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# **Veiled Power: The Art of Modern State Control**

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## **Abstract:**

This essay examines the mechanisms through which modern states perpetuate their authority, contrasting historical despotic rule with contemporary forms of control. While classical autocracies relied on overt coercion and centralized power, modern states employ rationalization, legitimization, and ideological hegemony to maintain dominance. Rationalization is achieved through bureaucratic systems, legal-rational authority, and technology, as described by Michael Mann's concept of infrastructural power and Max Weber's bureaucratic theory. Legitimization occurs through ideologies propagated via media, education, and welfare policies, fostering public trust and acceptance. Drawing on Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony, the essay looks at how states secure passive consent by embedding their values in civil society, supplemented by coercive measures during crises, as Giorgio Agamben's "state of exception" illustrates.

**Keywords: Modern state, Rationalization, Legitimacy, Hegemony, infrastructural power, state control.**

In history books, we read about the ancient empires and how the coercive force and fear was used to control people's life and they had little control over their lives. Remembering the older times when states used to rule through despotic power, we generally feel relieved that now we are independent and free from any state rule. But, we forget the invisible force that we have on ourselves. We are so normalized in laws, regulations and nation-state theory, that we do not find any odd in being guided by the state. It's very common that we have this notion in mind that we have our autonomy and whatever state implies on us is for our better. While overt force and centralized authority were hallmarks of autocratic power, contemporary nations increasingly rely on ideological frameworks and institutional mechanisms (such as bureaucracy, legal systems, and technology) to retain control. In classical despotism, rulers like the tsars in Russia or Mughal emperors held absolute power, often justified by divine right or hereditary rule. Even in the case of India, the British Raj's colonial administration included aspects of autocratic control, such as the use of direct military force, the repression of dissent (such as in the Jallianwala Bagh massacre),

and centralized government. But the kind of control that we seem to ignore today is infrastructural and ideological in nature. This aspect of authority has evolved through time in most of the nations. Modern state rationalises and legitimizes its control in such a manner that we find it necessary for our secure life and even beneficial at times. In this essay, this aspect of the modern state by which it perpetuates its hegemonic rule, rationalises the necessity of its rule and legitimizes its authority. Rationalisation is basically a process by which a state organizes its authority in a rule-based efficient manner. State uses bureaucratic systems (that Michael Mann calls ‘ Infrastructural power’) , legal-rational authority, use of technology , etc for rationalising its authority. Legitimation as a process used by the state uses ideology to make people trust the system and to make their governance acceptable. This is done in various ways by providing people a channel to elect their representatives, providing people with welfare policies, propagating dominant ideology through educational institutions and media, etc. Hegemonic rule in modern states is perpetuated through a combination of ideological domination, institutional control, economic structures, and coercive measures when necessary(state of exception).

### **Rationalisation of state's control**

The crystallization of the modern state in response to various social powers such as military, ideological, and economic rationalizes the state control by connecting it to societal needs. For example, the state's jurisdiction in welfare schemes, market schemes, feminist movements are some of the endless dimensions of state where it controls things. The systematic bureaucratic structures rationally allocate states' intentions. Mann highlights Weber's notion of state, differs in one aspect that military may not be attached to state as seen in modern states. The legal system along with legal rational authority makes the concept of state neutral to all ( Mann, 2005, pp 76-81). In India, the Constitution serves as the supreme legal framework that defines the scope of state power and individual rights, ensuring that governance is bound by established laws. So, the written laws rationalize the state and its control. According to Max Weber's theory of bureaucracy, modern states rely on established administrative frameworks to carry out laws and enforce regulations. Bureaucracy reduces decision-making arbitrariness by ensuring impersonal, rule-based, and systematic government. Further, the crystallization of state in efficient resource allocation and specialized institutions for various functions, for instance, health, education, defence helps state to

govern efficiently and rationalizes its need. Another aspect of this can be how democratic setups for electing government makes it seem that government is not exclusive and we constitute this. In the face of this indirect control, the state controls our everyday life. Even personal life such as marriage, death has to be certified by the state and comes under the state's jurisdiction. In "State of Exception," Giorgio Agamben explores how the state can increase its authority by defending extraordinary actions taken in times of crisis. He argues that the state can temporarily suspend regular legal frameworks by characterizing some circumstances as emergencies; this move has eventually become the norm. From the medieval times till modern times, these phenomena are increasing since the state rationalises this as a part of necessity and not exception ( Agamben, 2005). More recently, measures like the abrogation of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir (2019) and the prolonged internet shutdowns in the region reflect how exceptional governance practices are normalized under the pretext of security and integration. In India, the imposition of the Emergency (1975–77) under Indira Gandhi also exemplifies this. Fundamental rights were suspended, dissent was suppressed, and state control was justified as necessary for national stability. In these types of methods, the modern state rationalises their control and governance which is not by military directly, rather by indirect control through laws and administration structures.

Rationalization can sometimes lead to excessive centralization of authority, undermining local autonomy or diversity in governance.

### **Legitimation of state's control**

Legitimation starts with the ideology of state that it incorporates in public through media, educational institutions, etc. It gives power to govern through inculcating acceptance of that rule. States promoting national identity, cultural heritage, or religious values lead to their legitimation of authority. By promoting a shared belief system, States create a sense of collective identity and purpose, which helps them to legitimise their rule. Legitimation of the state's control is not a one-time event but a continuous process of justifying its power. With rationalisation, the state's authority is justified and made to seem like necessary and beneficial. The state justifies its control by presenting itself as the guardian of public order, security, and well-being. It accomplishes this through a variety of institutions such as law, religion, education, and media, all of which are

frequently aligned with state ideas in order to ensure that people accept government power. Media often portrays protests as anti national and thereby inculcating conformist mindset that accepts the state rule as necessary and beneficial. Mechanisms like transparency laws (e.g., India's Right to Information Act) and independent institutions (e.g., Election Commission) enhance legitimacy by holding the state accountable to its citizens. Programs like Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (financial inclusion) and Ayushman Bharat (healthcare) enhance legitimacy by addressing socio-economic needs. States justify their rule by demonstrating effective governance and delivering welfare benefits to their citizens such as economic growth, public services and security. When government meet these Performance expectations, the gain public trust and acceptance.

According to Michael Mann, the legitimacy of the modern state is derived from its control over the means of violence and distributive power, which allows it to mold both the economic and the cultural environment. In the case of Jammu and Kashmir, the Indian government utilized its authority over military and political systems to impose its decision, claiming that security considerations justified such drastic measures. A state's legitimacy is also reinforced when it is recognized by other states and international organizations as a sovereign entity (Mann, 2005). Nationalism is often used to legitimize the state and not following state's rule is going anti-nation. Initiatives like "Ek Bharat Shreshtha Bharat" promote unity in diversity while reinforcing national identity as a source of legitimacy.

### **How Hegemonic rule is perpetuated by the modern state?**

Hegemonic rule refers to how the state maintains control through its institutions and ideas, influencing societal consciousness and assuring consent even when power is not directly exerted. To maintain its power, the state uses not only force but also consent and intellectual control. Antonio Gramsci introduced the notion of hegemony, stating that the contemporary state is based not just on coercion but also on "passive consent" from civil society. Civil society includes a variety of non-governmental entities such as the media, education, and religious organizations that act as agents of the state's ideology. The state uses these routes to promote its agenda as common sense, making it appear natural and unquestionable. Gramsci's hegemony theory explains how the state builds a system of beliefs and values that people accept as normal, rather than simply forcing them to obey( Gramsci, 1992). The government, led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), has

actively promoted an image of India as a Hindu nation, which is portrayed as part of the country's ancient cultural legacy. The state has developed a sense of Hindu national identity through educational reforms, media narratives, and political rhetoric, gaining the passive acceptance of a sizable segment of the populace. This method sustains the state's hegemonic authority by embedding its ideology in the very fabric of society, making dissent appear unpatriotic or disruptive. State control people through control over cultural production. The state's dominance over important institutions including the court, police, military, and media contributes to its hegemonic domination. For example, in India, the media plays an important role in molding public opinion by disseminating narratives that support the state's goals. Media outlets that support the government frequently portray policies in a positive light, presenting moves such as the repeal of Article 370 or the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) as important for national security and social stability. By dominating media narratives, the state guarantees that dissenting voices are silenced, so maintaining its dominance. The Indian government has increasingly influenced media narratives to align public opinion with state policies. Journalists critical of government actions have faced harassment or legal action under sedition laws. The controversial farm laws were presented as reforms to modernize agriculture. Despite widespread protests, the government used media narratives to portray dissenters as misinformed or anti-national, combining infrastructural efficiency with ideological framing. This is how states use the social institutions to produce information that they want people to know.

Modern states create institutions that appear neutral but are designed to reinforce hegemonic control. These include legal systems, bureaucracies, and international organizations. In India, laws like the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) allow for indefinite detention under anti-terrorism pretexts. While framed as necessary for national security, such measures suppress dissent and consolidate state power.

In India, a large number of politicians are also actors or actresses, well-known for their parts in films that advocate for social causes, patriotism, and high moral standards. Their enormous fan base, or ideological support base, guarantees that these celebrities will continue to hold sway when they enter politics. The cultural power they possess is more important than force. The public thinks that their depiction of morally upright individuals in movies equates to political skill. Their perception of themselves as "good" leaders is so embedded that it permeates daily existence. this

is how the state maintains cultural hegemony—through the deep interconnection of culture, media, and politics.

Where hegemony weakens, coercion is selectively deployed to reassert dominance as Agamben talks in case of ‘state of exception’. The state becomes more despotic when it faces challenges to its authority, using laws, technology, and force to maintain control. While democracy provides checks and balances, historical patterns suggest that in times of war, internal unrest, or public health crises, the state justifies increased coercion in the name of security and stability.

For example ; Launched in 2020, the Ayushman Bharat Digital Mission (ABDM) shows how the state maintains its hegemonic power while rationalizing and legitimizing its control over healthcare. By creating a national health ID and a digital platform for services, health data, and financing, this program seeks to digitally revolutionize India's healthcare system and give access to healthcare to the country's economically disadvantaged citizens. This mission is rationalized by the state as a way to ensure that India's disorganized healthcare system can provide services effectively and openly. By digitizing insurance plans, health records, and service delivery platforms, the state hopes to cut down on inefficiencies including manual errors, bureaucratic delays, and corruption. This aligns with the broader narrative of India's move towards a "Digital India," thus justifying the state's role in the digitalisation process. By portraying Ayushman Bharat as a social justice movement that aims to solve health care access disparities, the state legitimizes its control over healthcare. The provision of free or subsidized healthcare coverage to eligible families (especially those from rural areas) generates public support, contributing to the legitimacy of the program. Celebrities, public leaders, and health activists are mobilised to endorse and explain the benefits of digital health records and access to free medical services, normalizing the acceptance of state control in the realm of personal health. However, in all these charming frontwork, what is hidden is the indirect surveillance and control of state. The digitalization of healthcare enables the state to collect massive amounts of personal health data, which is maintained in centralized systems. The government's control over this data provides it with extraordinary monitoring capabilities, allowing it to monitor health trends, track individual treatment histories, and even predict health crises. This establishes a level of control in which the state may monitor each individual's healthcare journey. This centralised digital platform makes the state the primary actor in shaping healthcare outcomes, further entrenching its hegemonic power.

## **Conclusion**

The modern state justifies and legitimizes its authority through bureaucratic efficiency, the development of extraordinary powers during times of crisis, and ideological manipulation. By embedding power within legal frameworks, delivering public services effectively, promoting cultural alignment, and ensuring accountability, states secure their right to govern without relying solely on coercion. Hegemonic dominance is maintained through a combination of coercion and acceptance, with the state enforcing its will through physical force while simultaneously maintaining power through cultural and ideological means. Through these processes, the state maintains its domination, making its authority look natural and unavoidable, while also preserving the stability of the existing social and political order.

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