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Q2(a)

"The post-colonial state was thought of an entity that stood outside and above society as an autonomous agency." Explain

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2021 · PSIR GS 2 · 20 marks · Comparative Politics

Comparative Politics: Nature and major approaches; political economy and political sociology perspectives; limitations of the comparative method.

Core demand of the question

- "The post-colonial state was thought of as an entity that stood outside and above society as an autonomous agency." Explain
- Write at 20-mark length

Revision summary

Colonial rule built a State of force and revenue over a subject society.

Alavi's overdeveloped State stands above a weak indigenous bourgeoisie.

Fanon described the colonial State as racial partition and violence.

Nehruvian planning looked like the same midwife State in India.

Society, capital, and external hierarchy later qualify the autonomy thesis.

Introduction

Independence inherited a colonial State that had ruled society from above. Many theorists treated that State as an autonomous agency: not a simple committee of local landlords or merchants. **Hamza Alavi** named the pattern. Frantz **Fanon** described its violence and distance.

Body**The colonial inheritance**

- The colonial State extracted revenue, held the monopoly of force, and sat over a society it did not grow from.
- Its civil and military bureaucracies were built to control, not to represent a national bourgeoisie.
- **Fanon** saw the colonial world as **Manichaeian**: the settler town and the native town, with the State as the armed partition.

Alavi's autonomous agency

- **Hamza Alavi** argued that in Pakistan and similar post-colonial societies the State was overdeveloped relative to the indigenous capitalist class.
- A military-bureaucratic oligarchy could stand outside and above landlords, the weak bourgeoisie, and the metropolitan neo-colonial tie.
- Relative autonomy here is not **Poulantzas**'s advanced-capitalist State balancing fractions. It is a State that predates a strong national capital.

India and the same family of claims

- The ICS-to-IAS steel frame, **Planning Commission** steering, and a large public sector looked like a State above the market.
- **Jawaharlal Nehru**'s developmental State claimed to modernise society from the centre.
- Rajni Kothari and others later showed Congress and caste as society inside the State, which already qualifies pure autonomy.

Why "thought of as"

- Modernisation writers and many nationalists needed a midwife State. Samuel Huntington wanted order-building institutions that were not the plaything of every social force.
- Marxists needed an explanation of why the post-colonial State did not simply enact a local bourgeois will.

Critiques

- Society captures the State through caste, clientelism, and business houses. Autonomy was a moment, not a law.
- The State is also permeable to foreign capital and aid, which Wallerstein's hierarchy would treat as external constraint, not Olympian independence.
- Military oligarchies that "stand above" can still rest on landed and ethnic coalitions.
- Feminist and subaltern work showed that the view from above erased gendered and local power.

What remains useful

- The thesis explains why the first decades looked like administration over politics, and why coups and planning both seemed plausible.
- It is a starting map. It is not a complete sociology of India after mobilisation and liberalisation.

Flow diagram

Colonial apparatus -> Overdeveloped State
 Overdeveloped State -> Alavi autonomy above society
 Fanon colonial violence -> Alavi autonomy above society
 Caste capital movements -.erodes. -> Alavi autonomy above society

Conclusion

The post-colonial State was theorised as autonomous because it inherited an overdeveloped colonial apparatus and faced a weak indigenous bourgeoisie, as Alavi argued, and a divided colonial society, as **Fanon** described. The image of a State outside and above society fits the founding moment. It thins as parties, capital, and social movements occupy the same State.

Facts & figures

Hamza Alavi

Overdeveloped post-colonial State and military-bureaucratic oligarchy, especially in Pakistan, as relatively autonomous.

Fanon

The Wretched of the Earth: colonial State and settler/native split; independence can inherit that distance.

Poulantzas

Relative autonomy of the capitalist State among class fractions - a different, metropolitan contrast to Alavi.

ICS / IAS

The steel frame that made the Indian State look like an agency above party and market in the early Republic.

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