
UNIT 5 FOUNDATIONS OF INDIAN NATIONALISM*

Structure

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5.1 INTRODUCTION

This Unit introduces you to the process of ‘political awakening’ in India in the second half of nineteenth century leading to the establishment of Indian National Congress in 1885. The great revolt of 1857 is considered as the culmination of popular discontentment against British rule and also marked the beginning of a long drawn struggle against British imperialism. In the presidencies of Bengal, Bombay and Madras, where the British first established its foothold, the new intelligentsia who were the beneficiaries of western education became critical of the exploitative character of the colonial rule. Initiatives to form provincial political associations first came from this elite section of society. Although in different parts of India the tribal people and the peasantry raised their voices against imperialism, there was no unity of purpose. The process of political mobilisation took a definite shape in the second half of nineteenth century. In this Unit we are going to discuss the impact of popular revolts in the development of new political consciousness and the role of educated Indians in mobilising public opinion. We would familiarise you with the political developments of this period leading to the rise of Indian nationalism. You would also learn about the formation of various provincial associations, British administrative measures in 1870s and 1880s contributing towards the growth of anti-British opinion and the foundation of Indian National Congress. You would also get an idea about how historians have interpreted the beginning of Indian nationalism.

5.2 LEGACY OF POPULAR REVOLTS

The primary object of British rule was to expand and protect the interests of Britain in India. In fulfilling its mission in India various policies adopted by British government in economic, political and social spheres gave birth to discontent against British rule and the idea of pan-Indian nationalism. The first hundred years of British rule witnessed the plunder of India’s resources causing major famines in India. Famines were certainly not new in India but natural

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calamities caused these famines. During British rule famines were man made because of exploitative policy of British government. The new land revenue system, commercialisation of agriculture, drain of wealth, and de-industrialisation adversely affected the peasants and the tribal people who revolted in many parts of India during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Beginning with the Sanyasi and Fakir rebellions in 1760s in Bengal till the Santhal rebellion of 1850s in the Bhagalpur-Rajmahal area, India witnessed about 100 rebellions involving different sections of Indian society. These rebellions were not centrally organised, nor there was a centralised leadership, nor they succeeded in arresting the expansion of British rule but these rebellions definitely conveyed the feelings of Indians towards British rule. The challenge that these rebellions put to British rule helped in creating awareness about exploitative nature of foreign rule and in developing anti-British sentiments.

The great revolt of 1857 is seen as the outburst of accumulated anger of dispossessed princes, disgruntled soldiers and aggrieved peasantry. Describing this great revolt as the mutiny of sepoys simplifies the complexity of issues involved in raising the banner of revolt by diverse groups of Indians. In the process of extracting maximum land revenues traditional landed aristocracy lost powers and privileges and the peasantry came under the burden of heavy taxes. By promoting British goods British rule caused serious hardship to the artisans and handicraftsmen. So the banner of revolt raised by the sepoys soon took the character of a civil rebellion having support from landed aristocracy, peasants, artisans and others. The British succeeded in suppressing the revolt, but the revolt succeeded in generating a powerful expression of nationalist sentiment which was yet to take an organised shape. The anti-British sentiments became so strong among Indians that even those who were the beneficiaries of British rule in India started criticising its repressive policies. Exemplary courage and sacrifice of lives by rebels soon became legends and gave birth to a sense of strong patriotism.

The spirit of protests against exploitation continued after 1857 and the indigo cultivators' resistance to the oppressive system of indigo cultivation by all European planters turned into a major revolt in 1859-60 in the province of Bengal. *Neel Darpan* written by Din Bandhu Mitra portrayed the oppression of indigo planters. Against their wishes peasants were forced to cultivate indigo for the benefit of planters. The administration being supportive of planters the peasants were left with no option to complain against extortion, flogging and other forms of tyranny except to revolt against planters. Servants of the East India Company were involved in plundering of wealth and it is argued that this caused the famine of 1770 in Bengal leading to massive starvation death. Exorbitant rent, forced cultivation, seizure of crops and cattle forced peasants to raise voice against the oppression and the eastern part of Bengal witnessed massive agrarian unrest during the second half of nineteenth century. In 1873 peasants organised agrarian league in Pabna district in Eastern Bengal and mobilised peasants to stop payment of rents to zamindars. Peasant discontent forced the government to pass Bengal Tenancy Act in 1885 to protect tenants. The new intelligentsia in Bengal represented by Bankim Chandra Chatterjea, R.C. Dutt, Surendranath Banerjea and others expressed their solidarity in support of tenants. In 1875 peasants in Poona, Ahmednagar, Sholapur, Satara of Maharashtra gave a call for social boycott of moneylenders and later on peasant resistance turned into agrarian riots. Peasant resistance succeeded in compelling the government to enact the Deccan Agriculturists' Relief Act of 1879 as a token protection against moneylenders.

Peasants in Malabar, Punjab and other parts of India were forced to raise voice against exploitation and deprivation in the course of nineteenth century. In the absence of any organised leadership and definite ideology peasant movements during this period might not have directly challenged British rule but the courage and consciousness shown by peasants had definite influence in shaping public opinion against colonialism. The new Indian intelligentsia was very much touched by the miseries of peasants and in the writings of nineteenth century this concern for peasants was reflected. The various popular revolts paved the ground for the growth of new political consciousness against British rule.

5.3 INTELLECTUAL AWAKENING

In 1817 with the establishment of the Hindu college at Calcutta Indian elite, belonging mostly to upper caste Hindus, got opportunity to learn English language and western science. English was made the official language in place of Persian language in 1835 and the rising elite saw in learning English the key to power under British regime. Lord Macaulay, known for his report on education in India, was a firm believer in the superiority of western education and wanted to train Indians in western education who would speak the rulers' language. This was followed by the famous report of Sir Charles Wood developing a framework of the colonial government's education policy in 1854 which led to the setting up of first three Indian universities in Calcutta, Bombay and Madras in 1857. The new colonial education empowered a section of Indians with a graduate degree making them eligible for government employment. But the new graduates with ambition very soon found them left out in the race for coveted administrative posts in government. There were competitions within Indian elites for shares of power and resources. It is argued that a sense of frustration due to limited employment opportunity gave birth to anti-British sentiments. One may not fully agree with the argument that the frustration of educated Indians made them nationalist but there was a visible change in attitude of educated Indians towards British rule in the second half of nineteenth century. In the initial years of British rule educated Indians were generally appreciative of the beneficial aspects of colonial rule and looked towards the west for new ideas and scientific education. The trend began to change from the second half of nineteenth century after realising the exploitative nature of colonial rule and the growing misery of Indian masses. Racist arrogance and denial of equal rights to Indians further alienated educated Indians and contributed towards the development of consciousness as Indian nation. Liberal, democratic and egalitarian ideas of the west opened the eyes of educated Indians to become critics of British domination and influenced them to look back to Indian civilisation for its unique power of assimilation. The period since 1860s witnessed significant increase in the literary production in vernacular languages. Through pamphlets and novels written during this period in vernacular languages a new interest was generated to rediscover India's golden past, particularly preceding the Muslim invasions. As against authoritarian and individualistic features of British rule effort was made to search for democratic, unifying values in Indian tradition. 'Indians in the important provinces of Bengal, Bombay, and Madras did not join the Mutiny. However, education, the press, and European racism and economic oppression were arousing a new political consciousness. Both the Mutiny of 1857 and the indigo peasant disturbances in 1859-60 contributed to this awakening in Bengal'. (John R. McLane, *The Political Awakening in India*, 1970, p.30). Vernacular press was also developing with

great importance and had great influence in shaping Indian opinion against British rule. One can make out the impact of vernacular press in influencing public opinion from the following testimony given by Reverend James Long before the Indigo Commission in 1860.

‘The vernacular press is rising into great importance, as a genuine exponent of native opinion, and it is to be regretted that the European community pays so little regard to its admonitions and warnings. It is the index of the native mind. In 1853, I visited Delhi, Agra, and Lucknow, and particularly examined the statistics connected with the vernacular press, in the upper provinces, and I remember the impression with which I left, after I had been through its lanes and gullies, exploring the localities of its vernacular presses. I felt then very strongly, how little the Europeans of Delhi and other cities were aware of the prodigious activity of the vernacular periodical press, and the impression it was evidently producing on the native mind as tested by the avidity with which books, treating on native and political subjects, were purchased... Bengali newspapers, such as the *Bhaskar* and *Probhakur* are circulated widely even as far as the Punjab, for wherever Bengalis go ... they keep up a correspondence with each other in their own language and read their native papers. Thus on a visit to Benares, three years ago, I was in a part, called the Bengali-tolla, inhabited almost entirely by Bengalis, who used the Bengali language. Two Bengali newspapers were printed there. These Bengali newspapers have mofussil [rural] correspondents, who give them the news of the district, and to each Bengali newspaper is attached a translator of English newspapers; hence the native mind is much more familiarised with political movements both in Europe and India. ..

‘The amlas [agents] of the courts, the state of the police, the character of magistrates are constant subjects of criticism in those papers. I remember reading sixteen years ago, a series of powerful articles in the *Bhaskar*, exposing with the most caustic wit, the abuses of the courts... I calculate that though native papers have a limited numerical circulation in the Mofussil [rural districts], yet each paper is probably read by from five to ten natives, and the information in it is orally communicated to a far wider sphere... the practice of Hindoos to have one person at night to read to a large number; and the power of communicating information orally, is a well paid profession among a class of Hindoos called *kathaks*. I have been present at an assembly where three hundred males, and more than one hundred females behind the *purdah*, were listening to an eloquent discourse in Bengali by a *kathak* for one hour and a half; and during that time, the attention was so profound, that the dropping of a pice [small coin] could be heard.

‘Nor are the popular songs of Bengalis sung at these assemblies always confined to subjects of love and religion, they occasionally touch on politics; for instance, on the appointment of indigo planters as honorary magistrates, strong feelings of indignation were excited among natives, but especially among ryots.’ [Cited in John, R. McLane, *The Political Awakening in India*, 1970, pp.32-36].

After reading the above text, the point to be noted is the importance of vernacular press in creating awareness about the abject misery of indigo cultivators. Educated Indians’ concern for poor cultivators and their criticism of British rule helped in shaping public opinion against British rule. More important is the fact that oral traditions helped in creating awareness about exploitative nature of British rule

among common masses. Folk songs and local forms of drama were used in exposing the misdeeds of British rule. The dawn of new political consciousness among Indians soon became visible with the emergence of a number of political associations.

5.4 PROVINCIAL POLITICAL ASSOCIATIONS

The formation of political associations to put forward demands of Indians to British government marked the beginning of new political consciousness of Indians. The new intelligentsia played significant role in these associations. The intelligentsia did not initially question the legitimacy of the continuation of British rule, but by 1870s their faith in British governance was shaken because of several famines caused by British rule. Dadabhai Naoroji and Ramesh Chunder Dutt strongly criticised economic exploitation of India by British rule. It is argued that as the Charter of English East India Company was going to expire in 1853 and British officials were reviewing conditions in India before the renewal of the Charter so the educated Indians took this opportunity to form provincial associations to put forward their demands. The British Indian Association was founded in Calcutta in 1851, formed by Zamindars of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, was the earliest public organisation to mobilise people for the political cause. Before the setting up of British Indian Association there were the Landholders' Society and the Bengal British India Society in Calcutta. The Landholders' Society was active in protecting the interest of landlords, whereas the Bengal British India Society was more broad based in its aim by focusing on the rights of peasants also. The British Indian Association with members from landed gentry and new intelligentsia drew the attention of British authority through petitions to London and local authorities to protect the interests of Indians and give more share of public office for Indians. In Bombay, the Bombay Association (1852) and in Madras, Madras Native Association (1852) were formed with the objectives to appeal British parliament for protecting interests of Indians. 'Transcending the ties of family, caste, religion and locality...these associations were the first overt sign of a social and political revolution in the sub-continent.' [Anil Seal, *The Emergence of Indian Nationalism*, p. 202].

In spite of repeated representations by the provincial associations the major grievances of Indians were not addressed and Indians continued in their demand for more representation of Indians in government services. After the great revolt of 1857 and the setting up of universities in Calcutta, Bombay and Madras political consciousness of Indians took a new turn. Being critical of limited approach of the British Indian Association young educated people in Bengal came forward to form the Indian League. The League wanted to broaden its base by involving masses and encouraging political education. Development of national unity was in its agenda. But best known and more active political association was Indian Association, established by the noted advocate Surendranath Banerjea in 1876 in Calcutta. Indian Association demanded the opening of Indian Civil Service to Indians and engaged in creating public opinion against various issues affecting interests of Indians. The association asked for elected Indian representatives in municipalities in which members were appointed by government and also organised public protest against the Vernacular Press Act of 1878. In Bombay the Bombay Presidency Association was formed in 1885 by Pherozeshah Mehta, Badruddin Tyabji and Kashinath Telang. The association took up local grievances

and through representations impressed upon British parliament for addressing their demands. In Poona, the Sarvajanik Sabha (1870), formed by the new intelligentsia became the platform for voicing political concerns and M. G. Ranade was its guiding force. It demanded Indian representation in parliament and protested publicly against the Vernacular Press Act in 1878. The Sabha was also concerned of agrarian problems and intervened to settle agrarian disputes. In Madras, first it was Madras Native Association (1852) and then P. Ananda Charlu and others established Madras Mahajana Sabha (1884) to draw attention of the government to various problems faced by local people. All these provincial associations which came up after 1850s in spite of having its limited social base and limited objectives marked the beginning of the process of political awakening and gave momentum to political activity. These associations provided confidence to Indians to organise political opposition to the mighty British rulers.

5.5 BRITISH ADMINISTRATIVE MEASURES

The great revolt of 1857, popular revolts against oppression faced by peasants and tribals, development of new political consciousness among Indians against British rule made the British rulers to think about administrative mechanism to stem the tide of anti-British opinion. The Indian Press, in English as well as in vernacular languages, during the period from 1860s to 1885 played a vital role in creating political consciousness of Indians. *Bengalee* and *Amrita Bazar Patrika* in Bengal, *Kesari*, *Mahratta*, *Indu Prakash* and *Voice of India* in Bombay, *Hindu* in Madras, *Tribune* in Punjab and many other newspapers tried to educate people raising important issues and to spread ideas about political rights among the common people. Issues like racial discrimination, injustice to Indians, economic exploitation were highlighted to argue that British rule resulted in economic and intellectual subordination of Indians to Britain. To put a curb on this anti-British propaganda by the Indian Press, Lord Lytton, the Viceroy, passed the Vernacular Press Act in 1878. This was followed by the Arms Act which introduced a system of license to have firearms in India but the Europeans were exempted from it. This open discrimination infuriated Indian public opinion against British policy of victimisation. Lord Ripon, successor of Lord Lytton, made efforts to appease the educated Indians by repealing the Vernacular Press Act although no action was initiated to amend the Arms Act. More crucial was the Ilbert Bill which allowed an Indian magistrate to judge a European. This invoked strong criticism of the English population living in India which had racist overtones. The Bill was amended to pacify the Europeans but all these exposed the true character of British rule to Indians. ‘The strength of English feeling and the threat of a “white Mutiny” forced the government to compromise in 1884 and to permit Europeans to be tried by juries, at least half of whose members would be European. In the Ilbert Bill controversy, nationalists saw a crude racism which was normally hidden behind the impersonality of institutions and the walls of private clubs.’ [John R. McLane, *Indian Nationalism and The Early Congress*, p. 38]. Indians could realise the depth of British hostility to political reform in India. Ripon also thought of raising the age-limit of Indians for Indian Civil Service examination but most of the Viceroy’s counselors opposed the increase in number of Indians in the civil service. Lord Ripon created hope among Indians but ultimately he could not succeed in bringing any major change to fulfill the expectations of Indians. Lord Dufferin who succeeded Lord Ripon took a very cautious approach towards new initiatives to fulfill aspirations of Indians. He was even hesitant of opening

up further employment opportunities for Indians in the civil service. Shrinking employment opportunities combined with repressive government measures pushed Indians further towards political mobilisation to make their voices heard. The shift in political thinking of Indians since 1870s was taken note of in a contemporary report which states:

‘within the last...20 years...a feeling of nationality, which formerly had no existence...has grown up, and the...press can now, for the first time in the history of our rule, appeal to the whole native population of India against their foreign rulers. Twenty years ago...we had to take account of local nationalities and particular races. The resentment of the Maharatta did not involve that of the Bengalee...Now...we have changed all that and are beginning to find ourselves face to face, not with the population of individual provinces, but with 200 millions of people united by sympathies and intercourse which we have ourselves created and fostered. This seems...the great political fact of the day’. [Cited in Anil Seal, *The Emergence of Indian Nationalism*, pp.146-147].

The point to be noted here is that the measures introduced by the Viceroys in the period between 1870s and 1880s to strengthen British control over Indian empire in fact fanned the flames of political aspirations of Indians.

5.6 FOUNDATION OF INDIAN NATIONAL CONGRESS

The efforts made by educated Indians at the provincial level to form associations with the aim of organising public opinion culminated in mobilising a national political conference of educated Indians. An Englishman, Allan Octavian Hume, a retired member of the Indian Civil Service was a major motivating force to bring the educated Indians who were active in provincial associations together to form one national political association. Hume wanted to have an all India representative body of educated Indians to voice their concerns on issues affecting them. Surendranath Banerjea also tried to make his Indian Association a broader platform by convening an all India conference of the association. But the initiative taken by Hume gave birth to the formation of the Indian National Congress and later on Surendranath joined the National Congress. In December 1885 seventy-two delegates all belonging to educated class living in the big cities of Calcutta, Bombay, Poona and Madras met in Bombay under the presidentship of W.C. Bonnerji, a noted Bengali lawyer. From its foundation onwards every year the Congress held annual conference in different cities and discussed issues which were of interest of educated elite Indians. Although Hume played a major role in the foundation of Indian National Congress by the early 1880s the idea of forming a national representative body was very much in discussion among educated Indians. The principal demands of the Congress in its initial years were the reform of the central and provincial legislative councils giving greater powers to Indians, Indianisation of the top-level administration, judicial reform, the spending of less money on war but none of their demands had mass appeal. Direct political agitation was not in its agenda rather the focus was on writing petitions, speeches and articles to impress upon English liberal opinion for reforms in India. One can get an idea of the aims of the Congress from the following words of Dadabhai: ‘We are proceeding upon cautious and conservative lines to obtain definite developments of existing institutions in the changed state of things that British

rule and British education has brought about in India.’ W.C. Bonnerji as the first president of the Indian National Congress stated that the Congress objective was the ‘eradication, by direct friendly personal intercourse, of all possible race, creed, or provincial prejudices amongst all lovers of our country...the promotion of personal intimacy and friendship amongst all the more earnest workers in our country’s cause in (all) parts of the Empire.’ [Cited in Bipan Chandra and others (ed.) *India’s Struggle for Independence*, p.77]. In the context of the process of political awakening that was taking place since 1850s the early Congress leaders were primarily engaged in preparing the foundations of democratic movement at national level rather than giving call for any immediate radical action. But definitely the foundation of the Indian National Congress gave the Indians a platform of their own to carry forward the struggle against British rule.

5.7 INTERPRETATIONS OF HISTORIANS

The foundation of Indian National Congress is generally considered as the first manifestation of organised nationalism in India and the beginning of a national political community in India. Historians have analysed the foundation of Indian nationalism and the formation of Indian National Congress from different perspectives. In this section we would like to introduce you to some of important researches done by historians. Anil Seal argues that because of differences in levels of progress in different provinces and differences in interests of Congress members coming from different social background it was difficult for the Congress to have common aims and national goal. He, commenting on the role played by Hume in the foundation of Indian National Congress, wrote,

‘By the early 1880s the idea of a national representative body was being discussed in every Presidency of India, and there had already been a number of attempts to bring it into being. The 1885 Congress itself was one of several such attempts, and its organisation owed something to men in Bombay, Poona, Madras and Calcutta. It was not the work of Hume alone, although he had a hand in it. During Ripon’s viceroyalty, Hume had made himself very useful as a sub-editor of Indian opinion and as an agent of Indian action. As such he was admirably suited to be one of the organisers of the Congress...It should be obvious that before the delegates assembled at Bombay, there was already a tendency to raise its activities to the all-India level. The repeated efforts in the early 1880s to form a united organization show that this tendency was growing stronger and stronger, and that the odds on one or other of these efforts succeeding were getting shorter. Congress was the experiment which, for reasons partly adventitious, was to survive’. [*The Emergence of Indian Nationalism*, pp.272, 277].

C. A. Bayly has argued that for ‘many local leaders, the congress was essentially a secondary organisation, and their association with it derived from the need to pursue within the regional and all-India skeleton of organization and aspiration the much more circumscribed local and sectional aims which derived from lower levels of politics’. [C. A. Bayly, *The Local Roots of Indian Politics, Allahabad, 1880-1920*, p.4]. Bayly’s argument draws attention to regional diversity and the local interests in the genesis of nationalist politics undermining the ideological considerations of the Indian intelligentsia.

John R. McLane does not subscribe to the arguments of Seal and Bayly who underestimate common aims and ideology of the Congress giving more emphasis on individual and local interests. McLane writes:

‘The Indian founders of the Congress were impressed by the nobility of a nationalist vision of subordinating the interests of self, family, and caste to the interests of an Indian nation. The Congress vision held that Indians shared fundamental economic and political interests, that those interests were in conflict with those of Britain, and that the collective welfare of all Indians could be improved by restructuring the relations between India and her foreign rulers. The first generation of Congress leaders was groping for a means of translating the vision into concrete political tactics. Congress leaders were sometimes diverted from this task by their personal careers. Nevertheless, the vision was potent, sincerely held, and widely shared’. [John R. McLane, *Indian Nationalism and the Early Congress*, pp.7-8].

Bipan Chandra and others in their book, *India’s Struggle for Independence*, have argued that from the beginning India’s national leaders understood the basic clash of interests between Indian people and British colonialism. The national movement under the Congress developed ‘a clear-cut anti-colonial ideology’. The common struggle against colonialism promoted the spirit of nationalism and intellectuals helped in ‘arousing the inherent, instinctive, nascent, anti-colonial consciousness of the masses.’ The foundation of the Congress is seen as the ‘culmination of a process of political awakening that had its beginnings in the 1860s and 1870s and took a major leap forward in the late 1870s and early 1880s’.

Depending on their ideological orientation historians have tried to interpret the foundation of Indian National Congress and the beginning of Indian nationalism. The crystallisation of what was essentially growing political consciousness at regional level into a common political platform to fight colonialism under the banner of Indian National Congress may be considered as the beginning of organised political movement at the national level. The Congress provided the platform for a variety of critiques of British rule in India. Membership being confined to educated middle class in its early years did not restrict its presence being felt by others, particularly its economic and political agenda.

5.8 SUMMARY

The British rule in India gave birth to a new political consciousness and the idea of nationhood and political rights. Being confronted with various forms of exploitation under British rule and the much visible racist attitude of the Anglo-Indians, the Indians felt the urge to raise voice against foreign rule. Indian intelligentsia being the beneficiary of western education played a key role in exposing the exploitative character of British rule and mobilising public opinion under one umbrella. You have seen how in different provinces people formed associations to deliberate on issues affecting their interests and this political consciousness ultimately paved the way for the formation of Indian National Congress. Early Congress leaders sensed the transformation of India under British rule and tried to build up an organised Indian opinion capitalising on the impact of British rule. Historians have analysed the foundation of Indian nationalism from different perspectives. But the fact remains that in spite of its narrow social base and limited approach the formation of Indian National Congress marked the journey of new democratic political movement for nationhood.

5.9 EXERCISES

- 1) Discuss the role of intellectuals in the emergence of Indian nationalism.
- 2) Can British administrative measures be considered as an important factor in the rise of nationalism in India?
- 3) Discuss the views of various historians on the phenomenon of nationalism in India.

