



Post Colonial Theory of State

Introduction

Post-colonial theory doesn't just begin where colonialism ends — it begins where the *illusion of independence* starts to fade. Think about it: many nations in Asia, Africa, and Latin America raised their own flags, drafted their own constitutions, and declared freedom. But did freedom really mean complete control over their destiny? Not quite.

This is where the idea of **neo-colonialism** comes in. It's like colonialism without the visible chains. No more British officers ruling over Delhi or French governors in Dakar — yet the same countries remained tied to the **colonial legacy**. Their economies still revolved around exports of raw material, their politics shaped by Western influence, their cultures still overshadowed by colonial mindsets.

Now, **Kwame Nkrumah**, the leader of Ghana, passionately argued that this wasn't true independence. He said: look at the **U.S. and Australia** — they were once colonies, but they managed to overcome dependence and build strong, autonomous economies and political systems. But why couldn't many nations in the **Global South** do the same?

The answer, Nkrumah believed, lies in the **Marxist-Leninist discourse of exploitation**. The global economy wasn't fair. It was structured to keep the **North-South divide** alive — the rich industrialized North extracting value, while the South remained dependent, vulnerable, and struggling.

So, **post-colonial theory** emerged as a **critique of this system**. It tells us: independence is not just about taking down a flag; it's about breaking free from the deeper structures of exploitation —

economic, cultural, and political — that colonialism left behind.

The Essence

Post-colonial theory is not just history, it's a mirror. It asks us — even today — are nations truly free, or are they still living in the shadow of colonialism, under new names and forms?

Field of Comparative Politics & Post-Colonial Conditions

When we study **comparative politics**, one of the big questions is: *Why do newly independent nations behave differently from the older Western democracies?* To answer this, scholars gave us some brilliant models. Let's walk through them.

E. W. Riggs and the Prismatic Society model

Riggs looked at post-colonial societies and said: *these are not purely modern, not purely traditional — they are something in between*. Like a prism that splits light into many colors, these societies show **features of both developed and underdeveloped worlds**.

- **Formalism** → Rules exist on paper but don't match reality. Think of India's **DPSP** — beautifully written, but non-justiciable, so a gap remains between theory and practice.
- **Polycommunalism** → Different communities live side by side, but without deep **trust** or integration. Coexistence without real harmony.
- **Polynormativism** → A mix of **rational and irrational laws**. For instance, **prohibition laws** in some states vs. cultural tolerance for alcohol; or recognizing **marital rape** as a crime in some legal systems but not in India.
- **Bazar-Canteen economic system** → Two logics running together: free **market prices** in the bazar, but also **subsidies** and rationing in



the canteen system.

- **Administration – SALA model** → Some offices work by **rules** (formal, bureaucratic), while others depend on **kinship and family ties**. A hybrid of modern Weberian bureaucracy and traditional patronage.
- **Heterogeneity** → The old and the new overlap. You may find a hi-tech IT park right next to villages steeped in traditional hierarchies.
- **Attainment norms** → In the West, achievement defines status. In traditional societies, birth does. In prismatic societies, **both birth and achievement matter** – a strange mix of meritocracy and nepotism.

So, Riggs basically said: post-colonial societies are “**in transition**”, neither fully modern nor purely traditional, but a *prism of contradictions*.

Gunnar Myrdal and the Soft State

Now comes **Myrdal**. He described post-colonial countries as **soft states**. What does this mean? A soft state is one where:

- The state has **poor capacity to implement laws** – land reforms are announced, but remain on paper.
- The state is **soft on criminals** – enforcement is weak, justice is delayed.
- **Corruption** and the **colonial legacy** weaken governance.

Myrdal also added a fascinating point: India inherited from **Gandhi’s culture of disobedience** – the idea that resisting unjust laws is morally valid. While noble in colonial times, it shaped a habit of *picking and choosing* which laws to follow in the post-independence period.

The Essence

Both Riggs and Myrdal remind us: **independence does not automatically create strong, modern states**. Post-colonial societies are hybrids, balancing modern ideals with colonial legacies, traditional norms, and weak state structures.

Marxist Approach

Instrumentalist Perspective

The **Dependency school**, developed by **A. G. Frank** and **Samir Amin** in the 1960s–1970s, tried to explain why regions like **Africa and Latin America** remained poor even after decolonization.

Their answer? Go back to **Lenin’s theory of imperialism**.

Core–Periphery Model

They argued that the **core of the industrialised North** controls production, technology, and capital. Meanwhile, the **peripheries** – the Global South – are reduced to suppliers of **raw materials** and markets for finished goods.

- This is not an equal partnership. The peripheries are merely **instruments of the state in the core**.
- The **Third World** is often governed by **puppet rulers and clientelist regimes**, who maintain the status quo instead of challenging it.

This leads to what they call **unequal exchange**:

- **Property accumulates in the North.**
- **Poverty deepens in the South.**

In other words, underdevelopment is not an accident, it’s a *deliberate outcome* of the system.

Noam Chomsky’s Critique

Adding to this, **Noam Chomsky** sharpened the critique. He argued that the **USA wages wars not**



for **democracy or freedom**, but for **corporate benefits** – to protect oil, markets, and multinational interests.

A. G. Frank's Solution

In his influential book **Development of Underdevelopment**, A. G. Frank went further. He said the South cannot wait for the North to “help.” Instead, the solution is:

- **National autonomous development** → countries must chart their own path.
- **Self-sufficiency** → reduce dependence on imports and foreign capital.

This was a radical call for **delinking** from the exploitative global system.

The Essence

The **Marxist instrumentalist perspective** tells us that post-colonial poverty is not due to laziness, corruption, or “backward culture.” It’s a structural issue: the **global capitalist system is designed to keep the South dependent and underdeveloped**, while enriching the North.

Structuralist School

Structuralist School – Hamza Alavi and the Overdeveloped State

Most Western Marxists, following Lenin, argued that the **state is an instrument of capitalist classes**. But **Hamza Alavi**, writing in the 1970s–80s about **Pakistan**, challenged this view. He said: *the post-colonial state is different*.

The Overdeveloped State

Alavi borrowed from **Marx's 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte**. Remember how Marx explained that Bonaparte achieved **relative autonomy** from dominant classes under special circumstances?

Alavi applied this to post-colonial states. He argued that the **post-colonial executive** became unusually **strong and autonomous** – not merely a puppet of one class. In Pakistan, this took the form of a **military–bureaucratic oligarchy**.

Such a state did **not govern for the masses**. Instead, it mediated between **three classes**:

1. **Indigenous bourgeoisie**
2. **Landed aristocracy**
3. **Metropolitan bourgeoisie in core countries**

That’s why Alavi called it **overdeveloped** – not in economy or society, but **politically**: it had a **modern executive structure** but still presided over **traditional economies and social relations**.

Why was the state so powerful?

Alavi identified three key **reasons**:

1. **Colonial laws** → British colonial rule left behind a strong **bureaucracy** and rigid administrative structures.
2. **Party legacies of freedom movements** → Nationalist parties carried **legitimacy**, and after independence there was little popular resistance to strong executives.
3. **Development models** → In early post-colonial economies, **resources were concentrated in the state**, giving it control through planning and distribution.

Consequences

This led to systems like the **inspector raj** and **licence raj** before the 1990s — where bureaucracy and permits dominated economic life, often stifling enterprise.

But today, the picture is shifting. With **deepening democracy, human rights activism, and judicial activism**, post-colonial states like India and Pakistan are no longer dominated entirely by



bureaucratic or military elites. The **trajectory** is **changing**, though the colonial legacy still casts a shadow.

The Essence

Hamza Alavi's **Overdeveloped State** theory reminds us: post-colonial states are not carbon copies of the West. They are *hybrids*: politically modern but economically and socially traditional, powerful yet constrained by class compromises.

Modern Relevance of Post-Colonial Theory

1. Dependency School (A. G. Frank, Samir Amin)

- **Global Supply Chains** → Even today, Global South countries supply cheap **raw materials** and low-wage labor, while profits accumulate in the industrialised **North and MNCs** (e.g., cobalt mining in Congo for Western tech companies).
- **Unequal Exchange in Trade** → WTO and trade agreements often favor developed countries, keeping developing countries locked in **structural dependence**.
- **Debt Trap & IMF Conditionalities** → Loans and structural adjustment programs resemble “neo-colonial” tools of control.

Relevance: Explains why “Atmanirbhar Bharat” (self-reliance) and calls for reforming global institutions remain strong political themes.

2. Prismatic Society Model (F. W. Riggs)

- **Formalism** → Laws exist but weakly enforced (e.g., environmental regulations, anti-defection law loopholes).
- **Polycommunalism** → Communal tensions in diverse societies, where groups coexist but trust deficit persists (e.g., CAA–NRC debates, sectarian divides in Nigeria).

- **Polynormativism** → Conflicting legal codes (e.g., debate over **marital rape law**; alcohol prohibition vs. social acceptance).
- **Bazar–Canteen Economy** → Coexistence of free market (e-commerce boom) with subsidies and welfare schemes (ration, MGNREGA).

Relevance: Helps us understand governance complexities in **hybrid democracies** like India.

3. Soft State (Gunnar Myrdal)

- **Weak implementation of laws** → Land ceiling acts, environmental protection rules, and anti-corruption laws often stay on paper.
- **Corruption & Criminal Politics** → Electoral candidates with criminal charges still winning elections.
- **Culture of Disobedience** → Selective law obedience — from traffic violations to mass protests (e.g., farmers’ protest against farm laws, where disobedience is seen as legitimate political expression).

Relevance: Explains governance challenges in India despite strong legal frameworks.

4. Overdeveloped State (Hamza Alavi)

- **Military–Bureaucratic Oligarchies** → Still visible in countries like Pakistan, Myanmar, Egypt, where armies dominate politics.
- **Inspector Raj** → **Bureaucratic Overreach** → Though liberalisation reduced it in India, new forms like regulatory overreach in start-ups, compliance burdens on MSMEs still echo the old model.
- **Concentration of Resources** → Large state role in infrastructure, natural resources, and welfare makes the executive still very powerful.
- **Changing Trends** → Judicial activism, civil



society protests, RTI, social media, and decentralisation challenge the monopoly of executives today.

Relevance: Explains why governance reform is still a central agenda in South Asia.

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1. Post-colonial theory of the state. 2020, 10
2. Make an assessment of the post-colonial understanding of State. 2010, 30
3. Critically examine Hamza Alavis Formulation of the over developed state. 2009, 60

