

The Emergence and Development of Indian Nationalism

**Historiographical Trends in
Imperialist, Nationalist and
Marxist Frameworks**

Indian Nationalism: An Overview

- In the nineteenth century, certain changes in the political arithmetic of the three presidencies, namely, Bengal, Bombay and Madras, resulted in the emergence of Indian nationalism. Some factors like the rise of professional intellectual middle class, the political cultures within the associations, British policies in the form of political concessions in order to include Indians in the lower echelon of government institutions contributed to the process of nationalism that, somehow, was confined to the arenas of constitutional moderate politics of Indian National Congress and the other associations in the presidencies. In the twentieth century, the arena of Indian nationalism was drastically expanded when the agitational mass politics became the dominant trend in particular under the Gandhian leadership. Historians belonged to the different schools of opinions, as of now, had a little disagreement that Indian nationalism that confronted to the British imperialism celebrated its victory in the formation of Indian nation-state. But they differed mainly on the three aspects of Indian nationalism:
 - a. What were the major political changes in the subcontinent in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century?
 - b. What were the most decisive territorial units- the subcontinent, the province and the locality- in which these changes have taken place?
 - c. What were the groups that shaped, in one way or other, these political processes of change?

The Major Historiographical Trends

- 1. Imperialist historiography.
- 2. Nationalist school.
- 3. Marxian, though not always Marxist, approach.
- 4. Neo-Traditionalists in Anglo-American Academia and in particular Cambridge Cluster of Historians.
- 5. Subaltern School and later with Post-Modernist approach.

Imperialist Historiography

Some prominent examples:

1. John Strachey, '*India*' (1888)
2. Valentine Chirol. '*Indian Unrest*' (1910)
3. Verney Lovett, '*A History of the Indian Nationalist Movement*' (1920)

Salient Features of Imperialist Historiography

- It derived its inspiration from the famous dictum of Rudyard Kipling, “East is East and West is West.”
- Imagining India as a mere geographical location.
- No possibility of India to become a nation, in the western sense of the term, with the growth in political and cultural westernization of its society.
- India consisted of religions, castes, communities and interest groups.
- The national movement, in their terminology **political movements with pseudo-national colour**, initiated by the small elite groups of traditional society tended to serve the interests of their very community instead of the general interests of the people.
- This movement had its root in traditional anti-western sources, namely, in particular, one or other form of Hinduism as these elites had a high ritual status in the caste hierarchy of Hindu society.
- According to Chirol, in particular, the material interests of these small high-caste English educated groups were fulfilled by pursuing their old aims of caste domination through new methods of adjustments in British rule. In that case, Chirol showed how the Chitpavan Brahmans in post-1818 Maharashtra have made structural adjustments in the new situation and by the end of the nineteenth century dominated the political, economic and administrative as well as legal sectors.

Theorizing the Imperialist historiography

- Before 1947, the imperialist approach towards explaining the Indian nationalism was further theoretically developed by Bruce T. McCulley, an American Scholar, when his '*English Education and the Origins of Indian Nationalism*' was published in 1940, where the author has tried assess the role of the English educated elite in spearheading the national movement. It, later, also influenced some of the pioneering works in Anglo-American academic circles in the 1960s.

Nationalist school

- The Nationalist historiography did not emerge until the 1950s although its root lay in the initiative taken up by the early nationalist leaders, such as Dadabhai Naoroji, Mahadev Govind Ranade, Romesh Chunder Dutt, since the 1870s to provide an economic critique of colonialism. Since the major form of constitutional politics of those early nationalists had been the moderate style of protest, they eventually undertook a process where an important feature was the use of bold, hard-hitting and colourful languages. The major works in this trend include-
 1. Dadabhai Naoroji- *Poverty and Un-British Rule in India* (1901)
 2. R. C. Dutt- *Economic History of India, 2 Vols.* (1901-04)

Salient features of Economic Critique of Colonialism

- The early nationalists raised the basic questions regarding the nature and the purpose of the British rule.
- They traced the process of the colonization of Indian economy and concluded that the main obstacles to India's economic development was the British colonialism.
- In order to show how the British colonialism destroyed the Indian economy that ultimately helped the English industrialization, they delineated the colonial structure in all its three aspects of domination through **trade**, **industry** and **finance**.
- They highlighted the progressive decline of Indian traditional handicraft industries in colonial structure whereas, at the same time, the British manufacturers were encouraged to industrial establishments and capital investments.
- The focal point of the nationalist critique was the '**Drain Theory**', as a large part of India's capital and wealth was being transferred or drained to Britain in the form of salaries and pensions of British civil and military officials working in India, interests of loans taken by the Government of India, profits of British capitalists in India and the Home Charges or the expenses of Indian Government in Britain.
- Criticizing the colonial pattern of finance, tariff policy and capital investment the early nationalists focussed on the assertion that the genuine development was possible if Indian capital itself initiated the process of industrialization.

The Nationalist's Imagining of Nation and Nationalism

- Apart from the economic critique of colonialism, the early nationalists had also imagined the Indian nation in their own way, distinct from the imperialist historians. They were aware of the fact the India as a nation, in terms of western sense, was yet to develop but the process had been started. A major breakthrough in this regard is Surendranath Banerjea's *A Nation in Making: Being the Reminiscence of Fifty Years of Public Life* (1925), which is, on the other hand, considered as a classic account of early nationalist movement in India.

Nationalist Historiography

- Since the late 1940s and 1950s, the nationalist historians, apart from demonstrating an awareness of economic exploitations of colonialism, tried to argue that the national movement was the result of the spread and realization of the idea or spirit of nationalism and liberty.
- They also focussed on the process of India's journey to become a nation and considered the national movement as the movement of the people.
- The standard nationalist interpretation suggested that the sense or spirit of nationalism had been getting stronger day by day, comparing to its previous phases, that ultimately paved the way for India's independence. Focussing on the history of large scale agitations and various aspects of popular politics or mass nationalism, they asserted that the nineteenth century urban intellectual nationalism existed in the minds of the people, whereas in the twentieth century it managed to penetrate within the reaches of the masses.
- The standard or notable works in this trend include-
 1. Pattavi Sitaramayya- *History of the Indian National Congress, 2 Vols.* (1944-47)
 2. Tarachand- *History of the Freedom Movement in India, 4 Vols.* (1961-72)
 3. R. C. Majumdar- *History of Freedom Movement, 3 Vols.* (1962-63)

Marxian Approach

- M. N. Roy in his '*India in Transition*' (1922) tried to set the Indian national movement in the universal Marxist framework of the development of human society.
- He posed a challenge to Lenin's thesis that India was under a **feudal system** and the **national bourgeoisie** would lead the revolutionary movement.
- According to Roy, India was not under any feudal system but was already within the orbit of capitalism and was moving towards a capitalist mode of production. In this connection, the **national bourgeoisie** had a stake in developing the capitalist mode of production. Thus, it would not lead a revolutionary movement for subversion of the existing order.
- According to this analysis, only the **workers** were the new social force which would push the national movement to its logical conclusion.

Other Classical Marxist works on Indian nationalism

- R. P. Dutt- *India Today* (1940)
- A. R. Desai- *Social background of Indian Nationalism* (1946)
- I. M. Reisner and N. M. Goldberg (ed.)- *Tilak and the struggle for Indian Freedom* (1966)

Basic Arguments of Marxist approach on Indian nationalism

Following the theory of economic determinism, the Marxist historians argues that:

- a. After the consolidation of colonial rule in India, changes in the structure of the economy produced new social relationship, where the society had been transformed **from a status-based to a contract-based one**. It set in motion a large scale of social mobility that had never taken place in India before.
- b. The penetration of British trade in the interior and the British land settlements which made land a saleable and alienable commodity, helped **the growth of a market economy** in India. As a result, new social classes such as **traders, merchants, subordinate agents of the Company, private British traders, middlemen and moneylenders** sprang up.
- c. Due to the growth of **market economy** and **contract-based society**, the old social and economic orders were disrupted.
- d. The new social forces, since the beginning of the nineteenth century, **struggled for finding a new identity**. The political struggle for freedom was the culmination of these social and economic changes.
- e. In this regard, the **bourgeois leadership** led and directed the movement to suit their own class interests and neglected the interests of the masses and even to some extent betrayed them.
- f. Soviet historians, in particular, considered **the foundation of the Indian National Congress as an inseparably connected event to the rise of indigenous capitalist industry**. On the other hand, the Congress, according to them, did split into two factions when the moderates represented the native capitalist class tied to foreign economic interests and the extremists represented the petty bourgeoisie.
- g. As far as the leadership of the nationalist movement was concerned, Marxists like R. P. Dutt categorised all of them as the bourgeoisie, whereas A. R. Desai or the Soviet historians focused on **petty bourgeoisie, educated middle class** and the **intelligentsia**. According to Desai, with the coming of new industries, new classes of modern bourgeoisie and working class came into existence, along with the professional class. The intelligentsia, derived from the professional classes, developed before the industrial bourgeoisie and led the national movement in each phase.

Later Marxian Approaches

- The classical Marxist approach towards Indian nationalism, of late, had been revised in details.
- For instance, Bipan Chandra, in his '*The Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism in India: Economic Policies of Indian national Leadership, 1880-1905*' (1966), has given the Marxist interpretation a distinctly nationalist orientation.
- Bipan Chandra has credited the **Indian intelligentsia** to the formulation of ideology of nationalism. The Indian intelligentsia, according to Bipan Chandra, realised the real nature of British imperialism and how it contradicted to the true interests of all classes of Indian people. As a consequence, they propagated an **anti-imperialist ideology** that represented the common interests of all classes of India.
- Bipan Chandra's intellectuals were not **the middle classes but the represented the nation as a whole**. Although they considered the foreign capital within the free capitalistic framework as a genuine path for India's development, they did not represent, at all, the Indian capitalist class. Indian intelligentsia did not receive any support from the leading men of commerce and industry until the First World War.

Marxist Framework with Nationalist Orientation

- Almost similar approach has been undertaken in '*India's Struggle for Independence*' (1989) by Bipan Chandra and his colleagues, where they try to argue that the Indian nationalist movement was a popular movement of different classes, not exclusively controlled by the bourgeoisie.
- They demonstrate that the colonial India had **two types of contradiction**. The **primary contradiction** was between the interests of the Indian people and that of British rule; apart from that there were several other **secondary contradictions** within the Indian society, between classes, castes and religious communities.
- With the progress of anti-colonial struggle, the secondary contradictions were compromised for the sake of primary contradiction. In this way, the hegemony of a nationalist ideology was established.
- The Indian nationalist movement was not movement of a single class or caste or community. Leaders like Gandhi or Nehru recognised that India was not a structured nation but a nation in the making.
- There were various groups with conflicting interests and thus constant compromises to avoid class, caste or communal conflicts and to bring all them under one umbrella type leadership were needed.
- As a result, Indian nationalist movement became a people's movement, though all the secondary contradictions were not satisfactorily resolved.

Sumit Sarkar: the later Marxist

- Sumit Sarkar expresses doubts about ‘the simplistic version of the class approach’ used by the earlier Marxists like R. P. Dutt and other Soviet historians.
- In ‘*Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903-1908*’ (1973), Sarkar has shown the non-bourgeois background of the Indian educated class. He argued that the educated class in India acted more as traditional intellectuals.
- They were largely unconnected to the processes of production and responding to world ideological currents like liberalism and nationalism.
- He also emphasised on the ideological basis of the Swadeshi movement, where Rabindranath Tagore and other Bengali intelligentsia had provided a great impetus that, apart from the economic dimension of the movement, made it possible.
- In ‘*Modern India*’ (1983), Sarkar has warned us that “ class and class-consciousness are analytical tools which have to be used more skillfully and flexibly”.
- Sarkar recognises the legitimacy of nationalism but does not ignore the internal tensions within it. According to him, there were two levels of anti-imperialist struggles in India, the elite and the populist. Neither of these two types can be ignored but complex interaction between these two levels that produced ‘a pattern of continuity through change’ has to be considered as well.

Conclusion: the other dominant trends

- Apart from the Imperialist, Nationalist and the Marxist interpretations of Indian nationalism, there have been some major trends and experiments in the writings on Indian nationalism that made their mark in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Some took their inspirational drive from the neo-traditional approaches of the Imperialist historiography and tried to revise it in their own works. Other works can be treated as the extended version of Marxist approach from the viewpoint and perspectives from lower strata of the Indian society. The neo-traditionalists in Anglo-American universities and on the other hand, the Subaltern Historians intervened in this domain of history writing with new approaches and ideas that ultimately paved the way for new debates in Indian history.
- Without getting into this debates, I have largely identified three landmark years when new trends in the historiography of Indian nationalism has been approached.
- 1968
David Anthony Low, *Soundings in Modern South Asian History*.
Anil Seal, **The Emergence of Indian Nationalism: Competition and Collaboration in Later Nineteenth Century**.
John H. Broomfield, *Elite Conflict in a Plural Society: Twentieth Century Bengal*.
- 1973:
John Gallagher, Gordon Johnson, Anil Seal (ed.) *Locality, Province and Nation: Essays on Indian Politics, 1870 to 1940*.
- 1982:
Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*.
Ranajit Guha (ed.) *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society, Vol. 1*.