, which meant that only 'the people' of the nation had the right and power to legitimise the state. This stems from Immanuel Kant's justification for individual self-determination, wherein he argued that morality should emanate from within the individual instead of being imposed by an external authority (Summers, 2014). This idea of moral self-determination was expanded by Johann Gottlieb Fichte, who argued that states were contracts of common will established by individuals, which created conditions for moral freedom (Fichte, 1970; Summers, 2014). This moral argument is supplemented by the historical argument of liberal nationalists that collective self-determination is essential for preserving the national identity passed down through their co-national ancestors (Amighetti & Nuti, 2016).

The problem with the nation-state vis-a-vis migration starts when self-determination is used to justify a nation's 'right to exclude'. The argument is straightforward: In order to preserve the national identity, it is essential to keep the foreigners out. However, the idea of a homogeneous and pure 'self' holding the sovereign power to grant entry into the state is xenophobic. It presupposes homogeneity of national identity, whereas postcolonial and postmodern scholars have shown that identities are fluid and hybrid (Bhabha, 2012; Hall, 1992). In addition, it does not recognise the contribution of migration in the making of cultural identities–a project that has been undertaken by scholars such as Martin Bernal, who demonstrated that the 'white' Greek culture was a mixture of European, African and Arabic civilisational influences (Bernal, 2007; Menon, 2024).

The inherent xenophobia did not prevent the adoption of the nation-state doctrine as the organising principle in legal and normative terms. Self-determination, as Summers (2007) pointed out, had three interconnected aspects: nationalism, liberalism and international law. The connection between national self-determination and international law can be traced through several historical writings. For instance, Montesquieu (1989 [1750]) argued that the 'spirit of the laws' was primarily derived from the national character of the state, and Vattel (Vattel, 2011 [1758]) maintained that sovereignty was established 'for the common good of all citizens.' It may be argued that the term 'self-determination' did not appear in these writings. However, it was inherent in the doctrine of nationalism. Therefore, when the Declaration of 1789 declared that 'the principle of all sovereignty resides essentially in the nation', it inherently pegged the state's political legitimacy on the people of the nation.

As the First World War ended, Western leaders accepted the principle of national self-determination as the organising principle. Woodrow Wilson (1918) said:

> *What we are striving for is a new international order based upon universal principles of right and justice ... National aspirations must be respected; peoples may now be dominated and governed only by their own consent. 'Self-determination' is not a mere phrase, which statesmen will henceforth ignore at their peril.*

Subsequently, after the formation of the United Nations, the doctrine of self-determination was mentioned in statutes such as the UN Charter Article 1(2) and Article 55, and the Declaration on the Rights of the Indigenous People 2007. The interpretation of self-determination has been varied, and its meaning has been twisted to prevent a domino effect of secessions.

In essence, self-determination — a manifestation of nationalism — and international law became inextricably bounded, consolidating the unit of the nation-state.

3. The Constellation of Modernity

In this subpart, I unpack my usage of 'subtle.' What do I mean by 'subtle' constestation of the nation-state? Pauline Kael once remarked: 'In Ray's work, what remains inarticulate is what we remember; what is articulated seems reduced, ordinary' (Dasgupta, 2001, p. xiv). In other words, Ray does not explicitly contest the nation-state like Ritwik Ghatak does. Ray, I argue, critiques the constellation of modernity of which the nation-state is a part.

There is a particular way in which the post-WW2 modernisation school envisaged modernity and development. The classical understanding of modernity emerges from the Enlightenment, which, as per Kant, is 'man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity' (Kant, 1784). For Kant,

Enlightenment was about freedom, rationality, and reflexivity. The defining notion of Kant's modernity, according to Foucault, is that it is an exit from the chains of dependence, dogma, laziness and cowardice (Hendricks, 2008). This forms one part of the modern project. Dipesh Chakrabarty defines the other part of the project as the emergence of institutions such as the parliament, the rule of law and capitalism (Chakrabarty, 2011). Chakrabarty (2011) differentiates between the two halves by deeming the former 'modernity' and the latter 'modernisation', admitting the interconnectedness of the two. If one puts both parts together, modernity emerges as a project that entails a constellation of processes enjoining to create a civilised society. This single structural pattern of development is visible in the writings of Karl Marx and Max Weber, wherein Weber viewed the 'protestant ethic' to be a driving force for capitalism, and Marx theorised capitalism as the economic base over which the superstructures of culture, bureaucracy and rational thinking were constructed (Marx, 1904; Weber, 1930).

Modernity became synonymous with a homogenous blueprint which had to be followed if civilisation and development were to be achieved. Therefore, the discourse around development, modernity and the nation-state can be summarised as:

> *According to political scientists one of the prerequisites for the ordered growth of a modern nation state is settled boundaries. Once a country has well defined borders, the planned development of the various sectors of the economy becomes easier and predictable (Krishna, 1994, p. 511).*

As per this view, the coming of modernity does away with the traditional structures of society and drives it towards capitalist development. However, Sudipta Kaviraj contested this view. He argues that the classical theory of modernity was symmetrical because it assumed a symmetric functional interdependence between its various processes (democracy, liberalism and so on) (Kaviraj, 2005). In other words, these elements either collectively survive and constitute modernity or do not survive at all. The emergence of one, say, liberalism, leads to the emergence of democracy, capitalism and so on. The image is similar to a constellation: all the elements come together and conjoin to form modernity. The arguments of Mignolo, Quijano and Deepak take this package or constellation of modernity into account, whereas Kaviraj takes one away from it. Kaviraj takes one away from this theory because it does not consider the social realities of the community where modernity emerges and treats modernity as a homogenous whole. The rejection is followed by a different understanding that Kaviraj calls the sequential theory of modernity, wherein the sequence of the elements and the social realities of the community where they are introduced shape the emergence of modernity. Kaviraj de-homogenises modernity by making it contingent upon the sequence of the emergence of elements and their interaction with society.

One of the most critical conditions that shape modernity, according to Kaviraj (2005), is the 'initial conditions.' The classical theory assumed that the coming of modernity slowly did away with the social and cultural forms that initially existed in a community. On the contrary, Kaviraj, through a rather complicated path of reading Gadamer, argues that initial conditions impart 'specific qualities and forms' to the processes of modernity. In essence, the ink of modernity is never spilt on a blank page. To demonstrate the same, Kaviraj, in a different essay, compares the initial religious structures of India and Latin America (Kaviraj, 2017). He finds that while the religions of Latin America collapsed and were replaced by Christianity, Islam and Hinduism held their ground in India. Latin America was profoundly drained of its cultural and religious capital, which made it more prone to cultural domination. However, the Indian religious intellectual class adapted to the rationalist Enlightenment critique and restructured itself to grapple with European modernity. Kaviraj (2017) gives the example of the Bengali community, which had, in three decades of colonial rule, produced 'an intellectual class that had acquired sufficient mastery not merely of the foreign language, but also the entirely unprecedented conceptual language of rationalism, to engage in an uproarious discussion about what to take and what to reject of the proposals of Western modernity' (p. 146).

Through Kaviraj (2017), it is discernible that two essential elements of Indian modernity were adaption and coexistence. In addition, this view throws the myth of capitalist development, contingent upon a homogenous nation-state, into crisis.

In the following section, I argue that Ray's work depicted this syncretic modernity of India, thus contesting the nation-state-led constellation of modernity.

4. Ray's Contestation of Symmetrical Modernity

The 'modern' and the 'traditional' coexist in Ray's films. This argument can be made broadly, as well as by examining particular frames from his films.

Broadly, Ray was called a humanist. However, the humanism that Ray performed was different from the European definition. Humanism was central to the European Enlightenment. It replaced the Church with the rational Human as the centre of Europe's socio-political and cultural system. Anthropocentrism punctuated this movement. However, in the Indian context, humanism was turned on its head. The Rigveda and the Upanishads depicted humans as the Earth is depicted in Hubble Telescope's famously captured photograph, Pale Blue Dot: an infinitesimal speck against the unimaginable vastness of the cosmos. The Vedic perception is Cosmocentric, wherein the cosmos is pervaded by an invisible, nameless and unending consciousness. Therefore, the centre is not the man but the evanescence of life and the present moment. The moment will vanish; therefore, it invokes compassion or Karuna. Therefore, unlike the Christian view of sadness connected to the anthropocentric Original Sin, the Indian view grieves at the passing of the moment. One could recall the scene from Apur Sansar where we see Aparna's (played by Sharmila Tagore) face lit up by the light of the matchstick. It is the last time we see Aparna before she goes back to her parent's place for childbirth and dies in the process. One does not want this scene to pass, but it passes and reaches death. It is not particularly Aparna or Apu who invoke compassion; it is the passing of the moment where Aparna's face bathes in the faint light of the matchstick.

Ray's sense of music and narrative style is primarily

derived from Hollywood. He wrote in a letter to Chidananda Dasgupta (2001, p. 174),

> *I am firmly of the opinion that cinema is a product of the west—where the concept of an art form existing in time has been prevalent for several centuries. Indian culture shows no awareness of such a concept. If I have succeeded as a film maker, it is due to my familiarity with western artistic, literary and musical traditions.*

However, Ray (2005) also wrote in Speaking Of Films,

> *Two trips to the great art centres of India—Ajanta, Ellora, Elephanta, Konarak and others—consolidated the idea of Indian tradition in my mind. At last I was begining to find myself, and find my roots. (p. 9)*

According to Dasgupta (2001), Ray's work was motley of mysticism and modernity. If one goes from the broad argument to examining Ray scene by scene, it becomes clear that tradition and modernity coexisted in Ray's work. Harihar, Apu's father, is a Sanskrit poet and writer steeped in tradition. Right before his death, he struggles for a drop of the holy water from Ganga and his death is depicted as pigeons flying away, which is a metaphor for the soul leaving the body. However, simultaneously, when Harihar learns that Apu has been learning English from his friend, he is overjoyed. The last words that he hears from his son are English words. Hence, we see a father steeped in tradition being comfortable and happy with his son learning modern English.

Furthermore, while it has been argued that Ray supported the Nehruvian project of development, one should not forget Ray's critique of the same in Apur Sansar and Pratidwandi. At the end of the former, Apu abandons his dream of becoming an English-educated writer and takes up a job at a coal mine. While the coal mine was central to the Nehruvian project, Ray portrayed it 'as an alienating space where an unemployed and directionless Apu gets a job as a manager, in an environment devoid of creativity or development, where the future appears bleak' (Ghosh, 2016, p. 147). Similarly, Pratidwandi involves the critique of a modernisation project which created inhumane circumstances in the guise of corporate culture.

While Ray was a modernist in the sense that he critiques dogmatism in Devi, what remains unnoticed is Ray's careful treatment of tradition. Ray does not portray the father-in-law as a villain for his superstitious dogma but as a victim. There is no villainisation of tradition but an attempt at reforming its ills. In this, Ray portrays the values of the 'Bengali Renaissance', which stood for the coexistence of Enlightenment values and traditional structures but against the ills in both. Hence, Raja Rammohan Roy rallied against Sati while supporting Vedant, while Gokhale is described as a 'a liberal of the Gladstone mould, rationalist in outlook, reformist in action, deeply imbued with western ideas blended with Indian tradition' (Dasgupta, 2001, pp. 11–12).

The thinkers of the Bengali Renaissance, including Satyajit Ray and the Tagore family, demonstrated how cultures are formed and enriched by interacting with one another. It is important to note that by depicting the Indian reality as a motley of traditional cultures and European values, Ray's work stands as a critique of nation-state doctrine wherein a homogeneous cultural unit is uncritically accepted as a legitimising force. It represents a movement that emphasises openness to cultural intermingling, which explains how Jotirindranath Tagore translated French plays into Bengali and Gaganendranath Tagore brought the Japanese wash style into Indian paintings.

Ray's work and the movement he represented break open the mould of the nation-state and expose one to the history of cultural confluences. Several projects have tried to unveil these histories. For instance, Trojanow and Hoskote (2012) highlight, among other things, the 'Egypto-Perso-Buddho-Judaeo-Islamo-Christian heritage' of the 'Judeo-Christian' myth of the Saviour. Similarly, they also bring out the Indic, Greek, Roman, Persian, Chinese and Turkish elements in the Buddhist iconography of the Kushan Empire in India. In addition, Graeber and Wengrow (2022) trace how the idea of equality travelled into the United States from the indigenous tribes of North America. While the nation-state overshadows these histories, Ray's work can provide a window into them.

5. Conclusion: Rethinking Anarchy

These histories compel a questioning of the Hobessian anarchy that pervades IR theorisation. Suppose the lack of overarching authority leads to ceaseless chaos. How did the thoughts of Aristotle and Plato travel to the falasifa thinkers of the Islamic Almohad Empire, who preserved, commented upon, and expanded them to make them available to the Enlightenment thinkers? Trojanow and Hoskote (2012) traced the lost histories of confluence between 'Western' and 'Eastern' cultures, and by the end of their examination, they concluded: 'no confluence, no culture.' If we accept this argument, then the realist construction of anarchy becomes unsustainable.

Theorisation in IR has primarily drawn from the European historical repertoire, especially the works of Thucydides, Machiavelli and Hobbes. This leaves out the entire chunk of historical experiences of Asia, Africa and the Americas. Therefore, the history of confluences disturbs this Eurocentric theorisation.

The work of Ray and other Bengal Renaissance thinkers, such as Tagore and Rammohan Roy, bring forth an image of modernity which is punctuated by syncretism and cultural openness, which should draw our attention away from the master discourse of the nation-state and towards the histories of cultural intermingling which defy the logic of Hobessian anarchy. Such histories, I argue, should compel IR scholars to rethink the nation-state and anarchy as they have been theorised to date.

Acknowledgement

No grants were received for this study.

Conflict of Interest: The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

Funding : The author has not received any grant or financial support for this research.

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