
UNIT 20 NATIONALIST APPROACH

Structure

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20.1 INTRODUCTION

This is a simple presentation of a very complex problem, especially because historiography is an aspect both of history and persons, and events and intellectual history. It should also be kept in view that when discussing historical approach of a historian, his or her sincerity and honesty is seldom in question. A historian worth discussing does not write to order or to deliberately serve specific interests. Though it is true that a historian's work may reflect the thinking of a class, caste or a social or political group, he basically writes through intellectual conviction or under the impact of ideas and ideologies. This is why often a historian may transcend the class, caste, race, community or nation in which he is born.

Thus concrete relationship of a historian to a particular approach to Indian history – for example, colonial, nationalist, or communal approach is evolved not by analyzing or 'discovering his motives but by seeing the correspondence between his intellectual product and the concrete practice of the colonialists, nationalists or communalists. Quite often a historian – or any intellectual – is affected by contemporary politics and ideologies.

Of course, it is an important aspect of intellectual history to study how and why certain ideas, approaches and ideologies are picked up, popularised, debated – supported and opposed—become dominant or lose dominance, or the ideas arising in one milieu are picked up in another milieu.

20.2 COLONIAL VERSUS NATIONALIST HISTORIOGRAPHY

Nationalist approach to Indian history may be described as one which tends to contribute to the growth of nationalist feeling and to unify people in the face of religious, caste, or linguistic differences or class differentiation. This may, as pointed out earlier, sometimes be irrespective of the intentions of the author.

Initially, in the 19th century, Indian historians followed in the footsteps of colonial historiography, considering history as scientific based on fact-finding, with emphasis on political history and that too of ruling dynasties. Colonial writers and historians, who began to write the history of India from late 18th and early 19th century, in a way created all India history, just as they were creating an all-India empire. Simultaneously, just as the colonial rulers followed a political policy of divide and rule on the basis of region and religion, so did colonial historians stress division of Indians on the basis of region and religion throughout much of Indian history. Nationalist historians too wrote history as either of India as a whole or of rulers, who ruled different parts of India, with

emphasis on their religion or caste or linguistic affiliation. But as colonial historical narrative became negative or took a negative view of India's political and social development, and, in contrast, a justificatory view of colonialism, a nationalist reaction by Indian historians came. Colonial historians now increasingly, day by day, threw colonial stereotypes at Indians. Basic texts in this respect were James Mill's work on Ancient India and Elliot and Dawson's work on Medieval India. Indian nationalist historians set out to create counter-stereotypes, often explicitly designed to oppose colonial stereotypes thrown at them day after day. Just as the Indian nationalist movement developed to oppose colonialism, so did nationalist historiography develop as a response to and in confrontation with colonial historiography and as an effort to build national self-respect in the face of colonial denigration of Indian people and their historical record. Both sides appealed to history in their every day speech and writing. Even when dealing with most obtuse or obscure historical subjects, Indians often relied in their reply on earlier European interpretations.

For example, many colonial writers and administrators asserted that historical experience of Indian people made them unfit for self-government and democracy, or national unity and nation-formation or modern economic development, or even defence against invasion by outsiders. Colonial rule would gradually prepare them – and was doing so – far all these tasks. Moreover, in the second half of the 19th century, the need for permanent presence of colonial rulers and colonial administration for the development of India on modern lines was sometimes implied and sometimes explicitly asserted. While the utilitarians and missionaries condemned Indian culture, the Orientalists emphasised the character of India as a nation of philosophers and spiritual people. While this characterisation bore the marks of praise, the accompanying corollary was that Indians had historically lacked political, administrative and economic acumen or capacity. Indians should, therefore, have full freedom to develop and practice their spiritualism and influence the world in that respect, the British should manage the political, administrative, and economic affairs and territorial defence of India against foreign aggression, which had succeeded whenever India had an Indian ruler. In fact, in the absence of foreign rule, India had tended to suffer from political and administrative anarchy. For example, it was the British who saved India from anarchy during the 18th and 19th centuries. The colonial writers and administrators also maintained that, because of their religious and social organisation, Indians also lacked moral character. (This view was often the result of the fact that British administration came into social contact only with their cooks, syces and other servants or with compradors who were out to make money through their relations with the Sahibs). Also, some of the European writers praised Indian spiritualism, because of their own reaction against the evils of the emerging industrialism and commercialism in their own countries.

Many colonial historians also held that it was in the very nature of India, like other countries of the East, to be ruled by despots or at least by autocratic rulers. This was the reason why British rule in India was and had to be autocratic. This view came to be widely known as the theory of Oriental Despotism. Furthermore, these writers argued that the notion that the aim of any ruler being the welfare of the ruled was absent in India. In fact, the traditional political regimes in India were 'monstrously cruel' by nature. In contrast, the British, even though autocratic, were just and benevolent and worked for the welfare of the people. In contrast with the cruel Oriental Despotism of the past, British rule was benevolent though autocratic.

The colonial writers also held that Indians had, in contrast to Europeans, always lacked a feeling of nationality and therefore of national unity, – Indians had always been divided. Indians, they said, had also lacked a democratic tradition. While Europeans had enjoyed the democratic heritage of ancient Greece and Rome, the heritage of Indians – in fact of all people of the Orient or East – was that of despotism.

Indians also lacked the quality of innovation and creativity. Consequently most good things—institutions, customs, arts and crafts, etc. – had come from outside. For example, it was colonial rule which had brought to India law and order, equality before law, economic development, and modernization of society based on the ideas of social equality.

All these colonial notions not only hurt the pride of Indian historians and other intellectuals but also implied that the growing demand of the Indian intellectuals for self-government, democracy, legislative reform, etc., was unrealistic precisely because of Indians' past history. After all, democracy was alien to their historical character and therefore not suitable to them.

20.3 NATIONALIST HISTORY OF ANCIENT AND MEDIEVAL PERIODS

Many Indians, affected by nationalism, and some Europeans, took up an examination of colonial stereotypes virtually as a challenge from the second half of the 19th century. They did so on the basis of detailed and meticulous research, which has created excellent traditions of devotion to facts and details and of reliance on primary sources in Indian historical discipline.

Indian historians tried to prove the falsity of colonial historical narrative on the basis of analysis of existing historical sources, as also the hunt for fresh sources. Of course, they also were moved by a feeling of hurt national pride. For decades, their work was confined to ancient and medieval periods. The professional historians did not take up the modern period though, as we shall see, the economists did, basically because of two reasons: (a) most of them were working in government or government-controlled schools and colleges, there was fear that any critique of colonialism would affect their careers; (b) they accepted the contemporary British historical view that scientific history must not deal with recent or contemporary period.

The Indian historians proclaimed the colonial notion of India's tradition of spirituality as a mark of distinction and of India's greatness and superiority over the West, especially in terms of 'moral values' as compared to the essentially 'materialistic' character of Western civilisation. (Paradoxically, this formulation made an appeal to the Indians of middle classes who belonged to moneylending and trading families who daily struggled for acquisition of material goods). At the same time, they denied the Indians' exclusive devotion to spirituality and stressed their prowess in administration and statecraft, empire building, diplomacy, taxation structure, and military organisation, warfare, agrarian, industrial and commercial development. Many historians discovered in India's past diplomatic and political institutions analogous to those of contemporary Europe. They vehemently denied the notion of ancient Indian being inefficient in running a state. They hailed the discovery in the beginning of the 20th century of *Arthashastra* by Kautilya and said that it proved that Indians were equally interested and proficient in administration, diplomacy and economic management by the state. Many glorified Kautilya and compared him with Machiavelli and Bismarck. Many also denied the dominant influence of religion on the state and asserted the latter's secular character. They also contradicted the view that ancient Indian state was autocratic and despotic. The Kings in ancient India dispensed justice to all, they said. Others refuted the view that Indian rulers did not keep in mind the aim of the welfare of the people. Some even asserted the strong presence of the popular element in the state and went even so far as to say that in many cases the political structure approached that of modern democracies. In any case, all of them argued that government was not irresponsible and capricious. There were many limits on autocracy or the power of the rulers. There were many channels through

which public opinion became effective. Some even argued that Indian monarchies were limited and often approached constitutional monarchy. For example, the Mantri Parishad described by Kautilya was compared with the Privy Council of Britain. Above all, very often the existence of local self-governments was asserted and the example of democratically elected village panchayats was cited. A few writers went so far as to talk of the existence of assemblies and parliaments and of the cabinet system, as under Chandra Gupta, Akbar and Shivaji. Quite often, the wide observance by the rulers of international law, especially in the case of war, was also pointed out. They denied the charge that Indian rulers took recourse to arbitrary taxation and argued that a taxation system virtually analogous to that of a modern system of taxation prevailed. K.P. Jayaswal, a celebrated historian of the first quarter of the 20th century, took this entire approach to the extreme. In his *Hindu Polity*, published in 1915, he argued that the ancient Indian political system was either republican or that of constitutional monarchy. He concluded: 'The constitutional progress made by the Hindus has probably not been equalled, much less surpassed, by any polity of antiquity.' (This was to counter the European view that Greece was the home of democracy).

Basically, the nationalist approach was to assert that anything that was politically positive in the West had already existed in India. Thus R. C. Majumdar wrote in his *Corporate Life in Ancient India* that institutions 'which we are accustomed to look upon as of western growth had also flourished in India long ago.' Thus, interestingly, the value structure of the west was accepted. It is not ancient Indian political institutions which were declared to be, on the whole, greater, but western institutions which were accepted as greater and then found to have existed in ancient India.

Colonial historians stressed that Indians were always divided by religion, region, language, and caste, that it was colonialism alone which unified them, and that their unity would disappear if colonial rule disappeared. This also meant that Indians lacked a sense of patriotism and national unity. Nationalist historians countered the colonial view by claiming that cultural, economic and political unity and a sense of Indian nationhood had prevailed in pre-colonial India. Kautilya, for example, they said, had advocated in the *Arthashastra* the need for a national king. This need to assert the unity of India in the past explains, in part, why Indian historians tended to see Indian history as a history of Indian empires and their break up and why they treated the period of empires as period of national greatness. In their view Chandragupta Maurya, Asoka, Chandragupta Vikramaditya and Akbar were great because they built great empires. Interestingly, this led to a contradiction in the nationalist approach during the Gandhian era. On the one hand India was praised as the land of non-violence and, on the other hand, the military power of the empire-builders was praised. One curious result was that Asoka was praised for his commitment to non-violence by some historians, others condemned him for the same as it weakened the empire against foreign invaders.

The nationalists wrote approvingly of India's culture and social structure. In the bargain they underplayed caste oppression, social and economic denigration of the lower castes, and male domination. Moreover, while rightly emphasising India's contribution to the development of civilisation in the world, they tended to underplay the impact of other cultures and civilisations on India's development. Furthermore, as in the case of political institutions, often the worth of social values and institutions was accepted and then found to have existed in ancient India.

Apart from its historical veracity, which cannot be discussed here, the nationalist historians' approach towards ancient India had a few highly negative consequences. (i) Nearly all achievements of the Indian people in different areas of human endeavour were associated with the ancient period, (ii) It was Hindu culture and social structure in its Sanskrit and

Brahmanical form that was emphasised. (iii) Glorification of the past tended to merge with communalism and, later, with regionalism.

In any case the high water-mark of the Indian historical writing on the ancient period of Indian history was reached around early 1930s. Later, it became more and more a caricature of the writings of the earlier period.

Nationalist historiography of medieval India developed mostly during the 1920s and after, often to dispute the colonial and communal approaches. Nationalist historians of medieval India repeated more or less the entire nationalist approach towards ancient Indian history. In particular, they emphasised the development of a composite culture in Northern India as a result of interaction among Hindus and Muslims both at the level of the common people and the elite. They also denied the colonial-communal assertion that Muslim rulers remained foreigners even after settling down in the country or that they were inherently oppressive or more so than their predecessors or counterparts in the rest of the world. Above all, they denied that Hindus and Muslims lived in a conflictual situation, ever at each other's throats.

Despite their tendency to glorify India's past and to defend Indian culture against colonial denigration, many of the nationalist historians also looked for an answer to the question: how could a small trading company, backed by a small country thousands of miles away, conquer such a large country as India with its hoary past and great civilisations. This indicated the beginnings of a critique of Indian culture and social structure, which, in turn, led to initial steps being taken towards the study of social history, especially pertaining to the caste system and the position of women.

The contemporary nationalist critique of colonialism also led to first steps being taken towards the economic history of pre-colonial India. Also as the national movement developed as a mass movement, attention turned in the 1930s towards a study of the role of the common people in history. This trend fructified, however, only after the 1950s.

It may also be kept in view that the historians we are discussing were handicapped by the limitation of their sources. They had to rely mostly on written sources, though epigraphy and numismatics were beginning to make a major contribution. Archaeology was still in its infancy, while the use of anthropology and sociology was negligible. Economics too was seen as a preserve only of the economists.

20.4 NATIONALIST HISTORY OF MODERN PERIOD

Nationalist historiography flourished mainly in dealing with the ancient and medieval periods. It hardly existed for the modern period and came into being mainly after 1947, no school of nationalist historians of modern India having existed before 1947. This was in part because, in the era of nationalism, to be a nationalist was also to be anti-imperialist, which meant confrontation with the ruling, colonial authorities. And that was not possible for academics because of colonial control over the educational system. It became safe to be anti-imperialist only after 1947. Consequently, a history of the national movement or of colonial economy did not exist. This is, of course, not a complete explanation of the absence of nationalist historiography before 1947. After all, Indian economists did develop a sharp and brilliant critique of the colonial economy of India and its impact on the people.

A detailed and scientific critique of colonialism was developed in the last quarter of the 19th century by non-academic, nationalist economists such as Dadabhai Naoroji, Justice Ranade, G. V. Joshi, R. C. Dutt, K. T. Telang, G. K. Gokhale and D. E. Wacha. Several academic economists such as K. T. Shah, V. C. Kale, C. N. Vakil, D. R.

Gadgil, Gyan Chand, V.K.R.V. Rao and Wadia and Merchant followed in their footsteps in the first half of the 20th century. Their critique did not find any reflection in history books of the period. That was to happen only after 1947, and that too in the 1960s and after. This critique, however, formed the core of nationalist agitation in the era of mass movements after 1920. Tilak, Gandhiji, Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Patel and Subhash Bose, for example, relied heavily upon it. A few historians who referred in passing to the national movement and nationalist historians after 1947 did not see it as an anti-imperialist movement. Similarly, the only history of the national movement that was written was by nationalist leaders such as R.G. Pradhan, A.C. Mazumdar, Jawaharlal Nehru and Patabhi Sitaramayya. Post-1947 historians accepted the legitimacy of nationalism and the Indian national movement but seldom dealt with its foundation in the economic critique of the colonialism. They also tended to underplay, when not ignoring completely, other streams of the nationalist struggle.

Modern historians have also been divided between those, such as Tara Chand, who held that India has been a nation-in-the-making since the 19th century and those who argue that India has been a nation since the ancient times. At the same time, to their credit, all of them accept India's diversity, i.e., its multi-lingual, multi-religious, multi-ethnic, and therefore multi-cultural character. Nationalist historians also have ignored or severely underplayed inner contradictions of Indian society based on class and caste or the oppression of and discrimination against women and tribes. They have also ignored the movements against class and caste oppressions. They have seldom made an in-depth analysis of the national movement, and often indulged in its blind glorification. While adopting a secular position and condemning communalism, they do not make a serious analysis of its character or elements, causation, and development. Quite often, it is seen merely as an outcome of the British policy of 'divide and rule'. They give due space to the social reform movements but do not take a critical look at them, and often ignore the movements of the tribal people and the lower castes for their emancipation. As a whole, historians neglected economic, social and cultural history and at the most attached a chapter or two on these without integrating them into the main narrative.

We may make a few additional remarks regarding nationalist historians as a whole. They tended to ignore inner contradictions within Indian society. They suffered from an upper caste and male chauvinist cultural and social bias. Above all they tended to accept the theory of Indian exceptionalism that Indian historical development was entirely different from that of the rest of the world. They missed a historical evaluation of Indian social institutions in an effort to prove India's superiority in historical development. Especially negative and harmful both to the study of India's history and the political development of modern India was their acceptance of James Mill's periodisation of Indian history into Hindu and Muslim periods.

20.5 SUMMARY

Nationalist historians did, however, set up high tradition of scholarship. They based their writings on hard research and commitment to truth as they saw it. They carefully and meticulously footnoted all their statements. Consequently, their writing was very often empirically sound. Their research advanced our understanding and interpretation of the past. They also contributed to the cultural defence against colonisation of our culture. Simultaneously, most of them contributed to the positive aspects of the modernisation of our society. Many of them also uncovered new sources and developed new frameworks for the interpretation of existing sources. They raised many new questions, produced controversies and initiated active debates. They also inculcated the notion that historical research and writing should have relevance for the present. Even when not going far in their own research, they accepted and promoted the notion that the role that the common people play in history should be a major component of history writing.

Above all, nationalist historical writing contributed to the self-confidence, self-assertion and a certain national pride which enabled Indian people to struggle against colonialism especially in the face of denigration of India's past and the consequent inferiority complex promoted by colonial writers. Nilkanth Shastri and other historians also helped overcome the regional bias – the bias of treating India as coterminous with the Indo-Gangetic plane. In this respect, as in many others, nationalist historical writing in India became a major unifying factor so far as the literate Indians were concerned.

20.6 EXERCISES

- 1) Discuss the differences between the colonial and nationalist historiography.
- 2) What are the specific features of nationalist historiography concerning ancient India?
- 3) Write a note on the issues discussed by nationalist historians writing on the modern period.