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Review of National Narratives

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Key Points

(i). National narratives are anecdotes that constitute the popular mythology and folklore of a region. They are manifestations of a nation's cultural identity and are central to the establishment of a development agenda (*Catling, 2011*). Thus, national narratives are indispensable and need to be preserved but after being subjected to an adequate degree of control.

(ii). If narratives are not monitored and scrutinized on a regular basis, they can transform into racial conflicts and inter-communal disharmony and become detrimental to maintenance of peace and security they themselves guarantee if circumscribed by review and regulations. Hence, the governments could conduct periodic reviews that act as control mechanisms preventing narratives from being misused by interest groups.

(iii). The unwarranted spread of the Islamic Jihad narrative in the Muslim world and the omnipresent mythology in the United States called the American dream are narratives that endanger peace, security and economic prosperity as they encourage revisionist goals in the two civilizations and provide breeding grounds for right-wing tendencies.

(iv). The Government of Pakistan through adequate legislative measures, requisite formation of an ad-hoc advisory committee that reviews national narratives on periodic basis to avoid economic and racial/geographic conflicts which are often triggered by a clash of narratives.

Introduction:

The President of the world's greatest economic and military power the United States of America has vowed to make America great again. This idea of making America great was the cornerstone of the American dream envisioned by the founding fathers of the state and became a narrative associated with American nationalism. Today, the revisionist ideas of Trump have brought the American dream and 'let's make America great again' slogan back into the fore. But since the greatness of America is inexplicably linked to the prosperity and growth of the white non-immigrant American who is seen as a representative of American nationalism, the peace, harmony and the very existence of the American superiority in the world are highly endangered. With the surge of right-wing populism, that quite often takes its roots from national narratives, not only USA but other states are expected to lose national sanity and peace to the unfettered growth of national narratives.

When states vow to get rid of narratives that invite cult following and belief to carve secular and universally acceptable societies, the social conservatives argue that national narratives are representatives of a state's formative structure and discounting them could dismantle the roots of a balanced society.

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National narratives have been used as tools/excuses for inflicting punishment on groups and communities and continue to be misused by non-state actors in roughly all parts of the world. However, this alone might not convince proponents of national narratives to make a sudden/and or gradual transition from narrative-driven societies

While national narratives need to be protected as state assets and cultural symbols, they should be put under regular scrutiny to prevent their misuse as that can reflect on direct repercussions for peace and state security amongst other non-security repercussions. So, what follows are a couple of questions that revolve around the debate on national narratives and answers to these questions can serve as critical points in analyzing whether any policy initiatives with regards to national narratives can navigate the socio-political matters involved in the right direction.

Should National Narratives be Preserved?

The process of cultural evolution and self-discovery in nations has constantly been at odds against persistence with the national narrative. Nations possess narratives and stakeholders ostensibly responsible for safeguarding the cultural/religious dogma have been resilient in protecting them against pressures from the often left-leaning social revolutionaries.

Most narratives have emanated out of communities combating collective failures and miseries to rise up to what they become. The collectivism in what transpires to be a fortunate series of events often converts into the popular narrative and nations proudly hold on to them as symbols of national pride and unity. The narratives, in a rather subtle manner, become a social reality and get embedded into the national philosophy to dominate a considerable part of life in such communities.

The conceptions of good and evil, the political discourse, traditions, customs and popular culture are all inspired by the national narrative. Consequently, one observes an unbridled socio-political resistance becoming a protective veneer for such narratives. But in the modern day and age, narratives in the United States including the conventional wisdom, which is considered vital to a nation's character building, have been criticized by the often leftist socialist revolutionaries for being archaic and irrelevant.

Countries have moved on, some have managed to escape the shadows of their past while others are vying to break the shackles and come to terms with the progressive thought of the 21st century. But alongside are conservatives that associate the excesses of the modern day to persistence with the national narratives and being proud of the glory that was achieved in an effort to eliminate social ills that occluded the general course of life within a said community. The critics of national narratives continue to blame social-stagnation on proponents of national narratives and believe the way forward is a complete estrangement from national narratives, especially those marred with unnecessary sloganeering, hyperbole and political exaggeration.

A vivid look at the demographics of societies that have been successfully able to shun national narratives reveals that they are those with the best universities and efficient education systems installed. This is presumably because universities are inculcating the idea of critical and free thinking in students while encouraging them to re-organize thought processes and get rid of

social barriers that hinder and discourage questioning the existing customs, traditions and socio-political realities.

On the contrary, countries in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa are still found to be mired in an unerring belief in the national narratives. Some of it being imbibed by religion and the rest by their transition from colonies or non-participatory monarchies of the past to quasi-democracies of the present. Their romance with the heroes made during wars for establishment of a religious doctrine or fight for freedom against a colonial monarchy has been instrumental in establishment of the meta-narrative.

It is yet to be fixated if persistence with the national narrative is necessary for establishment of a peaceful and progressive state or should progress be achieved through a review of narratives.

The imperatives in this debate for/against national narratives can be settled by thinking through the following questions. The first and the foremost could be whether breaking away from national narratives is withering away the social fabric of the societies since much of it was originally knitted by the same narratives that ran through the communities? The natural response to this would be "Yes". Since, the social fabric constitutes the philosophical consumption of a society; it delineates what the people generally welcome as an acceptable line of thought and what not. If the social fabric of a society is altered too frequently, it deconstructs in a way that what you obtain as an outcome is a visible disconnect between the people and their cultural identity.

The second is regarding stereotypes. A majority of stereotypes in the west have evolved out of a shared history that either allows people to celebrate achievements of a particular strata of the society or stigmatize them to the extent of calling them names or forcing them to become social outcasts. So, where national narratives could be seen as tools for undermining/humiliating a particular strata of the society it could be used as a unifying object for another. Racial stereotypes against communities of color were common in the west including the United States of America until the effects of ascending literacy rates started becoming evident in the improved social conduct of people. Simultaneously, it is the religious stereotypes that have been used by believers of a dominant religion in a state to overpower/sideline believers of a minority religion in the South Asian region. This is due to the relevant nature of the shared history and national narratives present in the two disparate regions.

The third is a question on the potency of national narratives to become a binding factor for a society. This pertains to the social cohesion that narratives can bring to a society. If narratives are brimming with indictments for a particular community while they vindicate another for the collective failures, then national narratives can translate into a resounding basis for inter-communal disharmony. This is a situation when they become the most undesirable for a state that vows to attain national objectives through unified effort.

Can Narratives become detrimental to the composure and outlook of the society?

Stating the obvious, there is arguably no stronger narrative present in any state of the world than the American dream in the United States. When the American economy was booming

through the early 20th century, the nascent structure of the American dream narrative developed into a roaring reality that envisaged an economically flourishing, progressive America. The reality was soon to be shaken by a frequent set of devastating financial crises in the 1930's and more recently in the 2000's that kept the general public hostage for years to come.

Robert Reich dissects the American dream in his 2005 book "The lost art of democratic narrative". He puts forth different narratives that fall directly under the umbrella of the American dream and have destabilizing impacts on the socio-political composure in the United States. Reich believes that if politicians can address these narratives, they'd be able to better resonate with the masses and the society could be put on the right course (*Reich, 2005*).

One of Reich's assertions is the 'triumphant individual'. A term coined for narratives that involve anecdotes about individuals that started with a humble beginning but climbed up to fame, wealth and glory by utilizing a rare combination of diligence, risk-taking and the copious amounts of opportunities present in the United States. This has lured thousands of immigrants to take refuge in the United States in the hope of becoming what some of the earlier triumphants have become. This myth is usually supplemented by the stories documented by Hollywood and other, more infiltrating media agents operating in the United States. The extreme promises these narratives make to aspirants of a successful career can have shattering consequences on their lives and that has been the case with a huge number of people working day and night shifts on a multiple number of jobs at the risk of their health and life security. Although much of it could be ascribed to the neoliberal economy and curses of globalization, the national narratives could still not be exonerated for the severity in endless economic objectives we see today.

The second is the "mob at the gates". The people in United States have lived with the idea that United States is the savior of humanity and inherits a self-assumed responsibility to fight evil in the world. The narrative is based on the idea that United States is constantly confronted with international challenges and endangered by foreign menaces as it battles them out diplomatically and sometimes through sheer force. This idea has been detrimental in keeping the society in balance from a sociological point of view as individuals take unnecessary credit for achievements they shouldn't celebrate and the cults misuse this state of mind to engage people in polarizations that increase hostility in the society and promote inter-communal disharmony. The same narrative has been clichéd against the black community in the United States through the mid-20s where the cults used the "End evil" narrative against the blacks only ending up infringing on their civil rights and intensifying hatred in the society.

The slave narrative, although believed by many to be non-existent in the US, still features regularly in writings reminiscent of the slave era and political commentaries on racial injustices still present in the American society. A contemporary form of the slave narrative still surfaces in the form of neo-slave narratives where contemporary authors and historians depict the lives of the slave era in the new world. The majority of neo-slave narratives are fictional works set during the enslavement period. Although these works have played a vital role in shaping up a sensitized society as opposed to an apathetic group of people that existed in the slavery era, the constant reminder of the slavery period has been a serious cause of arousing resentment in people against the social elite that ruled the United States then and even today. This creates mistrust between the government and the common man to the extent that we see greater number of dissidents in the

United States than ever before.

What policy framework is required to review national narratives?

The sovereign parliament of the Pakistan could take up this matter through passing a parliamentary bill on setting up an advisory committee mandated to periodically review the narratives that are contagious and bloated to the extent of interfering with the peace and tranquility of the region. The committee is set-up by recommendations from members of the parliament and invites representation from all stakeholders involved in the debate that revolves around national narratives. This could either be history professors in universities, education board members that finalize school curriculum, political and religious ideologues and the directly engaged proponents/opponents of the relevant narratives discussed in a particular committee meeting.

The committee converges after a stipulated time period and takes up narratives that are deemed to be have a high impact factor and contain verses or portrayals that are either derogatory or provocative for a certain community – or represent an antithesis to notions that are considered vital to maintenance of peace and economic stability.

Alternate Policy Frameworks

The policy followed in the developing world is to let narratives permeate in the society and wait for the marginal returns from education to recuperate for the national sanity lost to narratives. Like discussed, this is particularly the case with ex-colonial states of including Pakistan, India and a majority of states in Africa. The anti-colonial narrative in Pakistan and the color discrimination narrative in Africa have kept the two regions from prospering over the last few decades. The societies have neither achieved peace, nor a progressive economy. They have remained hostage to war crimes and injustices done during the colonial period and the people having turned extremely cynical to the ruling elite from fear of imperialism and fascist autocracies and are overtly disloyal to their governments.

A slightly moderate form of this policy is currently incumbent in the United States too where stronger systems of government have kept the unnecessary permeation of narratives under control but as the economy looks jittery, an economic downturn in the future conflated with the evoking national narratives can convert the residing social resentment in people into an outburst of uncontrollable public aggression. This has been the case in the Middle East where countries since the Arab Spring have borne irreparable losses to the outpouring of public anger.

Conclusion

I have already asserted the need for a national narrative review that begins with an understanding of the nature of national narratives that exist, how they rose to prominence historically and the social, political and economic repercussions of each. While national narratives are to some extent responsible for holding a society back, the argument shouldn't be used as a pretext for eradicating narratives from the history or discourse altogether. Like discussed, narratives build the social fabric of the society and breaking away from them can certainly have damaging effects on the sustenance of values and cultural identity. Therefore,

narratives need to be preserved and perhaps projected via historical writings and political commentaries but after being subjected to an adequate degree of control.

An analysis of the circumstances under which a certain narrative developed to assess how remotely the present situation in a state is different from those circumstances is an imperative. Given the emotive value of each narrative, an instance of a complete denunciation can have severe socio-political repercussions in the form of massive public outrage. An assembly that under-represents a particular group can result in low acceptance of the post-review recommendations made by the committee whose formulation has been proposed in the beginning of this paper.

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