



International Journal of Humanities & Social Science Studies (IJHSSS)
A Peer-Reviewed Bi-monthly Bi-lingual Research Journal
ISSN: 2349-6959 (Online), ISSN: 2349-6711 (Print)
Volume-I, Issue-III, November 2014, Page No.173-177
Published by Scholar Publications, Karimganj, Assam, India, 788711
Website: <http://www.ijhsss.com>

The Historical Challenges of Nationalism: Through the Eyes of Chatterjee and Appleby

Syed S. Uddin-Ahmed

Doctoral Candidate in History Program: “Modern World History” St. John’s College of Liberal Arts and Sciences St. John’s University (U.S.A.)

Abstract

Writing the history of a nation or national requires that, authors must deal with a number of pressing issues, including how they define and imagine a nation. There really is no one-size-fits-all definition of “nation,” because interpretations vary greatly depending upon the perspective of the author and the conditions under which they carry out their study. History is vital to explaining the significant impacts of events on society and culture. In this paper I would like to address dynamic challenges authors face when examining the idea of a nation brings to mind the question Appleby considered regarding what might bind together a diverse group of people under the banner of a particular nation. This issue is especially interesting in the context of his analysis of the problems with the formation of the American national identity. Another question related to this investigation, posited by Tosh, is whether the study of national history limits the scope of the writer of history. Finally, a third question, this posed by Chatterjee, deals with when looking at the way history has evolved, how we sort out the contradictory elements within a single nationalist discourse.

Key Words: Nationalism, Society, India, Nation-state, The West, Europe.

When writing the history of a nation or nationhood, authors must deal with a number of pressing issues, including how they define and imagine a nation. There really is no one-size-fits-all definition of “nation,” because interpretations vary greatly depending upon the perspective of the author and the conditions under which they carry out their study. History writers do not necessarily look to write accounts of what is “good” about a society or justify particular events; rather, they tend to be more interested in explaining issues that illustrate the process of how a society and culture evolve or develop over time. History is vital to explaining the significant impacts of events on society and culture.

An analysis of the dynamic challenges authors face when examining the idea of a nation brings to mind the question Appleby considered regarding what might bind together a diverse group of people under the banner of a particular nation. This issue is especially interesting in the context of his analysis of the problems with the formation of the American national identity. Another question related to this investigation, posited by Tosh, is whether the study of national history limits the scope of the writer of history. Finally, a third question, this posed by Chatterjee, deals with when looking at the way history has evolved, how we sort out the contradictory elements within a single nationalist discourse.

The first question to ponder is what might bind together into a nation a group of people that is often quite different and diverse. According to Appleby, history plays a major role in building the idea of a nation, because historians keep records and track the significant accomplishments of a nation, thus making it that much easier for us to understand as a concept.¹

The challenge faced by an author writing the history of a nation is that a nation cannot simply be reduced to a static geographic or physical thing. Historians are interested in the evolution and

¹ Appleby, Joyce, Hunt, Lynn, & Margaret, Jacob. *Telling The Truth About History*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1994, 79.

progress of a society. Often, history writers find themselves in a position where they must imagine and portray a picture of what a state is, while at the same time maintaining a level of objectivity; this can be very difficult.

History is a social science, and as such it is a vehicle for significant change and development within a society. According to Appleby, “people looked to national history to illuminate the course of human progress that brought modern nations into being.”² Societies in Europe embraced their identity as uniquely European. This is important because politically, socially, and culturally these nations in Europe experienced a level of uniformity and commonality. This, for example, would not be as easily done in the United States at the time of independence.

The United States was very different from Europe because the geographic landscape, culture, and traditions of the people in the United States were not similar. Americans were in many ways “in between,” since they were influenced by both Europeans and Native Americans.³ In America, what was lacking was a uniform identity with regards to what it meant to be an American; people practiced different beliefs, since there was no state church or ritual that forced them into a collective faith. The dilemma was, however, that America would need to create an identity to also create a sense of unity for its significantly diverse people. In New England, there were Puritans working long hours in the field while in the Carolinas you might have masters with many slaves working on their plantations. As a result, there was a real need to create a national image.

The fact that America was initially a colony of England offered a dynamic opportunity to see a shift in the way a potential new American state would be run. This was because the experience of having been colonized opened up an opportunity for Americans to attempt a democratic system. This would be a country not controlled by a king or ruled over by an official state church, and thus it would open up interesting possibilities. However, the process of creating a constitution while attempting to be open and democratic really was an extension of the beliefs of the elites in the United States.⁴ The result was an administration of elite leaders who were divorced from the lives of the majority in the citizens of the United States.

The formation of an American identity took much more than a war and the drafting of a constitution. According to Appleby, “the working out of the content of American identity did not take place until the mid-1790s when the events of the French Revolution converged with new developments in American domestic politics.”⁵ This is an example of the dynamic challenges faced by writers of history when they try to explain what brings together a diverse group of people to form a nation, such as was the case with the United States.

Moreover, Tosh brought up another interesting challenge that writers of history face. He asked: does the study of national histories limit the scope of the writers of history? Are national histories limited and regional in their scope and impact? When writing a national history, do writers of history handcuff themselves and turn themselves into regional specialists? Would this create a problem of limitation in their coverage? Could writers isolate history to the extent that the writer could close him or herself off to another world of possibilities and explanations? Are there dynamic perspectives and approaches that writers leave out when specializing in one particular area? Could they be guilty of having a pro-western bias in the histories that they produce?

This is fascinating to consider when examining national histories; big picture issues can be missed or totally unaccounted for if the eye of the social scientist is drawn solely to a particular country or region. Tosh offered a critique of the idea of a nation-state being the only means of pursuing history when he stated, “first ... it fails to engage the communities in which it engages with, and secondly it ignores global networks that have explained and constrained a nation’s development.”⁶ Societies are not static and also not immune to things that happen around them or in other parts of the world.

Studying the nation-state is very important to Western historians, but this also comes with the problem that having a particular ideological perspective can blind one and keep them from

² Ibid, 79.

³ Ibid, 79.

⁴ Ibid, 80

⁵ Ibid, 80.

⁶ Tosh, John. *The Pursuit of History*. Great Britain: Longman, 2010.

considering other viewpoints. For example, there were many civilizations in the Chinese, Indian, and Islamic spheres that had full running governments and sophisticated recording keeping and trade. These regions had a much different approach to history than what was being seen from the Western perspective of nation-states.

Moreover, Tosh brought up an interesting point in his critique of limiting oneself when looking at the nation-state; global issues such as the rapid spread of Islam and trade in India also have an impact on history.⁷ A comparative approach, instead of this highly Westernized concept of studying only the nation-state, could be more fruitful for the historian acting as an observer. It allows for a more universal and complete analysis of historical events. However, for a long time - before the rise of World History - the study of nation-states was pursued vigorously by historians.

There is a limiting effect in studying history solely according to the nation-state perspective, especially in terms of the possibility of understanding the world outside of that particular nation and for the most part, the Western world. This approach leads to a rigidity in thought and a dismissal of significant events that take place in other parts of the world. This is the reason why many historians create histories that are more or less propaganda promulgating an image of Western superiority. What Tosh's critiques do well is create a sense of awareness when writing the history of a "global picture beyond what was thought as a possibility by western writers of history."⁸

His critique is both refreshing and exciting because it brings up the notion of the historian as a social scientists who must look at the bigger picture and be cognizant of a global perspective, even when dealing with a national history. Through his critique, he illustrates a major dilemma with the idea of pursuing history only through the nation-state approach: we miss the effects of globalization. For example, Tosh states that "our world has become more integrated and uniform, shrinking both time and distance, [which means that] the world can be seen through a broader more global sense." This goes against the limiting views of studying just the nation-state."⁹

The critique gets to the heart of writing and understanding history from a non-Western perspective. This is vital because the history of areas outside the West, especially China and Mughal India, have had dynamic developments that were left out of the histories produced in the West. Even more troubling is the broad application of Western histories when looking at the outside world, especially with regards to colonization and biased views of developing nations. According to Tosh, "Europe's lead over the rest of the world became clear in the nineteenth century, especially in the spheres of technology and production[;] however today's world is explained by creative reactions in the Third World, in religion, and surprisingly in national identity and social organization."¹⁰ This is one of the dynamic challenges faced by writers of history, especially when dealing with the question of whether the study national histories limit the scope of the writer of history. Such a study could lead to missed opportunities in understanding the outside world, and to a certain level of Western bias.

Tosh's final query follows up on the idea of Western approaches and the flaws of writers of history who come from a highly Westernized perspective; such writers have created many problems for the study of non-Western society. Chatterjee brought up the dynamic question of how we sort out the contradictory elements in nationalist discourse. There are a number of disturbing issues with the idea of nationalism that works actively against non-Western states. The idea of nationalism was brought into conversations dealing with issue of development and politics in former colonies like India, for example. The great dilemma of trying to understand a society like India, a former British colony, is that nationalist rhetoric was greatly skewed to the Western perspective, and really did not fit properly into so-called developing nations.

One critique offered by Chatterjee on the idea of nationalism is that "the new global standard of progress may have been set for the rest of the world by France or Britain, based upon a set of ideas, about man, morals, and society which in their social and intellectual origins, were uniquely western

⁷ Ibid, 79.

⁸ Ibid, 80.

⁹ Ibid, 80.

¹⁰ Ibid, 81.

European.”¹¹ Chatterjee’s arguments carry significant weight because this perspective is a dominant view of many writers of history. Unfortunately, this system also creates a view of studying history which forces the Western values and perspectives that have stripped many of the former colonies of what was uniquely Indian. If a former colony espouses a system of thinking that is uniquely Western, then what becomes apparent is a way of thinking that actually works against the best interests of that particular culture.

Furthermore, if a writer of history espouses such a vehemently Western approach to writing history, it leaves cleavages in the understanding what the Indian culture really is. It becomes instead a system that oppresses and puts down the Indian voice in the formulation of the history being written about it. There is a serious danger that comes with blindly mimicking Western nationalism as a universal standard because lesser-developed nations are then essentially judged on their backwardness (determined by advanced states in the West). Chatterjee also adds that “what is distinctive here is that there is a fundamental awareness [that] the standards have come from an alien culture, and the inherited culture of the nation did not provide the necessary adaptive leverage to enable it to reach those standards.”¹²

When reaching for these goals, it is easy to forget that Eastern nationalism did not experience conditions in their development similar to those of England or France, so a foreign system does not necessarily make for a perfect fit. Chatterjee states, “The attempt is deeply contradictory as it is both imitative and hostile to the model it imitates.”¹³ From Chatterjee’s argument you can sense the level of difficulty in attempting to do this in a country like India. In a place like India, this Eastern nationalism puts at risk the culture and what is uniquely Indian as a consequence of attempting to imitate such a model. It becomes difficult because a model that sacrifices the cultural dynamics and values of India in order to imitate an alien model brings a drastic reaction against that alien model.

A major issue with following an alien model is denying the importance of culture in the formation of a nation. What role does culture play in the formation of the idea of nationalism? Chatterjee offers an interesting perspective when he states, “The knowledge of backwardness is never very comforting[;] it is even more disturbing when its removal means coming to terms with a culture that is alien.”¹⁴ The experiences of Eastern nationalism were not exactly the same as those of the West, as their practices and overall development differed. Even European nations like Germany and Italy did not mirror those of France and England. Chatterjee was able to bring up the fact the something exported out of Europe will never fit perfectly into other parts of the world, and historians writing from this perspective deny the voices of the lesser-developed world.

The fact that nationalism is a model that follows colonialism is very interesting because it helps to continue a level of dominance over former colonies. It is a model that has been used, for example, to empower England over India, because it was employed to “show” Indians how backwards they were. If the model was imitated by the Indians, they would have had to give up culturally what makes them unique and distinctive. The model would then serve as a system for continuing the dominance of an elite class from Western European states, and marginalize the lesser-developed parts of the world like India.

Chatterjee did an excellent job of highlighting how writers of history have been guilty of writing histories that have marginalized the voices of others, specifically because the notion of nationalism has had such a strong Western bias. After colonialism, it became a powerful tool for keeping up a level of superiority in the West, and made groups such as Indians feel backwards when this model was applied. Chatterjee states that “Nationalism denied the inferiority of the colonized people, assuring that even backward nations could modernize, while retaining their identity, and challenged previous views of domination.”¹⁵

Finally, this work highlighted just how much this model marginalized Indians because the model itself is alien and to adhere to it requires the sacrifice of what is uniquely Indian. These are some of

¹¹ Chatterjee, Partha. *Nationalist Thought and Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1998, 1.

¹² Ibid, 2.

¹³ Ibid, 2.

¹⁴ Ibid, 6.

¹⁵ Ibid, 30.

The Historical Challenges of Nationalism: Through the Eyes of Chatterjee and Syed S. Uddin-Ahmed
the dilemmas that writers of history are still trying to answer. How do we sort out these contradictory elements in a nationalist discourse?

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank Dr. Kinkley, the History Department Assistant Chair at St. John's University, for his guidance and support. Also, many thanks to Maya Chadda, who is a faculty member in the Department of Asian Studies at William Paterson University in New Jersey, for her tremendous seminars on South Asia and the Middle East. As well, I would like to thank Dr. Isabel Tirado of William Paterson University, for whom I teach courses such as History Since the 1500s. Finally, I owe a debt of gratitude to Jo-An L. Morris, Librarian at St. John's University, for being a constant source of support and helping me to acquire the necessary materials for this project.

Author Bio: Syed Uddin-Ahmed is a Doctoral candidate in Modern World History at St. John's University. He received an MA in Modern World History from St. Johns University in 2013, an MA in Public Policy and International Affairs from William Paterson University in 2010, and Bachelor's degrees in Political Science and Geography and Urban Studies in 2007. He teaches courses at several institutions, including Rutgers University, St. John's University, and William Paterson University.

References:

- Appleby, Joyce, Hunt, Lynn, & Margaret, Jacob. *Telling The Truth About History*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1994.
- Brown, Robert Craig. "Full Partnership in the Fortunes and Future of the Nation." *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 1, no. 3 (1995): 9-25.
- Carment, David. "Managing Interstate Ethnic Tensions: The Thai-Malay Experience." *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 1, no. 4 (1995): 1-22.
- Chatterjee, Partha. *Nationalist Thought and Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.
- Hechter, Michael. "Explaining Nationalist Violence." *Nations and Nationalism* 1, no. 1 (1995): 53-68.
- Heribert, Adam and Kogila, Moodley. "The Purchased Revolution in South Africa: Lessons for Democratic Transformations." *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 3, no. 4 (1997): 113-127.
- Knox, Colin and Hughes, Joanne. "Cross-Community Contact: Northern Ireland and Israel - A Comparative Perspective." *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 1, no. 2 (1995): 205-228.
- McGarry, John. "Explaining Ethnonationalism: The Flaws in Western Thinking." *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 1, no. 4 (1995): 121-142.
- Parekh, Bhikhu. "Ethnocentricity of the Nationalist Discourse." *Nations and Nationalism* 1, no. 1 (1995): 25-52.
- Rajagopalan, Swarna. "National Integration in India, Sri Lanka and Pakistan: Constitutional and Elite Visions." *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 3, no. 4 (1997): 1-38.
- Sonntag, Selma K. "Ethnolinguistic Identity and Language Policy in Nepal." *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 1, no. 4 (1995): 108-120.
- Suri, K.C. "Competing Interests, Social Conflict and the Politics of Caste Reservations in India." *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 1, no. 2 (1995): 229-249.
- Sandler, Shmuel. "Ethnonationalism and the Foreign Policy of Nation-States." *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 1, no. 2 (1995): 250-269.
- Tosh, John. *The Pursuit of History*. Great Britain: Longman, 2010.
