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SAGES: Imagining India

Nationalism vs. Colonialism Essay

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Nationalism vs. Colonialism

Nationalism is popularly defined as the pride in one’s country. However, the term has a much deeper significance in a historical context as the instigator of colonialism and conversely revolutions. Benedict Anderson defines a nation as being an “imagined community” in the sense that the idea of a nation, politically and culturally, is fabricated in the minds’ of the people living in it. From this idea of a nation spawns the concept of nationalism. In his novel, Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World, Partha Chatterjeee discusses the origins and expansion of nationalism both within a nation and across borders. He argues that nationalism originated in the west and extended to the east. He explains the differences between the two and the different perceptions western and eastern nationalism receive. For example, Chatterjee explains why eastern nationalism is viewed as spiritual as opposed to western nationalism, which is seen as materialistic. Colonialism, or the control of a weaker nation by stronger nation, is a way through which nationalism spread to Eastern countries. A paradox lies in the fact that eastern, colonized nations were indirectly taught to be nationalistic by western, imperialist nations, and that they used this nationalism to revolt against colonial powers. This paradox is apparent when explored in the context of Britain’s colonization of India.

The British Empire controlled present day India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh from 1958 until they gained their independence in 1947. India was its largest investment in the East and consequently its biggest loss when India revolted against their colonial rule. The British Empire was a strong imperialist nation and was advanced militarily, economically and socially. They were able to take power in the east because in the east there existed many separate regions ruled by different kings. Within these regions there were also many separate villages. The east lacked unity. They, of course, realized this. The British worked together as a whole to control them, and by this example they knew that they had to unite against the common enemy of the British. However, they realized that the hatred of the British was not the only common thread among the people of India. Through this unification of culture, tradition, and in some cases religion they eventually expelled the British. Chatterjee explains why and how this occurred in the context of nationalism, and also the significance of the transfer of nationalism from the British to the India.

In his book, Chatterjee states that on the imaginary time-scale of nationalism the west is ahead of the east and that the western concept of nationalism is developed on a more modern ideal. This is why western influence in the east spread nationalism. It is obvious that the concept of a nation was derived from the western ideas of commonalities within borders and territories. These ideas transferred to the east and sparked unity and eventually nationalism. Although eastern nationalism is an imitation of western nationalism, they are clearly very different in nature and in practice. Western nationalism is a material belief that western nations are more civilized and superior and must therefore spread their superiority to those inferior to them (the “White Man’s Burden”). It is materialistic in the sense that they believe that they are superior scientifically, industrially, economically, and socially. In practice, western nations used nationalism to colonize and exert control over other countries. On the other hand, in eastern nationalism there is an emphasis on spiritual superiority. They believe themselves to be more spiritual because of their strong ties to tradition, culture, and religion. They use these ties to unite and revolt against the nations that colonize them. Eastern nations both accept and reject the ideals of western nationalism. In one sense they use it for their benefit to gain independence, but in another sense they repel it for originally taking power away from them. According to Chatterjee, their use of the concept of western nationalism is its “thematic”, but their rejection of its power over them is its “problematic”. Eastern nationalism is also paradoxical because it both accepts and rejects modernity. The basis of eastern nationalism is eastern tradition and culture, but the practice of nationalism is pointedly modern.

These contradictions seem minute and unimportant in the minds of those in a nation. Nationalism naturally causes ethnocentric sentiments among people and therefore the paradoxes and contradictions are overlooked by those participating in nationalistic action. However, it is not completely justified to say that they are practicing a double standard, at least in the context of colonization. Although the east did essentially copy the idea of nationalism from the west, their actual conception of it is not at all a carbon copy. It is a fair assumption that eastern nationalism is an imitation of western nationalism, but after looking at them both on a larger scale it is apparent that in their similarities they are very dissimilar; this only proves that among humanity itself, there lies unity in diversity.