

Contributions To the Rise of Indian Nationalism: Qualitative Analyses

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Abstract:

Indian Nationalist Movement is known to be the greatest freedom movement against colonial power in the history of the world. However, today's generation tends to forget the immense contribution of our freedom fighters who liberated India, from the British yoke. India, was never, politically united. It was the same, since the Aryan invasion. India was under British colonial rule for around 200 years until its independence in 1947. Even before colonization, Indians were divided into lines of caste, creed, and religion. There was no national consciousness, no unity among them, and different rulers were fighting against each other for territorial gain and other interests. However, with the arrival of the British East India Company, and its policies of colonization being implemented, the British East India Company became the subject and its policies the tool for the birth of Indian Nationalism. Under British colonial rule, India was controlled in every sphere of life - political, social, economic, and cultural. In one way, the rule of the British was a curse to Indians, but, on the other hand, it was a way of uniting the Indians. Besides, some nationalists are forgotten in today's India, while others are highlighted as national heroes. So, the current study has been formed to bring to light those unsung heroes and their contribution toward free India.

Keywords: British, Imperialist, Nationalism, and Colonization.

Objective: The study aims to re-read the rise of the Indian Nationalist Movement, remember India's freedom fighters and their sacrifices, and acknowledge their immense contribution to the freedom of our country, India.

Methodology: The current study is an analytical method of re-reading Indian Nationalism and its contributions from the Post-Colonial India perspective.

Introduction

In fact, before the advent of the British East India Company in India, a nationalist consciousness did not prevail in the country. The nation as a whole was socially and politically not united, the North and the South were not going along in their love for the country. Division flourished among people on caste, race, region, and religion – barriers to national unity. However, the BEIC eventually brought into creating an elite middle class through western education. This group of western educated Indians realized the need for national unity, thus, contributing to the awakening of the masses in various parts of the country. Perhaps the Revolt of 1857 was a watershed moment in time, but sadly, it was confined to a small region, a small group of Indians, and unorganized (Campbell, 1987). However, the Revolt of 1857, no doubt, generated the rise of nationalism under efficient and robust national leaders culminating in India to her independence in 1947.

The rise of Nationalism in India

During the Industrial Revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries, also known as "Early Imperialism", the Europeans began exploring other parts of the world for trade and commerce. They came to South Asia, particularly to India, led by the Portuguese, through the exploration voyage of Vasco-da-Gama in 1498, and later on joined by the Dutch, the English, and the French. The BEIC evolved from a small enterprise (City of London Merchants), which in 1600 was granted a royal charter conferring the monopoly of English trade in Asia and the Pacific. Although technically independent from the British Crown, the BEIC became the primary agent for British imperialism throughout Asia, thus, raising its private army. The Battle of Plassey was fought in 1757 between the BEIC and the native Bengal Raja. Later, in 1764, the Battle of Buxar was fought between the BEIC and the triple alliance of the Nawab of Bengal, the Nawab of Awadh, and the Mughal Emperor Shah Alam II (Agarwal, 1968). In both battles, the BEIC became victorious, which finally ignited the BEIC agenda of colonization of the larger part of India.

Initially, the BEIC was a small, insignificant trading company interested in products like cotton, silk, indigo dye, sugar, spices, saltpeter, etc., and was primarily engaged in the buying and sale of products. By 1850, the BEIC had controlled almost the entire India, politically and economically, and discontentment had become the order of the day among the Indians. In 1857, the first Indian uprising against British rule led to a significant event, "The Revolt of 1857." However, the rebellion was suppressed and the British government completely made India part of its empire in 1858 (Jayapalan, 2001). The distrust of the administration of the British, the economic exploitation, and the introduction of policies relating to their superior complexity over the Indians, affected adversely all classes of people. The BEIC put an end to the old social order of the Indians, which was imperialist in its nature of reform. However, it was British Imperialism that gave birth to the idea of unification among the Indians, which enabled them to think as one nation. This unification led to the identification of the objective of freedom from British rule (The Age of Imperialism, 2001). According to Professor Moon, "British imperialism in India gave her a political unity under a third party despite the many discordant elements in Indian society." Perhaps, the Revolt of 1857 contributed a major role in uniting people, and imbibing the idea of nationalism in them. "The Nationalism at the time of the Mutiny of 1857 was not an organized force. But the year 1857 represents the watershed from where new forces were generated, which culminated in the rise of the organized national movement under the leadership of the Indian National Congress" (Agarwal, 1968). Thus, the idea of fighting back against the colonizer for a free India was born among the Indians.

Influence of Western education and means of communication

British supremacy over India brought her into intimate contact with European countries. Some Indians, who went to Europe to pursue their higher education and seek job, experienced liberalism and freedom in the governance system. Perhaps; this gave a thought about the condition of their homeland. Educated Indians like Surendranath Banerji and Lala Lajpat Rai who toured around Europe were greatly inspired by their nationalist movements. “They studied, admired, and emulated the contemporary nationalist movements of Rousseau, Paine, John Stuart Mill, Garibaldi, and the Irish nationalists, who later became their political heroes” (Grover & Mehta, 2008). The influence of the western nationalist movements played an important role in the awakening of the Indians to develop the idea of nationalism. The introduction of western education by the British, and the creation of the educated elite who would faithfully serve them, on the contrary, became the pioneers of the socio-economic, political, and religious reforms in the country. Alongside the reformation movements, books prescribed in schools and colleges gave the students a new political and economic outlook. Consequently, it helped the educated Indians to have a common view, feeling, aspirations and ideas for a free India (Chandra, 1971). Thus, these western educated Indians helped shape the leaders and the masses, for the freedom movement.

Lord Dalhousie made great contributions to the development of India by introducing railways, roadways, telegraph, and postal systems, even though, these were meant to facilitate British trading interests. However, the coming of good communication effectively helped in bringing together the Indian mass and created a feeling of oneness toward one goal. Edwin Arnold wrote, “Railways may do for India what dynasties have never done, what the genius of Akbar the Magnificent could not affect by the government, nor the cruelty of Tipu Sultan by violence, they have made India a nation” (Grover & Mehta, 2008). Indeed, the introduction of developments facilitated the emergence of a more effective national feeling. The postal system and the electric telegraph enabled the speedy transmission of messages to people all over India. As a result, dissemination of information and propaganda grew farther and wider, easier and sooner. Hence, without means of transport and communication, Indian nationalism would have been unthinkable (Chaurasia, 2002).

Contribution of the Reformers

In the process of the revolution, many Indians have fallen so low that they lost their confidence in their capacity for self-government, mainly due to the inner conflict between the Hindus and the Muslims. Moreover, many British officials had come out with an advanced thesis that Indians have never been able to rule themselves in the past. That Hindus and Muslims had always fought one another, that Indians were destined to be ruled by a foreigner, and that their religion and society were degraded and uncivilized, making them unfit for democracy or self-government (Chandra, 1971).

However, European scholars like Max Mueller, Monier Williams, Roth Sassoon, and Indian scholars R.D. Banerjee, R.G. Bhandarkar, Mahan Mahopadhyaya Hara Prasad Astir, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, R.L. Mitra and later Swami Vivekananda, etc. rediscovered India’s past glory from the history of the land. This encouraged the people of India who felt that their ancestors were great monarchs, who ruled the people well. They felt that they need no longer be ruled over by foreigners (Jayapalan, 2001). “The excavations conducted by archaeologists like Marshall and Cunningham also created a new picture of India’s past glory and greatness no less impressive than that of the ancient civilization of Greece and Rome” (Grover & Mehta, 2008). The discovery of the past glory inhaled the pride of being an Indian and, therefore, flared up the minds of all walks of life, with patriotism and nationalism.

Religion also played an important part in Indian nationalism. During British rule, Christian missionaries started winning the hearts of the Hindus through their education and charity mission. This was totally against the Hindu belief of their ancient glorious past. Perhaps, to save Hinduism, some prominent Indians started several movements to reform the evil practices which prevailed within Hinduism. Some of the prominent socio-religious movements were; The Brahmo Samaj, The Arya Samaj, The Ramakrishna Mission, the Aligarh movement, and the Theosophical Society, launched by Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Swami Dayananda Saraswati, Swami Vivekananda, Syed Ahmad Khan, Annie Besant, etc (Chaurasia, 2002). Thus, the socio-religious movements during the 18th and 19th centuries prepared the ground for national unity. As early as 1903, Mrs. Besant made a political vow that “India must be governed based on Indian feeling, Indian traditions, Indian thoughts, and Indian ideas,” which woke up Indians for the free India movement. These reformers championed the causes of human equality, individual liberty, the abolition of social disparity, and so on. “In the religious sphere, the reform movements combat religious superstition and attacked idolatry, polytheism, and hereditary priesthood. And in the social sphere, the movement attacked caste system, untouchability, and other social and legal inequities” (Geoffrey, 1929). This imbibed in the minds of the people, the feeling of oneness, the feeling of unity, and the feeling of freedom.

Development of Indian Press and Literature

Though the press was introduced by the Europeans in India for the purpose of their gain, it became an effective instrument through which nationalist Indians disseminated messages of patriotism. Political, Social, and economic consciousness was enhanced among the Indians. The Indian press both in English and vernacular language injected a strong motivation towards people’s awareness (Grover & Mehta, 2008). Despite numerous restrictions imposed upon the press and publications by the British, Indian journalists strode to publish their propaganda of nationalism to the maximum. In 1877, there were about 169 newspapers published in vernacular languages, and their circulation reached the neighborhoods of 100,000 Indians. To quote William Digby, “in 1875, there were 374 vernacular and Anglo-vernacular newspapers in circulation, as against 147 newspapers, out of which 102 were published in Bengal, 86 in Bombay, 65 in North-Western province (Madhya Pradesh) and Rajasthan combined” (Digby, 1879). The growth of the readers of the newspapers increased the growth of people in the political sphere, arousing them toward nationalistic mindset. Roper Lethbridge pointed out that, “if a single copy reaches a village or even a large collection of villages, its contents will soon become known to nearly every man residing in the neighborhood’s” (McCully, 1904).

Thus, the press and its publications successfully spread information about the British Imperialist policy, and at the same time, it helped in the growth of nationalism among the Indians. It is to be noted that, the Indian press played a great role in mobilizing public opinion, organizing political movements, fighting against public controversy, and promoting Indian nationalism. National literature too played a prominent role in arousing national consciousness in the form of novels, essays, and patriotic poetry. “Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and Rabindranath Tagore in Bengali, Lakshmi Nath Bezbaruah in Assamese; Vishnu Shastri Chiplunkar in Marathi, Subramanya Bharati in Tamil; Bharatendu Hanshchandra in Hindi; and Altaf Husain Hali in Urdu were some of the prominent writers of the period,” who largely won the hearts of many for the freedom movement (Chandra, 1971). Thus, the Indian press and literature became the mirror of Indian nationalism and a primary medium of educating the public as a whole.

Economic exploitation and Political unification

Before the coming of the BEIC, India was already a wealthy country. “India enjoyed brisk trade with foreign countries from times immemorial which was the primary reason for its fabulous wealth.” She was self-sufficient and could look to her own needs. However, with the arrival of the BEIC, India’s wealth was lost to the same. During the 19th century (Industrial Revolution), England was in high need of raw materials - for its machinery, for production and marketing, etc. The BEIC exploited India in two ways; providing raw materials to factories in England and serving as a big market for the finished goods. The BEIC profited immensely in both ways. Raw materials were bought cheap and the finished goods were sold at high prices (Grover & Mehta, 2008). Thus, India had the worst experience of economic exploitation under British rule. Meanwhile, Dadabhai Naoroji founded a theory known as the “Drain of Wealth,” in which he stated that Britain was completely draining India. And R.C. Dutt blamed the British policies for economic ills in his book, “Economic History of India.” A.O. Hume also remarked, that “the extreme poverty of the Indian people was directly and distinctly traceable to a fundamental defect in the British rule.” All these are, in fact, small igniters to the awakening of the people, towards the fire of freedom. “Indian nationalists also developed the ‘theory of increasing poverty in India’ and attributed it to Britain’s anti-India economic policies. They tagged poverty and foreign rule, which developed the psychology of hatred for foreign rule and products and the love for Swadeshi goods and Swadeshi rule” (Ahluwalia, 1963). This stimulated the heart of the people and developed the spirit of nationalism.

On the other hand, in the pre-British era, India was divided into numerous feudal states and the struggle for power over one another was always in existence. The Marathas, the Jats, the Sikhs, the Muslims, etc. existed within their own political boundaries but were often at war with each other, for reasons of economic and territorial expansion. However, the introduction of a new administrative system, common law, and change in the judicial structure under British rule, ultimately helped in the unification of the Indians (Pardaman, 2005). Under British colonization, most of India was put into one political setup, which, to a large extent, developed the spirit of oneness and one nation among the Indians. Of course, the British gradually introduced a uniform and modern system of government throughout the country and thus, unified it administratively.

The Ilbert Bill controversy and the atrocities of Lord Lytton

In 1883, Lord Ripon, then viceroy, passed the Ilbert Bill which permitted the Indian judges to hear European cases. This Bill was presented by Law member, C.P. Ilbert. It authorized the Indian judges to hear cases against the European British subjects.” This created a huge discontentment among the Europeans, leading to intense opposition in Britain and from the English living in India. The behaviour of the Europeans, in which, protests for the withdrawal of the Bill, was quite a shameful approach. For a while, it led to unrest among Indians too. Finally, the British Viceroy was forced to withdraw the Bill. Concerning this, the reaction attitude of the British colonizer made, rely upon the educated Indians about the necessity of forming their political organization (Chaurasia, 2002). Surendranath Banerjee rightly remarked, “No self-respecting Indian could sit idle under the fierce light of that revelation. It was a call to high patriotic duty to those who understood its significance.” Therefore, a natural feeling of heartedness towards the British took birth in each Indian-educated group of people. Perhaps, along the lines of Ilbert Bill, the Law Members of the Viceroy’s Council sought to abolish racial inequality by bringing Englishmen under the jurisdiction of Indian Magistrates. By removing the existing law that even Indian members of the Indian Civil Service were not authorized to hear the cases of the Europeans in the court (Sailendranath, 2010).

However, the British poured out abuses on Indians, their culture, and their ways of life. They declared that even the most highly educated among the Indians was unfit to try a normal European. some of them even organized a conspiracy to kidnap the Viceroy and deport him to England. However, the government of India submitted itself to the British and amended the controversial Bill to meet their criticism that gave rise to the feeling of being more conscious about their degradation toward the foreign rule. Thus, unitedly, the Indians organized protests, agitations, and meetings, in support of the Bill on a national scale. This movement was a prelude to the formation of the Indian National Congress in the next two years. Surendranath Banerjee claimed that it strengthened the forces that were speeding up the birth of the Indian National Congress. Reverend Henry Whitehead writes, “The response to the agitation of the Europeans against the Ilbert Bill was the National Congress” (Chandra, 1971).

Moreover, during the time of Lord Lytton, in the years 1876-1878, a famine broke out in India, affecting most - Madras, Bombay, Mysore, Hyderabad, and parts of Central India and Punjab. Romesh Dutt estimated, that, five million people perished in a single year (McCully, 1904). Amid all this suffering, Lord Lytton hosted Delhi Durbar, a celebration for assuming the title of Kaiser-e-Hind (Empress of India) of Queen Victoria. He also imposed heavy taxation on the people of India during his Viceroyalty and wasted a large amount of money in the Afghan war, which, no doubt, enhanced the ill feeling of the Indian masses toward the British. Lord Lytton’s infamous Vernacular Act of 1878, which outrightly discriminated against the (non-English language) Indian Press, generated discontentment and furthered protests from a wide spectrum of the Indian populace (Chaurasia, 2002).

Challenges and Conclusion

Post-independence India faced a number of challenges, like socioeconomic and political developments, regional disparity, education, poverty, etc. Through transport and communication technology and a centralized administrative system, British India participated in the process of colonization and brought a unified India. These systems suited them to run the country during that point in time. Whereas, post-independence Indians had a different priority. They needed a strong transport and communication network for a self-reliant economy. Another big challenge for post-independence India was to address the problem of communal tension. India needed to improve law and order machinery and at the same time educate the Indian mass for the well-being of Hindu-Muslim unity. On education, priority was given to go for a better and wider education system and institutions. Economic disparity and social neglect often caused the regional imbalance. The drain of Wealth and deindustrialization are the two major factors that brought immense misery and impoverishment to the common people. Thus, post-independence India had to change and improvise all systems of governance to have a robust and functional nation.

In spite of the fact that the Indian villages were largely self-sufficient units and the means of communication were primitive, India enjoyed extensive trade both within the country and with Asia and European countries. In fact, all was well, but the political unity. The advent of the BEIC, and the journey of their occupation, slow and steady, though it was, finally moulded fragmented India into one nation. The policies of the British during the evolution of the colonization process, brought ill feeling, discontentment, hatred, and disrespect among the Indian people, but, at the same time, these policies opened the doors of self-realization, self-respect, self-reliance, liberty, and freedom from the British yoke. The development of western education became an eye opener to India's past glory which greatly helped in the awakening of the minds of the Indian masses in the freedom struggle. The ruination of the Indian Indigenous Industries and the Drain of Wealth stimulated patriotic sentiments among all sections of Indian society.

After all, the racial discrimination of the British toward Indians was one of the driving forces to unite and fight against British imperialism. The English projected themselves as superior to Indians in every aspect of life and thought that the Indians were inferior at all costs. This complex feeling of superiority created the need for freedom among the Indians. Moreover, the Indians were never given the privilege of higher jobs even though they were qualified, capable, and intelligent. Though educated, the Indians were openly insulted and sometimes even assaulted in public (Clingingsmith & Williamson, 2004). Discrimination based on their colour was also one of the main reasons that resulted in the awakening of the Indian masses for a free India. "They were kept out of European Clubs and were often not permitted to travel in the same compartment in a train with European passengers. This made them conscious of national humiliation and led them to think of themselves as one people when facing Englishmen" (Chandra, 1971). Unlike the other foreign conquerors, the British did not associate much socially with the Indians of any status. For the matter, the Indians felt an urgent need to free India from British rule.

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