The Domain of Culture in Discourse of Nationalism in Colonial India

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ABSTRACT

With the rise in political consciousness developed a sense of an Indian identity among the social elite which helped in nourishing the budding nationalist sentiment in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Nationalist thought of the East liberated itself from the Universalist Colonial Discourses and maintained its distinctive identity and cultural autonomy. Nationalist thinkers separated the domain of culture into the 'material' and 'spiritual' spheres which was further discussed together in a similar analogy as the difference between one's inner self and external world. This project of nationalism was selective appropriation of Western modernity keeping its tradition and culture intact.

KEY WORDS: *colonial discourses, nationalist discourses, colonizer, colonized, material, spiritual, inner and outer.*

In the eighteenth century, India under the British Rule witnessed a number of changes in the social, economic and political milieu. With the emergence of economic and financial control, though under the British Rule, Indian nationalists come into direct conflict with the former. This age also saw a rise of western-educated Indian social elite class. With the rise in political consciousness these Indian social elite primarily comprising of teachers, doctors, lawyers, government officials, students and such other groups, developed an Indian identity which helped in nourishing the budding nationalist sentiment in the last decades of the nineteenth century.

In Partha Chatterjee's book "Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World", he has discussed on the differences between colonial discourses and nationalist discourses. According to him the Nationalist thought especially that of the East has not only liberated itself from the Universalist Colonial Discourses but also managed to maintain its distinctive identity and cultural autonomy. He refers to these antithetical thoughts as 'thematic' and 'problematic'. The 'thematic', according to him is the epistemological and ethical systems which provide the framework of elements and rules for establishing relations among the elements. 'Problematic' on the other hand are concrete statements about possibilities justified by reference to the elements of the thematic. The 'thematic', therefore, refers primarily to the western rationalist theory while the problematic despite of the fact being much influenced and inspired by the thematic, manages to sustain its cultural autonomy.

In India, nationalist thinkers and political reformers separated the domain of culture into the 'material' and 'spiritual' spheres. The Western Civilization where science, technology, economic and political reforms have already been established, had made European countries powerful. With the help of these developments the European countries (colonizers) established their dominion over other parts of the world including Middle-East, Asia and Africa. The people of the non-European world (colonized) in order to overcome this domination of the colonizers had to not only learn the superior material techniques of the latter but also adapt those within their own culture. One of the basic ideas of the nationalist project was to reform and rationalize the traditional culture of the colonized people. However, it was strictly opposed to imitating the West pattern of life, as it would lead to loss of self-identity and national culture of the East. In the late nineteenth century the Indian Nationalists argued that the East was far superior in matters of spiritual domain when compared to their Western counterpart. Therefore, borrowing anything other than material aspects of life from the West is not only unnecessary but also detrimental. The nationalists, therefore, while preserving and reinforcing the

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unique spiritual spirit of the national culture, also felt it essential to promote the techniques of western civilization which were far modern in nature. It is in this manner the nationalist project has justified the selective appropriation of Western modernity which very much exist till date.

Under this discourse of nationalism the distinction between the material/spiritual was discussed together in a similar dichotomy: that between the 'inner' and 'outer'. The nationalist writers referred the external aspects which influence us and decide the state of affairs as material domain, that which lies outside us. This material domain though forces us to adjust to it, however, is of less importance. On the other hand, the spiritual, lies within us and is considered to be our true and genuine self, and therefore important and indispensible. Upon this premise, these writers were of the opinion that even if India needs to compromise and adjust itself in order to sustain in the modern material world, it has to retain the spiritual distinctiveness of its culture and maintain its true identity. This nationalist concept of distinction between the material/spiritual helped in addressing and resolving various social issues which existed during the nineteenth century.

The distinction between the inner and outer was also seen in the social life. The social space was separated into home (ghar) and the world (bahir). The external aspects were in the domain of the material and their pursuit, the world (bahir). Whereas the home (ghar) was one's spiritual self, one's tradition and belief. The objective was to preserve the home and keep it away from the profane developments of the material world.

The Nationalists argued that the European powers (colonizers) were strong in the world with their superiority in material culture and with the help of this superiority they have subjugated the non-European peoples (colonized). The material weakness of the colonized had compelled them to accept the oppression of the colonizers in their daily chores. However, on the home front the colonized, with their inner, spiritual culture and self identity were superior to the colonizer. Here the colonized were rich, independent, sovereign and free to decide their own fate. The colonized felt the necessity of acquiring knowledge of the material world; learn modern ways of the West was only to strengthen itself so that the colonizers can be overthrown someday. However, in this process of self strengthening by imitating the West, no encroachment by the colonizers in the inner core of the national culture and spirit was permissible. Therefore, during the colonial rule, the aim of the nationalist project was to restore the nation culturally and to transform it at the same time. The purpose was regeneration of the national culture, without losing its distinctive identity on one hand and adapting to the requirements of the progress on the other.

Many liberals see this rejection of West as a mark of social conservation but it is not exactly so. The ideological principle of nationalism was based not on rejection of modernity; rather it was an attempt to align modernity with the nationalist project keeping its tradition and culture intact.

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