# Neo-statism in Third World studies: a critique

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ABSTRACT   *The literature on state autonomy has typically argued that the developmental state's weakness is accounted for by the relatively greater power of societal forces. The postulation of conflict between the state's purposes and partisan societal forces has been unable to shed much light on the enduring nature of the state–society duality. The literature on communitarianism has drawn attention to the multi-layered identities which underlie developing country politics and has underlined the efficacy of developmental action at the level of non-state actors. This article suggests that the community perspective can contribute towards a richer understanding of the state–society relationship than has been possible within the neo-statist paradigm. Without substituting community for the state, we need to modify at a broadly theoretical level the kind of macro-perspective, typical in comparative developmental studies, which adopts the physical boundaries of the state and its self-given developmental idiom, as the discipline's own conceptual boundaries.*

In the post-second world war period, the field of Comparative Politics has been closely engaged in the study of developing countries. The substantive concerns of the field have been with questions of political development—particularly with democracy and the integrity of the physical boundaries of nation states—and with the relationship of political regimes, political institutions and economic development. These concerns have generated a number of theoretical paradigms, notably modernisation, dependency, neo-Marxism and neo-statism. This article offers a critique of neo-statism.

The centrality of the state as a conceptual framework in third world studies needs to be seen in the context of developments in the field of Comparative Politics, broadly defined. In the postwar period classical political science was perceived to have been characterised by a narrow preoccupation with constitutions and governmental institutions. This gave way to the dominance of the political systems approach, whereby the concept of the political was broadened much beyond the state and government and, under the influence of structural functionalism, politics sought to be studied within the broader framework of societal variables. The centrality of the state re-emerged in Comparative Politics from the late 1970s onwards, mainly as a reaction to the neglect of the state within structural functionalist and Marxist paradigms. The resurgence of interest

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in the state, termed here 'neo-statism', was typically expressed in such titles as *Bringing the State Back In*, *Taking the State Seriously*. Neo-statism has been widely adopted, but has also been subjected to much critical dissection, both on theoretical and empirical grounds. This debate has proceeded mainly in the context of Western European and North American studies.[1]

In the context of third world studies, the 'neo-statist' phase emerged within this broader framework of the turn towards the state in Comparative Politics. As an echo of the broader critique of structural functionalism, it too was located specifically as an intellectual reaction to the 'modernisation' school—which was basically structural functionalism applied to the study of transitional societies, and which had shaped scholarly thinking from the 1950s to the 1970s. Modernisation was seen to have been largely society-centric in its interpretation of the developmental process, and thus to have neglected the central role that states play in the shaping of late development. The statist orientation sought to correct this neglect by looking at the state as the central analytical variable in the study of developing societies.

This paper argues that although neo-statist theory developed as a criticism of modernisation's neglect of the state, there are in fact dimensions of neo-statism which have been shaped by the approach to the state given in modernisation theory itself. Broadly speaking, modernisation theory perceived the processes of change to be taking place at the societal level. However, within the paradigm of modernisation, the catalystic role of the state as an agent of change in late development could hardly remain ignored, and was in fact explicitly recognised by some scholars. The state, in this approach, appears to be standing above society, and the state–society relationship is characterised primarily through the conceptualisation of the state attempting to induce appropriate changes in a given society towards the desired goals of economic development and political stability.

In particular, two central dimensions of this thinking continue to underline the neo-statist perspective in development studies: (1) the emphasis on political 'order', defined as governmental capacity to contain expressions of societal discontent and/or subnational tendencies; and (2) a preoccupation with the 'state' understood primarily as a set of political institutions associated with and supporting centralised political authority and measured in terms of its capacity to execute a given developmental agenda. These functions of the state are frequently understood to mean the capacity of state political institutions to effect changes in societal structures and behaviour.

These conceptual underpinnings to scholars' thinking about the state have significantly shaped their understandings of the state–civil society relationship. Typically, neo-statist arguments run along the following lines: societal forces and state political institutions are frequently at cross purposes; where the state is effective it is either because societal forces have been weakened by historical circumstances, or the state has been able to develop political institutions that allow the state some degree of autonomy from the pressures of societal forces. Where the state is weak it is because powerful societal forces are able to sabotage state programmes, initiatives and purposes. Thus the notion of the relative autonomy of the state—ie a state free from societal pressures—became

central to the concept of the effective developmental state. This perspective leads to the following problems.

First, despite the emphasis on a state-centric analytical framework, the explanation for state ineffectiveness, curiously, remains fundamentally societal. Therefore, this framework does not allow for any deeper examination of the state's own malaise to account for its inadequacies. Second, in arguing for the need for autonomy, the structural/organisational implications of the state's accountability to society are often ignored. In other words, while state autonomy scholars are in agreement that the developmental state needs to be free from societal pressures in order to be effective, the question of the relationship between democracy and the developmental state remains unworked out. Further, the explanation for the developmental state's ineffectiveness is seen in a conflict between the state's purposes—often assumed, uncritically, to be the attainment of the collective good—and the partisan interests of powerful societal groups. Several hundred books and papers adopting this 'society against state' approach in development studies have in fact only ended up reiterating the image of the state and society being at cross purposes, without being able to shed any significantly new light on the enduring nature of this duality. Finally, within this state-centric framework, scholars have been inclined to cast political phenomena such as social movements predominantly in terms of a state–society contestation for power. This essentialist perspective results from using the state as the central, and most often the only, conceptual framework for examining political phenomena, and has led to inadequate conceptualisations of movements and conflicts which are not primarily articulated or engaged as contestations over power, but which are necessarily political in their defining visions.

The paper argues that a more meaningful intervention at this point would be, rather, to seek to understand the history and nature of the state–society duality, in varying contexts. This would call for, then, historicised enquiries into the multilayered identities constitutive of developing country societies and politics. At a broadly theoretical level, we would need to modify the kind of macroperspective, typical in comparative developmental studies, which adopts the physical boundaries of the state and its self-given developmental idiom as the discipline's own conceptual boundaries.

But where, effectively, does this critique lead us? Indeed, if a state-centric focus has dominated comparative developmental studies, there has also been, in recent years, an avalanche of work which may be described as the communitarian approach to understanding socities and politics in developing countries. Historians have addressed questions of multiple identities that constitute the nation (rather than the state), while political anthropologists have brought to light the efficacy of political action and developmental efforts in micro-societal contexts which bypass the state, so to speak. These perspectives have, in these disciplines, raised 'community' to the status of a central analytical variable.

This paper does not argue that a 'community' perspective should replace the neo-statist perspective. But somewhat curiously, scholars writing within the neo-statist paradigm have not addressed the questions which the community perspective would raise in the context of their work. The paper suggests that the community perspective can contribute towards a richer understanding of the

state–civil society relationship than has been possible within the statist paradigm without, at the same time, abadoning the empirical and conceptual advances achieved by scholars working with the paradigm.

In the context of developing country politics, the state autonomy perspective has been adopted in a wide range of scholarly works on Asia, Latin America and Africa, appearing in the 1980s and through the 1990s. In the present paper the core arguments are made with reference to a few selected texts on the politics of development in India which have appeared in the 1980s and 1990s and which have adopted an explicitly state-centric approach. These texts have been authored by scholars who are India specialists, but who also contribute significantly to debates over theory and method in the comparative/development studies field. Their empirical work is thus informed by a high degree of theoretical self-consciousness. The examination of these texts, then, illuminates both current theoretical thinking in the field, and its reflection on empirical work and conceptualisations of the state–society relationship.

## Society against state: the conceptual framework in neo-statism

Modernisation theory, as is well known, was closely shaped by Parsonian structural functionalism. Social systems were seen in terms of opposed categories—the pattern variables—such as ascription–achievement, affectivity–affective neutrality, collectivity orientation–self-orientation, particularism–universalism, diffuseness–specificity.[2] The pattern variables provided the framework within which modernisation theorists read the progression of human history, or of societies, from less developed to more developed. The functioning of the pattern variables was understood in systemic terms, ie the patterns were systematically related; this underlined the teleological understanding of history as the movement from one systemic type to another, and of developing societies as traditional or transitional and advanced industrial societies as modern.[3]

A central critcism has been that modernisation tended towards societal determinism, and that the analytical focus on social forces, cultural orientations, interest group pressures, levels of economic development and individual psychologies diverted attention from the significant and central roles that states play in developing societies.[4] A second, and related, approach has underscored the need to break up the systemic and totalistic nature of the Parsonian model. According to some scholars, societies, and transitional societies particularly, exhibited adaptations and mixes which were not captured by the conceptual apparatus of the pattern variables or by a linear view of history. It was necessary to contextualise these societies within their specific historical and cultural situations in order to understand the constellation of features that constituted their particular character.[5]

These critiques emerged from comparativists who have sought to go beyond the definitional boundaries of modernisation theory and have constructed conceptual categories more appropriate both to the societies that they study and to the endeavour of comparative analysis of developing societies. A central concern in this new genre of scholarship has been the focus on the state, broadly the political, as a significant independent variable. Political decisions may reflect

socioeconomic constraints, nevertheless they are also shaped by political ideologies, interests and choices of state authorities, and must be examined as such. Secondly, political cultures, sructures and traditions do not change, readily and automatically, in response to socioeconomic change, but have a life of their own. The neo-statist perspective was adapted by a large number of scholars working in comparative developmental politics from the 1980s onwards.[6]

The argument here, as stated above, is that some basic concerns of the modernisation school remain explicitly or implicitly embedded in the neo-statist perspective and generate both conceptual and theoretical limits in the field. Modernisation theorists recognised the significance of the state in third world development mainly in two respects: first, in controlling disorder and instability, and second, in neutralising social forces which resist and oppose the state's developmental design. Neil Smelser and Samuel Huntington, for example, fall squarely within the modernisation school in their understanding of the pattern and purpose of third world political development, ie from tradition towards modernity, with modernity understood within the framework of the experience of the industrialised West. For both, however, the initial phases of modernisation generate a disjuncture between integration and differentiation,[7] between social mobilisation and institutionlisation.[8] In the social and political disruption thus created, the state has to play a critical role in controlling disorder and creating order. Huntington saw the state's role in broader terms, not only in controlling disorder, but also in guiding development. It is in this context that we discuss in some detail Huntington's seminal work *Political Order in Changing Societies* (1968) as a text which appears to have had an enduring impact upon the way in which scholars in the field have thought about the state–society relationship. Huntington's work is remarkable for his insistence on the need for a strong state in modernising transitional societies.

> To cope successfully with modernization, a political system must be able, first, to innovate policy, that is, to promote social and economic reform by state action … These [modernizing] societies differ from the United States in the number and strength of the sources of opposition to modernizing reform. The change or destruction of these traditional forces requires the concentration of power in the agents of modernization … It thus seems reasonable to conclude that in a modernizing society policy innovation will vary more or less directly with the concentration of power in its political system.

As such, in Huntington's view, democracy could come about in new nations only gradually, and in a phased and planned manner.

> The social and economic changes encouraged by the policy innovation leads new groups to demand entry into the political system … In a third phase, much later, the expansion of the system may make possible a new dispersion of power within the system.

The process of modernisation, most importantly, requires the concentration of power. The premodern system is one where 'traditional social forces, interests, customs and institutions are strongly entrenched'. Huntington thus calls for the 'breakdown of local, religious, ethnic, and other power centers, and the centralization of power in the national political institutions'.[9]

It is clear that central to this understanding was the conception of a strong state having the power and authority to mould/persuade/force/push/urge societal agents along a given developmental path. The underlying notion was clearly one which saw state and society in conflict, latent if not overt, over goals, purposes and strategies. A random look at recent texts by a number of well known development scholars would reveal that the Huntingtonian formula remains central in their conceptual apparatuses. In the following pages we refer to a few selected works, written in the 1980s and 1990s, on various aspects of the politics of development in India. Almost all these texts began with a critique of modernisation as society-centric, and the need to restore the state to a position of central analytical significance. The understanding of the state, in all these works, harks back to the oppositional nature of the state–society dynamics so explicitly stated in Huntington's work.

Joel Migdal's 1988 book, *Strong Societies and Weak States: State–Society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World* begins with the question:

> have these contours of society been redrawn more or less as state leaders envisioned? Why do some states succeed more and some less in realizing the vision of their leaders? The main issues will be state capabilities or their lack: the ability of state leaders to use the agencies of the state to get people in the society to do what they want them to do.[10]

Atul Kohli's 1987 work, *The State and Poverty in India: the Politics of Reform* poses the same question at a somewhat more specific level of enquiry:

> under what conditions is a Third World regime likely to possess a degree of autonomy from social constraints so as to facilitate economic gains for lower classes?[11]

In a later work, Kohli attempted to explain 'why India has become difficult to govern'. The conceptual framework that guides this enquiry is 'the patterns of politicization that result when the state can influence the life chances of many social groups and when the state is accessible via democratic politics'.[12] In this conceptualisation, the state is truncated and incapacitated because of societal pressure, that is, lack of autonomy.

Similarly, Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph in their 1987 publication posed the following problematic:

> the paradox of India's weak–strong state arises from the juxtaposition of the Congress party's durable command of a centrist ideological and foreign policy consensus, social pluralism, permanent government, and a dynastic charisma, on the one hand, with highly mobilized, albeit fragmented *social forces that threaten governability, political stability, and national purpose*, on the other.[13]

These quotes could be multiplied, if space permitted, with examples from similar sources, but the point is to underline that, repeatedly, the theme has been that both a developmental agenda and political stability have been jeopardised by the ability of social groups to block the state. State and society are therefore juxtaposed and placed in a hierarchised order in terms of the valued goods of development and stability.

What is the precise character of the state–society relationship that has emerged

from this shared conceptual framework of postmodernisation neo-statist schol-ars? If the question is around state incapacity (or capacity), the answer has inevitably been around social interests which have resisted state designs and of the factors which make state leaders unable or unwilling to overcome such resistance. Migdal has offered the model of 'web like societies', where multiple social organisations, representing ethnic, religious, regional, economic or cul-tural interests are able to confront and oppose the state's designs when these clash with their own. This conflict has been conceptualised by him as the interchanges between states and 'strongmen'.

> In India and Mexico, as in Egypt, state leaders and agency chiefs constructed complex rural policies aimed at eliminating intermediaries and establishing direct state control. Ironically, in each instance state institutions deeply penetrated rural life, but those institutions and the resources they brought reinforced the control of existing strongmen … Strongmen distributed them [the resources] and used their distribution to reinforce their own social control … Their [the strongmen's] most basic purposes have been antithetical to what a state should do.[14]

For Kohli too, the central question was why some political regimes are able to effectively implement anti-poverty redistributive reforms, while others are not. The key variable, in this scheme is that some regimes have the institutional capacities—understood in terms of leadership by tightly organised, ideologically infused, cadre-based parties which can free themselves from the influence of propertied classes. Conversely, multi-class regimes with loose organisations and diffuse ideologies are not successful at reformist intervention.[15] In this frame-work, therefore, as in Migdal's, the measure of state autonomy from societal forces is the determinant of success in developmental programmes; and the state is clearly privileged as the critical actor.

Similarly, for the Rudolphs, the political economy of the Indian state is understood in terms of a theoretical model the main conceptual pillars of which are the demand polity and command polity.

> The demand polity … is constrained and directed by the imperatives of electoral victory and by pluralist and class influences on public choice. The command polity is oriented towards state-determined long term goals and formulation of the public interest … A necessary condition for the command polity's ability to formulate goals, strategies and policy is *the state's ability to free itself from the constraints of societal demands* through leadership, persuasion and coercion.[16]

While the framework proposed by Migdal places the burden of explanation of ineffective states primarily (although not entirely) on strongmen, ie societal forces, the Rudolphs' and Kohli's perspective delineates specific state charecter-istics and institutional arrangements which can empower states by creating some distance between the state and societal forces. Thus each of these scholars saw an autonomous space as central to the state's capacity to get on with the job. The politics of development has been seen, in some cases, as the state's ability to encroach into societal space, successfully carrying its agenda, at other times as social groups' ability to block the state's purposes. Thus the state–civil society relationship is perceived as a contestation defined in terms of power. In the

following, I take up in somewhat greater detail two examples, from the works of Migdal and Kohli, to highlight the conceptual limitations of this perspective.

## The critique

Migdal's analysis conforms to the framework wherein, in the context of developing countries, the state, in attempting to put through and/or implement a rational and welfare-oriented policy package, is thwarted by social forces whose power is threatened by such state action. In the case of India, the central governments sought to implement its programmes for rural development in a political context where, given the imperatives of democracy, any dramatic transformation of agrarian relations in favour of the rural poor could not be coercively pushed through. Additionally, the state, that is, the Congress Party, was dependent upon local strongmen for votes. The central pillars of the government's rural development policy were thus rural cooperatives and *panchayat* institutions—both of which were intended to enable poor rural folk to create economic and political resources for themselves, bypassing the power of rural vested interests, mainly the landed upper class. In Migdal's discussion, these state-created institutions of rural development were undermined by the local alliances forged between rural (mostly landed) elites, local politicians and local bureaucrats. These so-called strongmen not only collided to sabotage land reforms, but were also able to co-opt a large part of the benefits and resources which were intended by the state to reach the rural poor through various developmental programmes.[17]

The ineffective implementation of rural reforms is explained by the dynamics of the 'triangle of accommodation', ie the alliance between local politicos, local bureaucrats and strongmen. However, it is the latter who provide the key variable in Migdal's framework—powerful local vested interests sabotage rural reforms and divert state resources for their own advancement. This understanding in itself is of course neither new nor contestable. What *is* interesting is the conclusion that Migdal draws from this. Consider the following statement:

> If we want to understand the capabilities and character of states—we must start with social structures. Where social structure has not been marked by deeply entrenched strongmen or where such strongmen have been weakened, state leaders have had greater opportunities to apply a single set of rules, and build channels for widespread, sustained political support. In such instances, leaders have been in a position to pursue broad social and political agendas. [As such,] the emergence of strong, capable states can occur only through a tremendous concentration of social control.

To summarise his framework, what must take place is a *shift in concentration of power from social forces to the state*. This can come about through certain momentous changes in a peoples' lives, such as a devastating war or a revolution, which destroy the bases of social control of particular social groups, and pave the way for the emergence of strong states. This is a necessary, but not sufficient condition; the other conditions are provided by one or other of the following: military threat, an independent bureaucracy, skilful leadership.[18]

This is a good description of what has happened in a few success cases. For example, one may take the cases of Japan and South Korea, both considered to be models of late development. Land reforms were successfully enacted and implemented by the US Army of Occupation in the case of Japan, and by a highly authoritarian military dictatorship in the case of Korea. It is not clear whether, in Migdal's framework, these experiences can or should be replicated in other developing countries. And in this sense therefore there is a certain unworked-out ambiguity in Migdal's perspective in terms of the relationship between the developmental state and democracy. The argument, essentially, is that states must enjoy a certain amount of independence from vested interests in society in order to accomplish goals which benefit society as a whole. Thus the obvious questions in this context—what would be the overall accountability of such a state to society and what would be the instruments of societal control over the state—remain unaddressed. While the argument for the state's autonomy is well taken, the particular structural configuration of such a state–society relationship is not worked out. And, in arguing for a 'tremendous concentration of social control', this view implicitly makes a case for concentration of power in state agencies as opposed to social forces, which gives the argument anti-democratic overtones.

Second, in this view, Migdal's understanding of the forces underlying the politics of development hinges entirely on his conception of the impact of societal forces upon the state: thus, the state's incapacity is caused predominantly by the relatively greater power of social forces. This raises two related problems. First, curiously, although Migdal is writing from within the 'state autonomy' perspective (which had emerged in reaction to modernisation's societal determinism), by a strange twist this analysis collapses into some kind of societal determinism. Second, given this framework, a deeper examination of the state's own characteristics are by definition ruled out. And the fact that in many third world societies state agencies are both corrupt and inefficient is not factored into this discussion. In the above quote, the state's capacity to pursue 'broad social and political agendas' presumably means policies designed for society as a whole. But here, surely, is the most astonishingly simplistic portrayal of state intentions and purposes. For, in this framework, not only is there no space for thinking about corrupt and inefficient state implementors but, even more seriously, there could be no way to think about situations where state *policies* are highly contested, and are perceived to have sustained class, gender, ethnic or other biases. Such biases are characteristic features of third world states, not only those which are relatively open to societal influences, but also those which are structurally closed, that is, authoritarian political regimes designed to ensure a certain distance between the state and social groups. Thus the state's autonomy, however defined, cannot be the single most important factor in ensuring the wholesomeness of the developmental state.

Finally, in many third world countries, the impetus for development is currently emerging not from tired, over-developed and over-stretched states, but in fact from non-governmental organisations (NGOs), civil societal groups. A large number of these groups functions with state support, and work to support state programmes. Thus social groups do not necessarily work against the state.

However, many NGOs perceive themselvs as broadening, deepening and carrying to the grassroots developmental programmes which, within the framework of state agencies, remain narrowly conceived, coopted by local elites, and indifferently implemented by bureaucrats. To this extent, therefore, NGOs certainly carry a definition of development that does not fundamentally challenge, but seeks to correct, certain basic imperfections in the state's developmental efforts. The point here is that Migdal's theoretical framework, which so strenuously argues for increasing state leverage *vis-à-vis* social forces for third world development, completely overlooks the fact that a groundswell of impetus for development can actually emerge from *non*-state actors who are not necessarily pursuing partisan interests. Thus both state and civil society are conceptualised in a manner which does not capture real situations in the politics of development in third world countries. In real situations the state does not occupy the moral high ground of pursuing collective purposes, nor is the state–society relationship necessarily only that of a contestation of interests and power.[19]

What is also overlooked is that there may be fundamental disjunctures between states and civil societies in terms of conceptions of what is desirable, and that this disjuncture is not necessarily only about the contestation over power. It is in this context that we take up the second instance for discussion, Atul Kohli's recent work (jointly edited with Amrita Basu) entitled *Community Conflicts and the State in India*. In their introductory essay, Kohli and Basu write that, rather than look at the whole range of community identities that people embody, they prefer to focus on identities that have become associated with political violence in the recent past, that is, on those engaged with the state. While they agree that ethnic conflicts require an understanding of the socially constructed nature of identities, their perceived 'comparative advantage lies more in tackling issues of explanation than in unravelling complex social constructions'.[20] Thus the emphasis is on explaining ethnic movements in so far as these are political, rather than sociocultural phenomena.

Accordingly, in outlining the explanatory variable in his own essay on ethnic movements, Kohli provides the following conceptual framework. He proposes an inverse $u$ curve in understanding ethnic movements: rising group expectations and mobilisation (as a result of democratic politics); confrontations with the state, followed by a process of power negotiation:

> such movements eventually decline as exhaustion sets in … and mutual accommodation between the movement and central state authorities is reached … The fate of these movements largely reflects the nature of the political context … two dimensions of the political context, namely, how well political authority is institutionalized within the multi cultural democracy and the willingness of the ruling groups to share some power and resources with mobilized groups, appear to be particularly relevant.

Thus the explanatory emphasis is on the state's capacity to strategise its equilibrium with ethnic groups. Additionally, ethinic groups and self-determination movements are perceived predominantly as political contestations for power, between the state and ethnic groups:

> self determination movements constitute a *political process* whereby the central

state and a variety of ethnic groups *discover their relative power balances* in developing country democracies.[21]

Kohli's essay reviews the cases of Tamil, Sikh and Kashmiri separatism in India. Each of these cases, according to him, fit in, more or less with the inverse '*u*' curve. I briefly discuss below his presentation of the Tamil case, and the problems raised by a state–centric understanding of this movement. The movement of backward castes in Tamil Nadu in South India began in the 1950s and gained momentum in the 1960s. It was articulated in successive stages as an anti-Bramhin movement, directed towards the restoration of a supposedly genuine Dravidian cultural and linguistic hegemony, and in its more extreme forms demanded the cession of a Tamil land from India. Kohli mainly discusses two moments of violent engagement between the Dravidian movement and the central government, over the issues, respectively, of linguistic reorganisation of states, and recognition of the Tamil language. The Dravidian movement, led by the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) party, succeeded on both occasions in getting substantial concessions from the central government, the first time in the creation of the separate state of Tamil Nadu, and the second time in getting Tamil recognised as one of the regional languages to be considered co-equal with the two national languages of India, Hindi and English.

The DMK had been born primarily as an anti-Bramhin movement, and as a crusader for the cause of non-Bramhins, seen as under-privileged and exploited. With the years, the DMK's popularity grew and it succeeded in marginalising the Congress Party in the state's politics. In the process of becoming entrenched as the ruling group, however, the extreme militancy of the DMK largely dissolved, both in terms of its demands for separate statehood, and of its self-definition as a crusader for the oppressed. The DMK, in other words, became just one more regional political party, *sans* most of its subnational and radical rhetoric.

While this reading of DMK politics fits into the inverse *u* curve rather well, there are dimensions of Tamil nationalism which are not easily captured within this framework. Much of the DMK rhetoric, in being anti-Brahminical, sought to unite all non Bramhin castes—mainly Other Backward Castes (OBCs) and Dalits (traditionally the Untouchable castes) under the same broad banner. An interesting feature of contemporary Tamil politics, in fact, is the emerging cracks in that banner, and the manifold expressions of fissure, as segments of Dalits increasingly express their bitterness with and alienation from the politics of Dravianism, which they perceive to be dominated by the OBCs and characterised by the conflict of interests between OBCs and Dalits. Dalit discontent manifests itself primarily by the assertion of Dalit cultural and historical distinctiveness from the OBCs, the claim to genuine Dravidian heritage, and the repeated assertions that Dalits stand only to lose from their political alignment with the OBCs.

Second, in contradistinction to the DMK's early subnationalism, which sought separate nationhood for the Tamils, Dalit politics seeks to go beyond, or to step out of the discourse of nationhood and modernity. Much Dalit literature and politics have underlined the fact that Dalit politics rejects the notions of inequality, hierarchy and power, inherent in the construction of the nation state. There is, in essence, a rejection of the discourse of what is perceived as *Hindu*

modernity. This construction of Dalit identity and politics, as opposed to the identity and politics of OBCs, constitutes a central dimension of political contestations and conflicts in contemporary Tamil politics. This groundswell is not as yet a direct or politically explicit macro challenge to the state. But the essentially *political* character of this movement can hardly be missed, not only in the perceptions and articulations of Dalits' conflict with OBCs, but in the Dalits' representation of an alternative history and an alternative politics. The essential point here, then, is that the politics around the concept of Tamil nationalism continues to be expressed, now articulated in opposition to non-Bramhin dominant castes, and envisioning a casteless future political formation.[22]

Kohli's analysis limits the definition of movements to overt engagement with the central state, and therefore views Tamil nationalism as neutralised within the context of the DMK's politics. His framework thus excludes both the continuities and the complexities of Tamil nationalism which are indeed part of contemporary Tamil politics. The following analytical points need to be emphasised here: first, an ethnic group's engagement with the state, and/or with other groups, may not be only (and in fact may not at all be) a contestation over power, and may involve contestations that are much more fundamental than can be resolved by strategies of sharing power. Second, to define only moments of overt engagement or confrontation as political movements (thus excluding levels of activities and discourses which are not as yet, or are no longer, explicitly engaged in confrontations), and these as determined predominantly by state policies, is to seriously limit one's framework for understanding the generalised political and social environment, over time and space, in which such movements periodically arise.

It is not the intention here to undertake a detailed critique of the institutional interpretation of community movements. The brief outline of these interpretations is provided above in order to show that, for scholars in this genre, the state, understood primarily as a set of agencies which have a monopoly of coercive authority, remains the central conceptual instrument for understanding civil society or, if we like, the nation. There is here a certain unquestioning adoption of the post-colonial state's territorial boundaries as the researcher's conceptual boundaries. Subnational tendencies are thus understood within the official paradigm of the inclusive state; but when such tendencies are viewed exclusively from the viewpoint of the state's problem of management, there is a danger of missing crucial dimensions of such movements, in terms of their genesis in civil society. The ultimate danger here is that one may miss critical areas of state–civil society disjuncture which do not easily fall into the category of power contestations.

To sum up the discussion in this section, the following points need to be highlighted. Migdal's perspective on the need for state autonomy results in a curious anomaly: his explanation of the state's ineffectiveness rests entirely on the role of societal forces and thus precludes a substantive exploration of the state's own predilections for inefficiencies, corruption and biases. In real situations, given these characteristic features of third world states, the case for autonomy itself would seem to be at least debatable, rather than axiomatic.

Secondly, this perspective leaves Migdal without any space to conceptualise the emerging role of civil societal forces in third world development. Finally, in Kohli's work, the state remains the central conceptual instrument for examining ethnic movements. Significant dimensions of ethnic movements, which are not captured within the framework of state–ethnic group contestation for power, remain unexplored in this paradigm.

Thus the problem with a state–centric approach seems to be not that these scholars are concerned to study the state, but the particular conceptualisation of the state–civil society relationship that they propose. First, the two central problems facing developing countries—economic development and political stability (the latter defined narrowly as the integrity of the physical boundaries of the nation state)—are viewed predominantly as problems exclusively of state management. Second, the state's capacity to manage is determined partly by the strengths (or weaknesses) of social forces, and partly by the state's ability to fashion appropriate strategies to neutralise or incapacitate social forces. Third, the politics of development is thus a continuous state–society contestation, wherein the state's efficiency depends on its ability to tip the balance in its own favour.

The need for an autonomous space for the state's purposive action *vis-à-vis* civil society, potentially pushes this theory in undemocratic directions. But even within the liberal democratic idiom, within which most development scholars operate, this approach leads predominantly to the repetitious emphasis on the need for effective political institutions (disciplined, cadre-based political parties, for example) which can create a safe distance between social forces and the state. In real terms, given a democratic framework, there is always a good chance that political institutions will be impacted upon by the so-called social forces, thus involving this analytical mode in a circular argument that social forces prevent the development of effective political institutions.

The key question, then, which is neglected, given this perspective, is: what is it, in the character of social forces, which continues to elude institutionalisation in the preferred manner? Or, stated differently, what is it which continues to create and recreate the state–society duality long after the start of state-led modernisation, Huntington-style?

### The communiatarian perspective

The concept of state autonomy and a hierarchised interpretation of the state–society relationship possibly results from an ahistorical reading of the state (ie taking the post-colonial state always as the only point of departure) and from an unnecessarily limited conception of political action in the context of development (ie identifying the state as the primary source of developmental change and purposive action). Both of these theoretical shortcomings could be modified were neo-statist scholars to borrow from the work of historians and of political anthropologists, or at least to engage in dialogue with the analytical frameworks in these disciplines.

In the short space available here we will refer primarily to the fairly recent work of two historians of South Asia. The first is Partha Chatterjee, whose work

on the cultural history of Indian nationalism is arguably one of the most influential interventions in scholarly thinking on modern Indian history. The book in question is his 1993 publication *The Nation and Its Fragments*. The text does not address the question of contemporary politics of development; but our objective here is to show that his interpretation of the nation can be used to modify the ahistorical, fixed-in-time notion of the state which so dominates the discourse in development studies.

Chatterjee perceives the historical processes of nation-building and state-building in parallel, perhaps conflicting, at least contested, terrains in terms of the 'inner' and 'outer' domains of national self-constitution. In the inner domains—in art, language, literature, drama and spirituality—the period of nationalist awakening saw efforts to constitute a self and society in contradistinction not only to colonial power but to the hegemonic project of western universalism. This process needs to be understood with reference to its relationship to the colonial state. This is how Chatterjee reads it:

> although the need for change was not disputed, there was a strong resistance to allowing the colonial state to intervene in matters affecting national culture … in fact, here nationalism launches its most powerful, creative, and historically significant project: to fashion a 'modern' national culture that is nevertheless not Western.[23]

In the outer realm, where nationalist politics sought political power, the terms of discourse were somewhat the opposite. Here nationalist politics sought in fact to challenge and overcome the 'rule of colonial difference' in the domain of the state, by demanding those very principles on which the modern Western state was founded and which were denied within the framework of the colonial state.

Chatterjee perceives these two domains as incompatible, flowing from two different sources of thought, characterised by different purposes: 'the hegemonic project of nationalism could hardly make the distinctions of language, religion, caste, or class a matter of indifference to itself'. On the other hand, the monolithic nation-state was not 'co-extensive with the nationalism(s) that had been constituted … The project of the post colonial state was shaped by the universalist prescriptions of modern social thought. In politics, and in intellectual discourses, the autonomous forms of imagination of the community were, and continue to be, swamped and overwhelmed by the history of the post colonial state'.[24] The discourse on the autonomy of communities, according to Chatterjee, has been subordinated to two dominant discourses of modern times, the sovereignty of the individual, and the sovereignty of the nation-state. He perceives this dialectic to be a function of the history of capital and its enduring capacity to shape institutions and ideologies to its universalising project.

The juxtaposition of the nation-state—with its homogenising intent and narratives—with that of a diversity of communities is understandably a recurring theme in Indian studies. What marks out Partha Chatterjee's interpretation is his historicisation of this difference. Thus the underlying theme is the different ways in which the political (state) and the cultural (communities) evolved. And the roots of that difference are traced to the contrasts in the experiencing of colonisation, of nationalist awakening, and of the colonial and post-colonial

states. It is the recognition of this difference that lends urgency to Chatterjee's plea for a 'theoretical language that would enable us to talk about community and state at the same time'.[25]

The questioning of the modern state and its uncritical acceptance both in mainstream post-colonial politics and intellectual discourse emerges in another recent historical work, Ayesha Jalal's 1995 book, *Democracy and Authoritarianism in South Asia: a Comparative and Historical Perspective*. Jalal's central object in this work was in fact to overturn both the disciplinary and the temporal–spatial boundaries that political scientists have set for themselves when, in looking at South Asian politics, they examine the post-colonial state from the moment of its independence and within the boundaries of the newly constructed nation states. She seeks to understand differences and commonalities in the post-independence politics of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, but within an analytical framework that historicises the nation-state and therefore questions, rather than accepts the monolithic sovereign modern state as the appropriate starting point for scholarly research. This work abandons the superficial, and often-made distinction between India as democratic and Pakistan as authoritarian, underlines what it perceives to be features of authoritarian democracy in India, and focuses mainly on the similarities in the subcontinent:

> despite claims to the contrary, neither democratic and secular India, nor military dominated and authoritarian Pakistan have had significant success in constructing a common sense of unity out of the jumbled web of multiple identities.[26]

She calls attention to the fact that:

> The nation state's efforts to manipulate and control the overlapping oscillations between centralism and regionalism as well as nationalism and communalism have had a direct bearing on the problem of recasting multiple social identities to fit a singular conception of citizenship in the subcontinent. Historically, multiple and shifting social identities in South Asia have found their most comfortable expression in political arrangements based on loosely layered sovereignties.[27]

Finally in a line reminiscent of Partha Chatterjee's call for a new theoretical language, she says:

> it is time to abandon the dominant discourse on monolithic sovereignty and reconstitute the narrative of inclusionary nationalism.[28]

It is interesting that while Partha Chatterjee's is a close reading of the period of cultural–nationalist awakening through historical, literary and religious texts, and Ayesha Jalal's work is a broad brush political history of post-independence South Asia, the historical method of enquiry in both of these works generates a dymystification and historicisation of the nation state. The critique which this article offers emphasises that the understanding of the state in development with which development scholars have been concerned needs to learn from this framework of demystification, and therefore to recast the state–civil society relationship. We will return to this theme in the concluding section.

Finally, a number of political anthropologists have studied political behaviour, developmental initiatives and participatory structures in situations which are not

only spatially but contextually distanced from the state. These studies have shown that effective action for development and institution building can in fact emerge from micro societal contexts. Elinor Ostrom, for example, has shown with reference to a range of situations in common property resources how communities of people in diverse parts of the world have worked out resolutions to shared problems; they do not necessarily succumb to the problem of the 'tragedy of the commons'.[29] Ronald Oakerson, in similar vein, examined the establishment of patterns of collective order through the functioning of primary units of collective action. This approach, too, questioned the need for monolithic state power given the latent capacity of societal groups to evolve functional collectivities.[30] Vincent Ostrom, striking a very different chord from the development politics literature discussed above, said 'degrees of choice are available in the way that human beings constitute ordered relationships in human societies. The command of the sovereign is not the only way to achieve ordered ways of life'.[31]

The criticisms made of communitarianism are by now well known.[32] But we need to underline here that in, so far as, typically, the communitarian perspective locates itself broadly within a crique of modernity, even scholars who are primarily in sympathy with the communitarian perspective have cautioned that many of the essential gains of modernity may be lost within a communitarian social design. Communitarianism poses an explicit critique at once of the supposedly atomised and alienated being that constitutes the subject of liberal individualism, and of the modern state which provides the individual's central, defining political identity in terms of citizenship. However, small group/community identites have historically denied the kinds of rights and opportunities which we have now come to accept as part of the notion of citizenship within a democratic political framework. Second, the foundational principles of the democratic welfare state underlined not only the protection of basic individual rights but also, importantly, the provision of welfaristic rights defined as equal opportunities to economic well-being and the rights of the disadvantaged to specific measures of welfare and security. In so far as individualism, and the welfare state, as political theories, underline these central normative principles, these cannot be bartered away, particularly in the context of developing societies marked by high degrees of deprivation and inequalities. Perhaps the greatest weakness of communitarian theories has been the unwillingness to offer an alternative to received theories, a specific social design where the issue of political identities, with which communitarians have been concerned, does not overshadow the question of rights as they have come to be defined in modern times.

The study of cooperative behaviour has not taken the shape of a political theory; it is also true that primary associations can hardly serve the ever expanding and complex needs of modern societies, or completely replace the state. The idea in presenting the view of political anthropologists is not to privilege communities over the state. What these studies (and this paper presents only an outline of the literature on this theme) do, however, is to open up alternative ways of examining the question of institutions in the context of effective developmental action, and place communities in the centre of this

analytical framework. Read together with the historical processes of communities' autonomous self-constitution in post-colonial societies, often at variance with that of the modern state, this framework could lead to a theoretical perspective that enabled one to conceptualise communities on a par with the state, and thence, to a redefinition of the structural and ideational features of the modern state.

## Towards a dialogue

The reading of communitarianism offered here does not suggest that it is a ready alternative to existing theories and political arrangements. The discussion in the previous pages is a critique of the tendency, in the neo-statist framework, to conceptualise state– society interaction in terms of a duality: state purposes versus social resistance. We suggest that communitarianism offers clues for a more meaningful understanding of the nature of this duality.

For example, Partha Chatterjee's reading of the parallel streams of nationalist awakening—the cultural, which led to the self-affirmation of autonomous communities and the political, which led to the formation of the post-colonial state—recasts the state–civil society problematic in terms that are more comprehensible than its contentious and hierarchised presentation in the work of neo-statist scholars. Through the historian's lens, the nation (or civil society) undergoes a process of self-constitution independently of the process of formation of the post-colonial state. And when the state–society duality is thus historicised, the two realms can be seen to be belonging to different domains, their contrasting purposes constituted by differences in their respective experiencing of and relationship with colonialism.

This historical perspective does not deny the enmeshing of the state and society, the extent to which the modern state has in fact grounded itself in society and the mutuality of the interface. What it does do is to recast the oppositional and hierarchised quality of the state– society relationship so frequently adopted by development scholars; this relationship now appears less a question of social resistance to state purposes and more a question of state and society (communities?) looking in different directions, possibly in search of different things.

The point therefore is not to displace the problematic of development from the state to the community/civil society; it is, rather, to show that mainstream comparative development studies have typically conceptualised the state–society relationship as conflictual and have somewhat uncritically identified both with the state's self-accorded centrality and with the state's given definition of development and political stability. We need to acknowledge that the roots of the state–society disjuncture may lie not primarily in state–society conflict (of social interests versus state purposes) but in the varying histories of their constitution as political entities. Thus if the focus is shifted from a state–society conflict—which must be continously strategised and managed without being resolved—to an effort to understand the historical roots of that disjuncture, the problematic of the politics of development begins to look very different.

# Notes

An earlier version of this paper titled 'Comparative politics: rethinking theories' was prevented at the 27th Annual Interdisciplinary Research Methodology Workshop, sponsored by Indian Council of Social Science research and the Madras Institute of Development Studies at Trivandrum, Kerala, September 1997.

[1] For theoretically informed and empirically orientated discussions of the neo-statist position, see particularly Eric Nordlinger, *On the Autonomy of the Democratic State*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981; Nordlinger, 'Taking the state seriously', in Myron Weiner & Samuel Huntington (eds), *Understanding Political Development*, Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1987; and Peter Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer & Theda Skocpol (eds), *Bringing the State Back In*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985. For a particularly telling critique of the statist approach, see Timothy Mitchell, 'The limits of the state: beyond statist approaches and their critics', *American Political Science Review*, 85 (1), 1991, pp 77–96. For an interesting debate, see the contributions of John Bendix, Barthlomew Sparrow, Bertell Ollman & Timothy Mitchell, 'Going beyond the state', *American Political Science Review*, 86 (4), 1992, pp 1007–1021.

[2] Talcott Parsons & Edward Shils, *Towards a General Theory of Action*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1951.

[3] Classics of the modernisation school would be Gabrielle Almond & James Coleman, *Politics of Developing Areas*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960; Daniel Lerner, *The Passing of Traditional Society*, Glencoe, II: Free Press, 1958.

[4] This was the critique adopted by those who took up a state-centred approach. For a broad, theoretically orientated introduction to the statist perspective, see Atul Kohli's 'Introduction' in Kohli (ed), *The State and Development in the Third World*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986.

[5] For an early critique from within the modernisation school itself, see Godrielle Almond's 'Introduction' in Almond & Coleman, Politics of Developing Areas; Lloyd Rudolph & Susanne Rudolph, *The Modernity of Tradition: Political Development in India*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1967.

[6] For a review and detailed bibliographical information on the neo-statist perspective, see Kohli, *The State and Development in the Third World*

[7] Neil Smelser, 'Mechanisms of change and adjustment to change', in Bert F Hoselitz & Wilbert E Moore, (eds) *Industrialization and Society*, Paris: UNESCO, 1963.

[8] Samuel P Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1968.

[9] The quotes above are from *ibid*, pp 141, 145, 142.

[10] Joel Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States: State–Society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988, p xiii.

[11] Atul Kohli, *State and Poverty in India: The Politics of Reform*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, p 2.

[12] Atul Kohli, *Democracy and Discontent: India's Growing Crisis of Governability*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, p 10.

[13] Lloyd Rudolph & Susanne Rudolph, *In Pursuit of Lakshmi: the Political Economy of the Indian State*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1987, p 6 (emphasis added).

[14] Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak states*, pp 252, 255.

[15] Kohli, *State and Poverty in India*, pp 46–50.

[16] Rudolph & Rudolph, *In Pursuit of Lakshmi*, p 212 (emphasis added).

[17] Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States*, pp 250–51.

[18] *Ibid*, pp 253, 256–57, 262.

[19] In a later work, Migdal attempts to delineate a more nuanced state–society relationship. He states here that the relationship, instead of being conflictual, may be mutually empowering. The emphasis is on the need to look at both states and societies as disaggregated (instead of as single points of power), such that the struggle for domination appears dispersed and varied. However, even in this work, the predominant tendency is to look at states in so far as they have been facilitated, or obstructed, by social forces in the pursuit of certain goals. Migdal 'The state in society: an approach to struggles for domination', in Joel Migdal, Atul Kohli & Vivien Shue (eds), *State Power and Social Forces*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

[20] Amrita Basu & Atul Kohli (eds), *Community Conflicts and the State in India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998, p 4.

[21] *Ibid*, pp 7–8 (emphasis added).

[22] For the material on Dalit politics in Tamil Nadu, I have drawn heavily on MSS Pandian, 'Stepping outside history: new Dalit writings from Tamil Nadu', in Partha Chatterjee *et al* (eds), *Wages of Freedom*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998; and T A Kannan, 'Replication of hierarchy: a subaltern understanding', paper presented at the Third All India Cultural Studies Workshop, Bhopal, January 1998, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta (mimeo).

[23] Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995, p 6.

[24] *Ibid*, p 11.

[25] *Ibid*.

[26] Ayesha Jalal, *Democracy and Authoritarianism in South Asia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, p 254.

27 *Ibid*, pp 256–257.

28 *Ibid*, p 257.

29 Elinor Ostrom, 'Institutional arrangements and the commons dilemma', in Vincent Ostrom, David Feeny & Hartmut Picht (eds), *Rethinking Institutional Analysis and Development Issues: Alternatives and Choices, San Francisco: International Center for Economic Growth*, 1988.

30 Ronald Oakerson, 'Reciprocity: a bottom-up view of political development', in Ostrom *et al*, *Rethinking Institutional Analysis and Development Issues*,

31 Vincent Ostrom, 'Cryptoimperialism, predatory states and safe governance', in Ostrom *et al*, *Rethinking Institutional Analysis and Development Issues*, pp 65–66.

32 For critiques of the communitarian literature on India, see Pranab Bardhan, 'The state against society: the great divide in Indian social science discourse', in Sugata Bose & Ayesha Jalal (eds), *Nationalism, Democracy and Development: State and Politics in India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997; and Sara Joseph, 'Politics of contemporary Indian communitarianism', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 4 October 1997.