

# Post-colonial Theory of State

Post-colonial theory offers a radically different way of understanding the state—especially in societies once colonized. Thinkers like **Frantz Fanon**, **Achille Mbembe**, **Gayatri Spivak**, **Mahmood Mamdani**, and **Partha Chatterjee** argue that Western political theories—like liberalism, Marxism, or pluralism—cannot fully explain the state in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

These states were shaped by colonization, which left deep marks on their institutions, social hierarchies, and notions of citizenship. They are not just incomplete versions of Western states—they are **hybrid political forms** rooted in unique historical experiences.

## Core Idea

### 1. The State as a Colonial Inheritance

Post-colonial theory views the state not as a product of organic social development, but as a tool imposed by colonial rulers. Unlike European states that evolved through internal conflicts and reform, colonial states were built for control, surveillance, and extraction.

After independence, many post-colonial states retained colonial institutions like sedition laws, police powers, and centralized bureaucracy. **Hamza Alavi** termed this the “**overdeveloped state**”—strong in administrative control, but weak in mass integration.

### 2. Hybrid Nature of the Post-Colonial State

Post-colonial states blend formal modern institutions with informal, traditional practices. Elections coexist with patronage; constitutions with identity-based mobilization.

**Mahmood Mamdani** highlights how indirect colonial rule empowered local chiefs, who remain powerful even today, blurring lines between custom and law.

Similarly, **Partha Chatterjee** introduced the idea of “**political society**”, where marginalized groups engage the state through negotiation, not legal rights. This contrasts with “**civil society**”, the formal domain of rights and institutions.

### 3. Contemporary Challenges

Post-colonial states continue to use colonial-era laws—like the **Sedition Act**, **AFSPA**, or **Emergency Provisions**—to curb dissent and manage minorities.

**Fanon** argued that post-colonial elites often become a new “**national bourgeoisie**” that mimics colonial rulers, prioritizing power over liberation.

**Mbembe’s concept of necropolitics** explains how states govern through abandonment—where slums, conflict zones, or tribal regions face selective neglect, surveillance, or coercion.

## Key Features of the Post-colonial State

### I. Hybrid Sovereignty in Post-Colonial States

**Hybrid sovereignty** means that post-colonial states combine **modern laws and institutions** (like constitutions and elections) with **traditional and informal power structures** (like caste leaders, kinship networks, and religious authorities).

- This mix began under **colonial indirect rule**, where colonizers ruled through **local elites** while building bureaucratic systems.
- After independence, countries like **India, Nigeria, and Indonesia** kept **Western-style institutions**, but **informal networks** continued to hold real power.
- In India, **caste panchayats, religious bodies, and patronage systems** still shape how politics works on the ground.

### II. Colonial Continuities: Institutions That Outlasted Empire

Post-colonial states often **retained colonial institutions** and laws after independence, resulting in **ongoing authoritarian practices** despite democratic forms.

- These institutions—like the **police, criminal law, and civil services**—were designed to **control**, not serve.
- In India, laws like the **Indian Penal Code (1860), Sedition Law (124A IPC), and AFSPA (1958)** are still in force.

## 3. Nation-Building and Development as Legitimacy Tools

### I. Historical Context: Building Nations from Fragmented Societies

**Post-colonial states** emerged suddenly after colonial rule, unlike Western nations that evolved slowly. Countries like **India, Nigeria, and Indonesia** had to build **national unity** in societies divided by **language, caste, tribe, or colonial borders**.

In this setting, the **state became the symbol of the nation**, not just its administrator. In **India**, this urgency was felt after **Partition** and the integration of **500+ princely states**. Nation-building, identity, and governance were **interlinked from the start**.

### II. Development as a Tool for Legitimacy

**Development became a powerful tool for legitimacy** in post-colonial states. Leaders across the Global South adopted a form of **developmental nationalism**, where building infrastructure and driving progress were seen as ways to **unify the nation and gain public trust**.

In **India**, **Jawaharlal Nehru** famously called dams the "**temples of modern India**", while **Indira Gandhi** used slogans like "**Garibi Hatao**" to link development with social justice. In **Ghana**, **Kwame Nkrumah** built roads and power plants to showcase national capability. **Sukarno** in **Indonesia** and **Nasser** in **Egypt** similarly launched massive infrastructure projects—such as the **Aswan Dam**—to symbolize national power.

### **III. Contradictions and Costs of Developmental Nationalism**

While **development can create national pride**, it also brings serious **social and environmental costs**, especially for **marginalized communities**. In **India**, many **tribal groups have been displaced** by large projects like the **Sardar Sarovar Dam**, as well as through **mining and forest clearances**.

Protests such as the **Narmada Bachao Andolan** emerged to fight against forced displacement and loss of livelihood. Globally, similar patterns are seen.

In **China**, the **Three Gorges Dam** led to the **displacement of millions**. In **Brazil**, infrastructure and mining projects in the **Amazon** threaten both **indigenous communities** and the **fragile environment**. Thus, development often comes at a **high human and ecological cost**.

**In summary:**

- Post-colonial states used **development as a strategy to forge national unity and political legitimacy**.
- Slogans, infrastructure, and science became tools for **imagining and materializing the nation**.
- This model, called **developmental nationalism**, aimed to unify but often **excluded marginalized groups**.
- The **contradiction between national progress and local dispossession** remains a key challenge.
- In today's context, there's a growing push to **balance state-led development with equity, sustainability, and participatory planning**.

## **4. Political Society vs. Civil Society**

### **I. Two Ways of Engaging the State**

**Partha Chatterjee** explains that in **post-colonial democracies**, citizens engage with the state in **two distinct ways**:

- **Civil Society**: The elite space of **rights, laws, and formal institutions**.
- **Political Society**: The informal space where **the poor negotiate** with the state through **protests, brokers, or vote banks**, not legal rights.

In **countries like India**, large groups—**Dalits, slum dwellers, migrants, Adivasis**—lack full legal citizenship but are still part of the political system through **mobilization and informal negotiation**.

## II. How Political Society Works in Practice

In **urban slums**, people may not own land, but they still get **ration cards, electricity, voter IDs**, and public services through **local leaders and politicians**.

- These benefits are exchanged for **votes**, especially before elections.
- The **state treats them as populations to manage**, not equal citizens.

This form of engagement is based on **relationships, visibility, and negotiation**, not law. It challenges the **Western view** that democracy only works through formal rights.

## III. Significance of the Theory

Chatterjee's idea shows why **populism, patronage, and protests** are not democratic failures—they are how democracy functions in post-colonial settings.

- **The poor are politically active**, even without full legal rights.
- But this model **reproduces inequality**, as **the middle class** accesses civil society, while the **poor remain dependent** on informal politics.
- It also prevents **long-term reform**, as governments focus on **short-term appeasement**, not systemic inclusion.

### In Summary

- **Civil Society = Rights-based, legal engagement** (for the elite).
- **Political Society = Informal, negotiated engagement** (for the poor).
- **Chatterjee's theory** explains the **real functioning of democracy** in post-colonial states.
- It shows why **informality and identity politics** persist—and how democracy is **negotiated, not guaranteed**.
- Yet, it warns of **deep legal inequality and dependence**, making reform difficult.

## Post-Colonial State Dynamics

The **post-colonial state** is not a fresh creation at independence—it is deeply shaped by **colonial legacies**. Though these states adopted **new flags, constitutions, and parliaments**, they often retained the **coercive structures, identity politics, and bureaucratic models** of their colonial past. These are not accidents but **structural continuities**, rooted in how empires governed.

## I. Rule by Exception: Coercive Governance Continues

One key colonial legacy is the use of **emergency powers** to control regions seen as “sensitive” or “rebellious.”

- **AFSPA (1958)** gives sweeping powers to the army in **Kashmir, Manipur, Nagaland**, similar to colonial laws like the **Rowlatt Act (1919)**.
- Such laws allow **arrest without warrant, shoot-on-suspicion, and legal immunity**, placing entire regions under **militarized rule**.
- These areas are treated as **internal frontiers**, where **citizenship is conditional** and **rights can be suspended**—echoing colonial “rule by exception.”

## II. Development and Displacement: Progress with Exclusion

Post-colonial states often use **development** to claim **legitimacy** and inspire **national pride**—but this can marginalize vulnerable groups.

- Projects like the **Narmada Dam** displaced thousands of **Adivasis**, triggering long protests like the **Narmada Bachao Andolan**.
- In **Jharkhand, Odisha, and Chhattisgarh**, tribal lands are taken for **mining or industrial zones**, often without proper consent or compensation.
- Similar to the colonial era, **land is acquired for "national" purposes**, ignoring local voices.

## III. Identity Politics and Populism

Colonial rulers classified people by **caste, religion, tribe**, and this logic survives in **contemporary electoral politics**.

- The **Mandal Commission (1990s)** made **caste a formal political category** through reservations.
- Movements like **Dravidian pride (Tamil Nadu), Ram Janmabhoomi**, or **tribal assertions** show how **identity drives politics**.

## IV. Citizenship and Exclusion: Who Belongs to the Nation?

The idea of **citizenship** remains highly **contested** in post-colonial states.

- Laws like the **Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA, 2019)** and the **National Register of Citizens (NRC)** define belonging based on **documents or religion**.

- In **Assam**, nearly **2 million people** were excluded from the NRC, creating **stateless populations**.
- While the state **mobilizes identity** for votes, it also **uses identity to exclude**—a colonial technique repurposed in democratic contexts.

### Summary

- **Post-colonial states** carry forward many features of **colonial governance**.
- They rule by **exception**, develop through **displacement**, govern via **identity**, and define citizenship in **unequal terms**.
- These patterns are not democratic failures, but part of a **historically rooted political structure**.
- Understanding these dynamics helps explain **why democracy in post-colonial states looks different** from Western models—and why it remains deeply **contested** and **negotiated**.

## Critiques of Post-colonial Theory

### 1. Overemphasis on Cultural Identity over Economic Structures

Post-colonial theorists often focus on how colonial power shaped culture, language, and identity but neglect **material issues like poverty, landlessness, and exploitation**. This weakens the theory's ability to address ongoing issues of **class-based inequality**.

### 2. Romanticization of Subaltern Resistance

The theory tends to celebrate grassroots resistance and indigenous practices as authentic forms of political action, sometimes **ignoring their internal oppressions**. This leads to **uncritical glorification of tradition** without examining its hierarchical aspects.

**Example:** Idealizing rural resistance may overlook the persistence of **patriarchy in khap panchayats** or **caste exclusion in village assemblies**.

### 3. Neglect of Gender and Intersectionality

Post-colonial literature frequently presents marginalized communities as unified victims, **ignoring gender-based oppression within those groups**.

This oversight weakens its capacity to represent **Adivasi women, Dalit women, or queer voices** accurately.

**Example:** Subaltern Studies rarely address how **tribal or Muslim women** face dual marginalization—from the state and their own community.

### 4. Lack of Comparative Analysis Across Global South

By insisting on the uniqueness of post-colonial states, the theory often **refuses meaningful comparisons** with other non-Western experiences.

This prevents the development of **global or regional frameworks** for understanding state-building and democracy.

**Example:** India's democracy is rarely compared with **South Korea's developmental state** or **Brazil's populist coalitions** in post-colonial theory.

## Scholarly Contributions

### Frantz Fanon

In *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), Fanon argued that **colonialism dehumanized subjects** by violently restructuring their consciousness and identity.

After independence, he warned that **post-colonial elites often replicated colonial structures**, focusing on power rather than empowerment, creating a "national bourgeoisie" disconnected from the masses.

### Achille Mbembe

Mbembe introduced the concept of "**necropolitics**", where post-colonial states decide **who is allowed to live and who may be left to die**, especially among marginalized populations.

He uses this to analyze how power operates through **abandonment, militarization, and indifference**, visible in **how slums, refugees, or the sick are managed during crises** like pandemics.

### Partha Chatterjee

Chatterjee distinguished between "**civil society**" and "**political society**", arguing that in post-colonial democracies like India, the poor often **engage the state through informal negotiations** rather than formal rights.

His work helps explain **how patronage, protests, and informal settlements** function as valid forms of political participation.

### Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

In her famous essay "**Can the Subaltern Speak?**", Spivak questioned whether **marginalized voices—especially poor women—are truly heard** in dominant political or academic narratives.

She critiqued both colonial and nationalist discourse for **speaking on behalf of the oppressed**, rather than enabling their own representation.

### Mahmood Mamdani

Mamdani analyzed how post-colonial African states inherited and **repackaged colonial structures of indirect rule**, especially the divide between **citizens and "subjects"** (rural, tribal communities).

His concept of "**decentralized despotism**" shows how **local customary authority** can be manipulated to enforce state control without true democracy.

## **PYQ Insights**

### **1. Post-colonial theory as a critique of Western political thought**

UPSC examines how post-colonial theorists reject the universal applicability of Western liberal ideas in colonial contexts.

*"Critically examine the Post-colonial critique of Western political theory."*

### **2. Partha Chatterjee's distinction between civil society and political society**

The exam probes how informal politics operates as a survival strategy for the marginalized in post-colonial democracies.

*"In post-colonial societies, democracy often operates through political society rather than civil society. Comment with reference to Partha Chatterjee."*

### **3. Frantz Fanon's theory of violence and national bourgeoisie**

Fanon's ideas on how post-colonial elites mimic colonial rulers and the liberating role of violence are frequently tested.

*"Discuss the role of violence in Fanon's theory of decolonization."*

### **4. Achille Mbembe's necropolitics and coercive post-colonial governance**

UPSC tests themes of state control over life and death, especially in contexts of exclusion, abandonment, or exception.

*"Post-colonial states often function through coercion and selective inclusion rather than universal citizenship. Examine."*

### **5. Gayatri Spivak and the problem of representation in post-colonial discourse**

Questions assess whether post-colonial theory truly empowers the marginalized or simply speaks for them.

*"Can the Subaltern speak? Explain with reference to post-colonial discourse."*

### **6. Post-colonial state as a continuation of colonial institutions and logics**

The exam explores how administrative, legal, and coercive structures persist post-independence.

*"How far is it correct to say that the post-colonial state in India has been a continuation of the colonial state?"*

### **7. Post-colonial nationalism and developmental legitimacy**

UPSC engages with how post-colonial states justify authority through nation-building and state-led development.

*"Critically analyse the relationship between nationalism and development in post-colonial states."*

### **8. Subaltern Studies and the rejection of elite-centric history**

UPSC has tested how Subaltern Studies shifted focus from elite narratives to everyday resistance and marginal agency.

*"Examine the contribution of Subaltern Studies in rewriting Indian history."*

## Conclusion

**Post-colonial theory** critically examines how the legacy of colonialism continues to shape political power, identity, and governance in formerly colonized societies. It challenges the universalism of Western political thought by highlighting the historical, cultural, and structural specificities of post-colonial states.

Thinkers like Fanon, Chatterjee, Mbembe, and Spivak expose how the colonial state's logic—coercion, exclusion, and symbolic control—often survives independence. The theory foregrounds informal politics, contested citizenship, and the persistent struggles of the marginalized. It also explains how development, nationalism, and identity become tools of both resistance and domination.

However, it faces criticism for overlooking economic structures, gender, and internal hierarchies. Despite these limitations, post-colonial theory remains vital for understanding state–society relations in the Global South. It encourages a pluralistic, historically grounded view of political life beyond Eurocentric assumptions.

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