

# India Since Independence

*Making Sense of Indian Politics*



E ANA/I  
918

Carson

V. Krishna Ananth

# Contents

---

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
<i>Prologue</i>	xi
I Nineteenth Century Intellectuals and the Emergence of Nationalist Thought	1
II The Emergence of Gandhi and the Nationalist Struggle	9
III Indian Capitalists and the Freedom Struggle	21
IV Independence and the Emergence of Nehru	27
V The Era of Nehruvian Socialism	37
VI The End of the Nehru Era, the Shastri Interlude and the Emergence of Indira	51
VII The Decline of the Congress and Indira's Rise	67
VIII The Congress Party's Shift to the Command Mode	91
IX Indira Under Siege and JP Arrives on the Scene	107
X The Emergency	143
XI The Janata Party	181
XII The Turbulent Years: 1980–84	237
XIII The Rajiv Gandhi Era	277
XIV The V. P. Singh Era	343
<i>Epilogue</i>	389
<i>Bibliography</i>	417
<i>Index</i>	423

## Nineteenth-Century Intellectuals and the Emergence of Nationalist Thought

---

It was in England ... that the bourgeoisie developed out of Indian gold, the unlimited profits of the Indian trade and, later, Indian wars. The profits of Spain ... only strengthened reaction ... and moribund feudalism; Portugal hardly fared better from its Eastern trade ... The Dutch did progress, but the pressure of Spain and France by land and England by sea was fatal. France was a hundred years too late with its bourgeois revolution. In England alone were the necessary conditions satisfied.

—D. D. KOSAMBI, *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History*

The conclusion of the Battle of Plassey and the series of treaties that led to the various native rulers ceding territory to the East India Company in exchange for large purses and perks to themselves set in motion a process that culminated in the making of the Indian nation. While the birth of the nation had to wait until 15 August 1947, the factors that influenced the making of the Indian nation and the play of forces therein had an impact on the manner in which the political history of independent India unfolded. It is also true that these very factors continue to influence the political discourse today. Hence, it is imperative that the historical roots of Indian nationalism are discussed in brief.

After the fall of the Mughal Empire—the last of the medieval enterprises whose command and revenue system constituted the law in most parts of the subcontinent—the agents and the servants of the English East India Company put in place an administrative structure that was distinct from the past. The East India Company, in this course, imported the theory of law (jurisprudence) that was in vogue in England at that time. This was distinct, in its basics, from the system that prevailed across the subcontinent until then. Its striking feature was the concept of right, as it evolved in the context of the French Revolution and the larger concept of rule of the law. The days of the empire and the emperor were thus brought to an end, marking the birth of a distinct framework on which collectives could be constructed. A notion that was modern and based on the ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity and the principle of equality before the law came to determine public policy and this made the British rule in India distinct from all previous invasions and the empires that were built.



The inevitable fallout of this enterprise was the setting up the law courts and an elaborate machinery for collection of land revenue and other taxes. The agents of the company and their officers were also under the illusion of permanence; they presumed that the British Empire was there to stay. Hence, they went about creating in India a set of men who would look after the administration of the Company's affairs. They found it convenient to recruit the 'natives' into positions in the administration. This was what Lord Macaulay outlined in his minutes.

History, however, does not progress merely on the lines prescribed by those who were involved in crafting the present. History, in India and all over the world, was made not exactly in the manner that the rulers liked it to move. The unintended consequence, in the case of India, was the emergence of a class of people who, by virtue of their exposure to concepts such as liberty, equality and fraternity, began dreaming of constructing in India a mirror image of the society and the socio-economic set-up that prevailed in the West in their times. The rise of the new order in Europe on the ruins of the feudal set-up and the notions of modernity influenced the thought process of the English-educated intelligentsia in India at that time. Foremost among them was Raja Rammohun Roy, who wrote in 1828:

I regret to say that the present system of religion adhered to by the Hindus is not well calculated to promote their political interest. The distinctions of castes introducing innumerable divisions and sub-divisions among them has [*sic*] entirely deprived them of patriotic feeling, and the multitude of religious rites and ceremonies and laws of purification have totally disqualified them from undertaking any difficult enterprise. It is, I think necessary that some change should take place in their religion at least for the sake of their political advantage and social comfort.

Rammohun Roy was not alone. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Akshay Kumar Dutt in Bengal, the Aligarh movement of which Sir Syed Ahmed Khan was a leading light, the powerful tradition of social reforms pioneered by Mahadev Govind Ranade in Maharashtra were all part of this process. The ground laid by Ranade was developed into a powerful tradition by Jyotibha Phule whose trenchant criticism of the scriptures and codes that legitimised the oppressive caste system took the reforms tradition a few steps forward. In southern India, there was Sri Narayanaguru whose campaign for reforms among the Ezhava community (among the backward castes in Kerala society) laid the foundations for substantive changes in the socio-economic set-up that prevailed among the Malayalam-speaking people.

All these reformers had a sense of purpose. The social relations and the customs that guided the social life at that time, in their perception, were bound to impede the progress of India. But then, their vision for progress was guided by the perception that the East India Company officers were committed to carve



out in India a mirror image of the society in England. This led them to look at the Company's officers as potential collaborators. Such a perception was not off the mark completely. In the legislation to abolish *sati*, Rammohun Roy found much more than a mere collaborator in Lord William Bentinck and Vidyasagar found tremendous support from the establishment in his campaign against child marriage. These were instances where the commitment of the rulers to effect changes in the social set-up in India was evident. This, however, led to a reaction from within the intelligentsia. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, for instance, was among those who found in the reformist zeal a threat to the tradition and the cultural life in India. The challenge to the traditional social set-up, after all, did not come from the Indian intelligentsia alone. The activities indulged in by the young Derozians (Henry Derozio was an English teacher whose students went about throwing pieces of bones on the premises of the orthodox Brahmin households) in Calcutta (now Kolkata) and similar campaigns were seen as threats to the Hindu way of life.

It was not as if the nineteenth-century reformers were anti-religion. Rammohun Roy, for instance, was not contemptuous of religion as such. His approach was that religious practices based on the scriptures and rituals were a hindrance to progress. Vidyasagar, similarly, based his campaign on the premise that there was nothing in the scriptures that legitimised child marriage. Syed Ahmed Khan, again, stressed the need to modernise Islamic tenets rather than rejecting Islam as such. Khan was also of the view that if Islam did not keep pace with the changing times, it would get fossilised. In other words, the force behind the nineteenth-century reformers was that of universalism. They were iconoclasts and their campaigns targeted the rituals that vested the priestly class with privileges.

This strand of the reform movement was picked up and further developed in the campaigns spearheaded by Sri Narayanaguru and his disciple Sahodaran Ayyappan in Malabar (and in the princely states of Travancore and Cochin) leading to the rejection of the Brahmanical order in a substantive sense. A similar movement was witnessed in the Marathi-speaking regions in Western India. After Ranade's pioneering effort, the social reform movement in Maharashtra took a radical turn under Jyothiba Phule. These movements too tended to look at the British rulers as collaborators for progress and social change in the same way as the early reformers did. The perception, hence, was that it was possible to construct a social set-up similar to the one that came into existence in Europe after the industrial revolution.

There was, indeed, resistance to all these ideas. There were attempts, most of them localised, to invent virtues within the Hindu way of life, which manifested in campaigns against the British policies, particularly where they involved the religious and cultural dimensions of life.

The Arya Samaj movement in Punjab and the Anand Math set up by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee sought to revive the traditional values while attempting to incorporate egalitarian values without having to collaborate with the rulers and their agents. The theosophical society that came up in Madras (now Chennai) could also be placed in this category. These attempts, in a sense, did lay the foundations towards an assertion of Indian nationalist identity from a cultural framework. This aspect could also be traced in the several localised campaigns against the Western system of medicine and against English education. These campaigns, however, lacked a systemic critique of the economic order. In other words, even if these campaigns were distinctly anti-British and revolved around the idea of self-rule, its leaders did not develop a systemic critique of the colonial order.

### An Economic Critique of Colonialism

Unlike the social reformers of the earlier period who perceived British rule in India as an opportunity to lead the society into modernity and hence supported the Company and its officers, the intellectuals who emerged on the scene towards the end of the nineteenth century were able to place self-rule as a precondition for India's passage to modernity. In their perception, the march to modernity was not just a social agenda. They were clear that the transition in the social sense would be possible only in the event of a transformation in the economic sense. They considered India's development into a capitalist society as a necessary precondition to the building of a liberal social order. This, indeed, laid the foundation for the emergence of nationalist thought in India.

The experience of industrial development in India during the 100 years after the Battle of Plassey was the force behind the process of disillusionment with the British rule. The development of the railways to ensure that the ports were connected with the mineral-rich interiors and the regions cultivating raw material so that that they could be transported to the metropolis and the nature of industries that came up were sufficient to convince the intelligentsia that India was certainly not evolving as a spit image of the metropolis. This led to a quest among them, laying the basis for Indian nationalist thought.

Among the founding fathers of the Indian nationalist thought was Dadabhai Naoroji, who devoted his time and intellect to understand and explain how the national wealth was being drained out of the country to finance the industrial enterprise in England. Naoroji's theory of 'Drain of Wealth' and his trenchant indictment of the British policies in India through his work *Poverty and Un-British Rule of the British in India* (1901) served the



basis for the emergence of Indian nationalist thought. Dadabhai Naoroji launched a relentless campaign through the press and pamphlets driving hard his thesis that 'the Indian is starving, he is dying off at the slightest touch, living on insufficient food'. The early nationalists refused to treat poverty and the consequent suffering as inherent and unavoidable. They were also clear that the suffering was not the consequence of any divine curse. Instead, they were able to see it as a fallout of the British policy in India.

Another nationalist in this context was Romesh Chandra Dutt, who went on to publish *The Economic History of India in the Victorian Age* (1903), in which he exposed the plunder indulged in by the rulers on behalf of the East India Company (during the 100 years after the Battle of Plassey) and the half-century after 1858, when the dispensation was brought directly under the Crown. Similarly, R. C. Dutt could convince a whole generation of educated Indians that poverty in India would have to be seen in the context of the operation of economic causes rather than anything inherent to the traditional Indian economy. Dutt and his contemporaries could come to this realisation on the basis of their observations of the manner in which the traditional economic structure, in which the rural artisan played a prominent role, was destroyed with the advent of the British. Heartrending stories of poverty and starvation among the artisans in Bengal and similar experiences elsewhere in the subcontinent could not have escaped the attention of the intelligentsia, particularly those who were exposed to the thoughts of the libertarian thinkers of the era from the West.

The most striking aspect of the nationalist thought process in this context was the clarity with which the early nationalists could draw a blueprint for India's economic development. Ranade, for instance, could convince an entire generation of educated Indians, of the virtues of modern industrial development. In other words, the early nationalists were categorical against celebrating the old socio-economic order, inspired as they were, by the progress made in the West. This indeed was the basis on which the first slogan of the Indian independence movement—*swadeshi*—was built.

It must be noted that the Indian National Congress, founded around the same time, was beginning to emerge into a platform from where the demand for self-rule was being raised. These voices, however, were weak and it was only after several years that they matured into a mass movement. In fact, the last few decades of the nineteenth century was the period when Indian nationalism was taking concrete shape and the Indian National Congress was becoming the platform from where these ideas were echoed. *The Hindu*, among the newspapers that came into existence in the late nineteenth century as part of the nationalist campaign, wrote in September 1889:



Where foreign capital has been sunk in a country, the administration of that country becomes at once the concern of the bondholders. If the influence of foreign capitalists in the land is allowed to increase, then adieu to all chances of success of the Indian National Congress whose voice will be drowned in the tremendous uproar of "the empire in danger" that will surely be raised by the foreign capitalists.

A more illustrative example of the linkage between the Indian National Congress and the incipient Indian capitalists, who had begun carving out a space for themselves in the context of industrial development in India, was found in the strong views that were expressed in Surendranath Banerjee's newspaper, *Bengalee* (in January 1902):

The agitation for political rights may bind the various nationalities of India together for a time. The community of interests may cease when these rights are achieved. But the commercial union of the various Indian nationalities, once established, will never cease to exist. Commercial and industrial activity is, therefore, a bond of very strong union and is, therefore, a mighty factor in the formation of a great Indian nation.

Thus, it is clear that the early Indian nationalist thought was rooted firmly in two distinct premises: (i) That the making of the Indian nation shall have to be on the basis of a modernist notion of development and not on a shared or perceived notion of unity based on denominational identities rooted in tradition and culture. (ii) Flowing out of this, the early nationalists were also categorical that the potential for such a development could be realised only when Indian capital itself initiated and developed the process of industrialisation. *Swadeshi*, thus, was not a slogan rooted in notions of tradition or culture. It was, instead, a concept that evolved at a time when the national bourgeoisie began to emerge and assert itself.

The partition of Bengal in 1905, a decision that sent ripples among the people of the undivided Bengal presidency, was grabbed by this new class—the incipient Indian bourgeoisie—to give concrete shape to Indian nationalism. The orchestration of this was evident in the call for boycott of foreign goods, particularly clothes manufactured in Britain. The policies of the British Indian government all the while, particularly in the context of regulating the conditions of labour in Indian industries (the Indian Factories Act, 1881), had convinced the incipient bourgeois class that the objective of the British rule in India was to reduce the subcontinent to a colony of the metropolis rather than facilitate capitalist enterprise. The call for *swadeshi*, as it evolved and spread across the towns in the presidencies, turned out to be the beginning of a movement, which was rooted firmly in the idea of building India into a modern industrial society on the lines of the modern West. The idea of India as a nation was also rooted in this.

In other words, the making of the Indian nation was based on the same principle of modernity that had led to the evolution of nationalism and nation

states in Europe a couple of centuries earlier. The distinction, however, was that while in Europe, the nation states were built on the ruins of the feudal estates (whose destruction was finally achieved by the march of industrial capitalism), the Indian nation was built on the ruins of the colonial order. If the battle cry in Europe was liberty, equality and fraternity, the battle cry that dominated the course in the making of the Indian nation was *swadeshi*.

