

S.A. AND S.E.A. IDEOLOGIES

The South Asian and South East Asian regions are themselves products of ideology established after colonial rule was dismantled after World War II. As a result, these newly formed nations have been a moving mosaic of various ideological articulations that began with anti-colonial struggles and continue till now informed by new exigencies, but always instructed by the concepts of tradition, religion, indigeneity, or nationalism.

Of the many forces that have shaped these regions, European colonialism is the most prominent as colonial administrations had directly managed education, racial relations, family and sexual relationships, religious adherence, and legal practices. WWII and the subsequent Cold War also contributed to substantial change.

Liberalism and its Limits

Colonial liberalism introduced and implemented ideas of restraints on the rule of law and executive powers, the concept of equality before the law, and the education of the masses. SA and SEA liberalisms appeared in response to these implementations. Education was the foremost liberal reform which created a native elite educated in the language of the colonisers that was politically situated in-between native society and colonial rule. They would go on to invoke liberalisms to gain autonomy from colonial rule, and to exhort natives to move away from certain outmoded cultural practices, or later embrace certain traditions or cultural narratives for political dividends.

As such, a crucial tension that liberalism in the region has grappled with is the rub between pursuing socio-political reform while opposing Western hegemony. Rammohan Roy, for instance, pushed for press freedom and restrictions on the power of the East India Company while simultaneously looking to enrol the help of the colonial state against regressive Hindu practices. Liberalism in India thus was marked by a robust belief in state intervention for attaining liberal ends. The Indian Constitution of 1950 is a culmination of colonial, elite, and radical liberalisms entrenching the above notion with quotas and action for social change.

Trajectories of Communism

The lack of a substantial industrial proletariat, anti-colonial movements that necessitated allying with the local capitalist class, and responding to the exigencies of the changing communist ideological and political arena in the rest of the world were the three key challenges faced by Communist Movements in SA and SEA. While some Communist leaders like Ho Chi Minh saw practical issues that needed to take precedence over ideology, given the agricultural nature of colonial society, others like M.N. Roy held that Marxist thought was compatible with the Indian context. Over time SA communists, rather than liberals, have maintained a sustained critique of religious and social orthodoxies; in so doing, communism furnished a new avenue for building cross-community solidarity to stand against injustices.

Nationalism, Developmentalism, and Tradition

SA and SEA nationalisms have encountered two key problems: how to resist colonial rule while pursuing Western-style economic and social development, and how to articulate a national good that resonates along lines of religion, race, language, and class differences.

Development in these countries was understood mainly along economic lines entailing both economic advancement and alleviation of poverty, but it also came to be associated with larger themes of social change and adaptations to modernity. For many like Nehru, social challenges such as the Hindu-Muslim divide or caste hierarchies were associated with lack of development that would sort themselves out with economic development and attendant social modernisation. Gandhi, on the other hand, had insisted that an internal transformation of the self was key to political change seeing Western excess and consumption not as goals to aspire to.

In SEA developmentalism, political stability and its steady maintenance has been the paramount aim and to that end, restraints on political expression and competition have been used and justified. Developmentalist ideology has thus permitted various permutations of authoritarian nationalism and semi-democratic practices. Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore are examples of such states that conduct developmentalist policies and politics claiming that developmentalism needs a “procedural democracy” rather than a “participatory democracy.” Along similar lines, the notion of Asian values has come to common parlance generally consisting of a balance between social rights and duties, a culturally led idea of communitarianism, and the supposition that social concord and agreement takes priority over individualism and social and political competition.

Religion and Ideology

In the SA and SEA regions, religion is simultaneously the target of ideology as well as an avenue for ideological articulation. As such, state ideologies have moulded the nature and purview of religion in the region. Colonial and post-colonial regimes have looked to solemnise their rule by upholding the religious practices of their subjects. The concept of democracy has also made ideologies of religion stronger in the region. For instance, religious majoritarianism seeks to have state favour and a greater political role proportional to its numbers.

Race, Caste, Indigeneity

Racial ideologies have been quite widely utilised to create community hierarchies in precolonial, colonial, and post-colonial states. While racial categorisation predates colonialism in SA and SEA, during colonialism it gained prominence due to European innovation in evolution, eugenics, and ethnology. Although, almost always the natives were seen as inferior and meriting the guidance of the colonisers, sometimes as in the case of Gurkhas and others given “marital status” Europeans held some natives to be superior to others. Race has also at times determined who is the true heirs and subjects of the nation, thus creating enduring

nationalisms. At times, racial categorisations have also been used to oppose the inferior status given to oppressed groups such as when anti-caste leaders invoked Dalits and Shudras as the indigenous population.

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