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*Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*

By Partha Chatterjee

University of Minnesota Press, 1986

Nationalism is colloquially defined as pride in one’s country. However, the term has a much deeper significance in a historical context. Nationalism is the instigator of many international processes of change. For example, colonization and revolutions are both products of nationalist thought. Partha Chatterjee’s book, Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World, describes the effect that nationalism had during the struggle for independence in British India. Nationalist thought, in this case, facilitated an incredibly drastic change: independence for the Indian subcontinent and the end of British colonial rule. The purpose of this essay is to provide a critical analysis of Chatterjee’s book based on how it is written and what it is arguing. I will first give a brief summary of central themes and ideas in the book. Then, I will analyze the content of the book. The questions I will attempt to answer include: how India’s fight for Independence is an example of a change movement in the context of our course, and why Chatterjee’s book provides a strong argument.

The book begins by explaining that nationalism causes contradictions and problems within political discourse. Chatterjee, in the specific context of colonialism, explains how nationalism is the basis for both colonization and the desire for freedom. Basically, he argues that nationalist thought is not a singular or holistic idea. On the contrary it is fragmented into different parts. Chatterjee distinguishes between different types of nationalism. He insinuates that Eastern and Western societies have different kinds of nationalism. Within Eastern nationalism, Chatterjee discusses three “ideological moments” that are essential for nationalism to culminate into a desired result. These moments are the Moment of Departure, the Moment of Manoeuvre, and the Moment of Arrival. For each moment, Chatterjee names an individual and the mechanisms he used to accomplish his goal.

The Moment of Departure was led by a novelist by the name of Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay. In 1882 he wrote the poem Vande Mataram, a national song of India that united the people through culture. Bankimchandra used the lack of solidarity in Indian culture to explain the subjection of the people. Solidarity of the Indian people would lead to the nationalism they desired. Bankimchandra was the first to take a truly influential stand against the British. The Moment of Manoeuvre was led by Mohandas K. Gandhi. Gandhi’s actions united the Indian masses by critiquing civil society. His ideas were revolutionary and able to inspire millions. Gandhi rejected the caste system and other social injustices. He also promoted self-sufficiency but with an altruistic nature. His ability to sway the masses was arguably a direct cause for Independence. The Moment of Arrival was led by India’s first Prime Minister, Jawarharlal Nehru. In 1947, Nehru formed the first functional government of India. He followed some of Gandhi’s ideals but applied them in a political context. For example, he outlawed the practice of the caste system. He sustained Gandhi’s legacy and created a just government under many of his own ideals.

These three men were revolutionaries that used nationalism in different contexts to unite their country. Chatterjee uses these three men to explain how the different types of nationalism were a source of power that resulted in colonization, then the mass revolt, and eventually the independence of India.

The purpose of the book was to reconcile nationalism in the context of colonialism and the dilemma it causes. Chatterjee is trying to challenge the typical assertions made about nationalism and its effects on the processes of colonization and decolonization. Underneath his main thesis, Chatterjee indirectly provides his readers with an explanation as to how and why independence for India was accomplished. These processes affected all aspects of life: personal, social, economic, political, religious, and cultural.

This leads us to the relevance of the book on a large scale. Chatterjee helps us not only to understand different leadership styles but also to give us another model of how change occurs in the context of colonization and decolonization. I think Chatterjee’s audience is definitely highly educated. He is writing to historians, political scientists, anthropologists and other students, researchers or educators in related studies. Many of Chatterjee’s claims are controversial and suggestive, but they attempt to answer fundamental questions about nationalism from historical and anthropological approaches.

When I first read this book, it reminded me of the first few days in class when we discussed change agents and their purposes. This is not a book about change, but change is a definitely underlying theme. The change that Chatterjee addresses is in a cultural, social, and political sphere; thus the change agents must address these aspects.

As we discussed, change initiators are the individuals or things that spark change. They create a novel idea or experience that differs from the present situation. Chatterjee’s change initiator was Bankimchandra, who used poetry to inspire ideas of unity and revolt. Change implementers are the individuals or things that carry out and expand the idea or experience of change. They take the process of change to a higher level. Gandhi successfully expanded the idea of an independent, free India to the masses. He used the problems in society to do this. Change facilitators sustain and aid the change that occurs. These facilitators allow the change to leave a legacy of some sort. Lastly, Chatterjee brings in Nehru who created an Indian government that still stands strong today. Though it is not free of corruption, it is still growing largely due to Nehru’s legacy.

Chatterjee’s book is incredibly dense and very intuitive. The actual content of the book is very interesting and the theories that Chatterjee supports can be evocative. He continually goes back to his central theme of nationalism and its problems. However, without background knowledge on the subject matter I can see how the book may be difficult to understand. As someone who already knows a lot about the subject, I found it very informative. It allowed me to view Indian independence from a familiar but altered perspective. It was a context that I had never thought of before.

Chatterjee’s writing style is at times convoluted and incredibly wordy. He uses long and sometimes tangential quotes that can throw off the reader. In discussing the different change agents he goes into excruciating detail about each of their ideas. Though they are helpful to know, they stray away from the purpose of the book.

Overall, I would recommend this book to an audience that is highly interested in its subject matter: nationalism. Nationalism, according to Chatterjee, is a mechanism of change. He proves that nationalism is different depending on contexts and situations and book was both informative and suggestive. It challenged many existing theories on nationalism. In my opinion, the book was more about the Indian context than nationalist thought. The case of British India was supposed to be supportive example of Chatterjee’s theory, but I think it consumed his whole piece. However, I may have concentrated more on the Indian context of nationalism because that is what interests me. However, all in all, the book introduced a different way of thinking about nationalism, colonialism and resulting changes.