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Book Review

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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 the British Raj, or the Indian subcontinent. Nationalist thought, in this case, facilitated an incredibly drastic change: independence for the Indian subcontinent and the end of British colonial rule. Chatterjee looks at three key figures in India’s history and how they conceptualized and were influenced by nationalism. These three figures are: Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, Mohandas Gandhi, and Jawaharlal Nehru. This review will provide a critical analysis of Chatterjee’s book based on how it is written and what it is arguing. First, a brief summary of central themes and ideas in the book will be given. Then, the essay will analyze the content of the book.

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 one of the aforementioned figures and the mechanisms he used to accomplish his goal.

The Moment of Departure was led by a novelist by the name of Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (also known as Bankim Chatterjee). He wrote many articles, books, and poems that addressed the issue of nationalism. According to Chatterjee, Chattopadhyay believed that a spiritual (specifically Hindu) and cultural revival was needed in India in order to combat British power. In 1882 he wrote the poem Bande Mataram, a national song of Bengal and India that united many people through Hindu culture. Bankimchandra used the lack of solidarity and vitality in Indian culture to explain the subjection of the people. Spiritual solidarity of the Indian people would lead to the nationalism they desired. However, Bankimchandra could not lead a revolution with the support of just Hindu elite; he needed the support of the masses. The Moment of Manoeuvre was led by Mohandas K. Gandhi. Chatterjee argues that Gandhi’s actions united the Indian masses by critiquing civil society. His movements of passive disobedience were holistic and were able to inspire thousands. He incorporated peasants and subalterns in satyagraha. 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. Chatterjee argues that Nehru was able to reconcile Gandhi’s social ideologies with the realistic politics of the world. He sustained Gandhi’s legacy and created a solid foundation for 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 suggests that they were each chosen as part of the puzzle that led to independence. That is to say, Nehru could not have done what Gandhi did, and vice versa. 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 Chatterjee’s book was to reconcile nationalism in the context of colonialism and the dilemma it causes. He is trying to challenge the typical, Orientalist 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 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. 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 and arguments are controversial and suggestive, but they attempt to answer fundamental questions about nationalism from historical and anthropological approaches. This is not a book about change, but change is definitely an underlying theme. The change that Chatterjee addresses is in a cultural, social, and political sphere; thus the change agents (Chattopadhyay, Gandhi, and Nehru) must address these aspects.

It is very apparent that Chatterjee falls under the postcolonial category of historiography. He believes that colonialism in India caused irreparable changes in society and culture. Most notably he addresses how colonialism affected the Western and Eastern perception of nationalism. This is a reason why Chatterjee critiques Orientalist historiography. The dichotomy between Eastern and Western nationalism is poignantly stressed throughout the book. However, this is Chatterjee’s criticism of Orientalism rather than his own version of it.

“Orientalism *created* the Oriental; it was a body of knowledge in which the Oriental was ‘*contained* and *represented* by dominating frameworks’ and Western power over the Orient was given the ‘status of scientific truth’. Thus Orientalism was ‘a kind of Western projection onto and will to govern over the Orient’.” (Chatterjee, 36)

In this quote Chatterjee is showing how Orientalism perceived Eastern nationalism to be that of a subjective and passive society. 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. Chatterjee strives to eradicate that Orientalist notion and thus shows how the three figures created a new sense of Eastern nationalism. In some aspects, Chatterjee can also be seen as a subaltern historiographer, as he addresses the heavy role that the masses played in Independence.

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 moments and respective figures he goes into excruciating detail about each of their ideas. Though they are helpful to know, sometimes they drift away from the purpose of the book. This makes it incredibly dense but still very intuitive. The material in 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 the book may be difficult to understand. The book allows the reader to view Indian independence from a familiar but still altered perspective. In terms of the books actual content, Chatterjee does a good job in addressing the faults with Bankim’s ideals, but not so much with Gandhi or Nehru. He shows how Bankim focused too much on the Hindu elite; religion was too heavily involved in his battle and that was not going to unite the diverse population of India. Gandhi was able to sway the masses. Chatterjee seems to glorify Gandhi in many ways.

“...Gandhism provided for the first time in Indian politics an ideological basis for including the *whole people* within the political nation. In order to do this, it quite consciously sought to bridge even the most sanctified cultural barriers that divided the people in an immensely complex agrarian society. Thus, it was not simple a matter of bringing the peasantry into the national movement, but of consciously seeking the ideological means for bringing it in *as a whole*. This, for instance, is how one can interpret the strenuous efforts by Gandhi to obliterate the ‘sin’ of the existing *jati* divisions in Indian society and the ‘deadly sin’ of untouchability in particular...” (Chatterjee, 110)

Historians would argue that Gandhi’s attempts to eradicate untouchability were not exemplary of his efforts to ‘include the whole people’. Rather, historians might focus more on his Salt March, which united people simply because all Indians must use salt regardless of caste or religion. Chatterjee focused a lot on Gandhi’s concept of the universal Truth and how he applied in the social atmosphere to gain popular support. Chatterjee’s fault with Gandhi is simply that he was not a politician and he would not be able to lead India after independence. Historians would argue that by the time independence came, Gandhi was just a symbol. Nehru, the last of the three figures, is also glorified, but Chatterjee implies that he has set up government whose success will only be determined by its future history.

Nationalism, according to Chatterjee, is a mechanism of change. He proves that nationalism is different depending on contexts and situations and his book was both informative and thought-provoking. It challenged many existing theories on nationalism, especially the Orientalist view of it. Although, the book was more about the Indian context than nationalist thought in general, it still provides a good example for his theory on nationalism. All in all, the book introduced a different way of thinking about nationalism, colonialism and resulting changes. In the end he leaves the reader with an open-ended idea; nationalism has not reached its full potential and in the post-colonial nation it is very difficult to achieve that. So the question remains: “how will nationalism supersede itself?” (Chatterjee, 162)