

## MOOC ON HISTORY OF INDIAN INDEPENDENCE (1857-1950)

### MODULE 9

## HISTORIOGRAPHY OF INDIAN NATIONALISM

### **Academic Script**

During the period of more than half a century after India's independence in 1947, both optimism and at times disenchantment about the Indian state have come to influence historical judgments about nationalism. The nationalist historians celebrating the emancipatory outcome of the national movement inherited from their early twentieth century predecessors the historical critique of imperialism. The critique of imperialism of the kind that Dadabhai Naoroji offered in his *Poverty and Un-British Rule in India* or R.C.Dutt in his *Economic History of India* indicted British rule for keeping India economically backward, and for denying Indians the right of self-rule. It is well-known how such historical understanding of the essential malevolence of imperial rule laid out the ideological foundations of nationalism, just in the same way as nationalist archaeologists and art historians celebrated the cultural achievements of India to contain the imperial practice of attaching labels of inferiority to Indian culture. Recent works by scholars like Vasudha Dalmiya or Tapati Guha Thakurta have drawn attention to a certain nationalist engagement with India's cultural heritage in what has been labelled as the nationalist public sphere, constituted as it was by print and visual culture.

As far as the history of the Indian nationalist movement is concerned, researches by professional historians during the last few decades have raised questions about the sanctity of the ideological commitments of the nationalist protagonists by concentrating on the interplay of interest and power in shaping the politics of nationalism. It has been often argued that the dilution of the emancipatory promises of the national movement after the Indian National Congress achieved power, was built into the game of politics for power that the nationalist politicians had played out even during the phase of anti-colonial movements. This was one reason, as Marxist critics of the Congress and the practitioners of subaltern

history have argued, why the Congress had time and again tried to restrain the militant spirit of popular movements from below, often by calling off a movement, as Gandhi did during the height of the non-cooperation agitation, when it reached a level of militancy. The subaltern historians however go beyond this by suggesting that the ordinary people, predominantly peasants in a country like India periodically mobilized themselves without depending on the initiatives of the elite politicians. The thesis of self-mobilization indicated among other things an unbridgeable divide between elite politics represented by the Congress and popular politics which always displayed greater militancy. Earlier during the 1960's several scholars found a cultural divide between what was perceived as an abstract nation in a multi-cultural society and regions which had their distinct regional cultural traditions. Regional movements in post-colonial India created a more acute awareness about regionalism, that apparently ran counter to nationalism once the nation came into being and tried to create a homogenous national culture. The fragments of the nation came to look upon such homogenizing trends with disfavour, as pointed at by Partha Chatterjee succinctly in his *Fragments of the Nation*.

### ***The Nationalist Thesis***

The nationalist historiography has always emphasized the Unitarian vision of nationalism. During the last few decades this Unitarian vision has given way to studies of sub-nationalism, local factions and autonomous peasant movements. These are competing historiographical trends that refused to believe that the idea of the Indian nation could ever exist without implying discordant meanings. In other words the nation meant different things to different people, depending on their location, interest and imagination. The nationalist historiography recognized such discordant trends. Yet, it emphasized how over time certain common bonds and interests were created. The educated middle class or the Indian business classes shared common interests regardless of the region they represented. Of course there were differences among nationalists. Some preferred moderation; a few others opted for militant nationalism of the kind that surfaced around the close of the nineteenth century. Such differences suggest different political methods that nationalists of different persuasions were willing to adopt. But there was no disagreement about the essential malevolence of British rule. If such realization in the early stages of nationalism remained

limited to the urban intellectual world, a time came in the early twentieth century when the urban leaders forged links with the peasants to create the phenomenon of mass nationalism.

The combination of the intellectuals with the people, represented by Gandhi according to nationalist historiography, brought about more intense pressures on the British Empire. Large scale agitations which however were never uniform and came in cycles and touched different regions unevenly none the less put so much of pressure on the British that the Imperial rulers eventually realized that ruling India had become an impossible proposition. On the other side of the fence the chain of commands that the Congress had created by establishing local organizations resembled an alternative stage.

A new generation of leaders like Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel or Rajendra Prasad came to constitute the new general staff of Gandhi's army. Such accounts suggest that as a consequence of the initiatives of the Congress organizations and nationalist volunteers, the peasants who had remained hitherto outside the purview of nationalist mobilizations, began to feature as important actors in the Congress. Disagreements however centred on the precise motivations behind such mobilizations. Some saw in this the impact of nationalist idealism; the more sceptical among historians emphasized elitist manipulations of peasant grievances. The theory of manipulation ultimately converges with the standard Marxist argument about imperfections in such mobilizations. If the peasants looked anxiously towards the Congress for leadership in their struggle for genuine freedom, the latter was intent on diffusing the tension generated by the anti-landlord evocation of peasant mobilization. The history of the Congress mobilization of the peasants according to Vinita Damodaran's *Broken Promises*, was a story of betrayal as their leaders went back on their promises of a just world. However imperfect, this was still mobilization on a grand scale. In a well-known research on the Congress mobilization of the peasants in Uttar Pradesh, Mazid Siddiqi argued that apart from creating nationalists out of peasants the Congress taught them the basic lessons of organization. In the process the Congress generated a certain kind of peasant militancy which they also wished to restrain, yet peasant nationalism in Siddiqi's opinion suggested the emergence of an alternative nationalism. Mass

nationalism therefore was a linear sequel to the emergence of nationalist consciousness in the late nineteenth century. If nationalism in the nineteenth century had infected the mind of the leaders it entered the heart of the people in the age of mass nationalism.

### ***The Region versus Nation***

Questions about this Unitarian vision of nationalist historiography began to be raised from the 1960's when the euphoria for independence dissipated and the Congress began to be indicted by its opponents for adopting anti-people measures. This was also the time when regional movements, nurtured by local and ethnic sentiments started threatening the legitimacy of the nation state. It was against this backdrop that school of American historians started emphasizing the existence of strong regional identities that ran counter to the Unitarian aspiration of nationalism. The idea of a nationalist leadership gave way to the concept of regional elites who drew on distinct regional cultural traditions as political resources. This understanding revealed that the nation tended to imply completely different things in different cultural regions. Cultural nationalism in India had the ability to foreground differences among Indians along regional, linguistic and communal lines. In a very influential work on South India, Eugene Irschik showed how the traditional social conflict between the Brahmins and non-Brahmins had brought about Tamil separatism by the non-Brahmins' identification of the former as the agents of an alien north-Indian culture. In the Madras Presidency, Congress dominated as it was by the Brahmins represented precisely that for a Tamil nationalist. In effect such studies put emphasis on an endemic conflict of 'two nationalisms' within Indian nationalism. Rabindranath also recognized this when he talked about the great Indian nation (Bharatbarshiya Mahajati) which permitted the peasants of a smaller nation as well.

This new understanding came to influence the writing of the history of Indian nationalism as historians sought to reconcile the existence of numerous 'little nations', shaped by regional cultural identities within the broader framework of a Unitarian nationalism. Some historians like D.A. Low in his persuasive introduction in *Soundings in modern South Asian Histories* (1968) went to the extent of suggesting that it is only at a rather 'rarefied level that modern Indian history may be said to comprise a single all-India story'. The distinct regions in India

contained independent dynamics of politics. In explaining the lack of national uniformities in Indian society some of its inherent cultural divisions were given greater prominence.

### ***The Cambridge School and the Pursuit of Power***

In the early 1970's a group of historians in the University of Cambridge started emphasizing the local dynamics of Indian politics. At one level they under-emphasized the impact of cultural factors like caste or language, and at another level ideological factors like nationalism. The main story line in their accounts was formed by the dominant individuals operating in the locality who pursued their interest in power to reinforce their local dominance by forming factions. Since pursuit of power was the be-all and end-all of Indian politics, nationalism had a marginal impact. At best, nationalist mobilization provided new opportunities to the local faction leaders to fulfill their aspirations for power by achieving prominence in Indian politics. A collection of essays entitled 'Locality, Province and Nation', edited by Cambridge historians like John Gallagher, Anil Seal and Gordon Johnson in 1973 provided the frame-work of the new approach. The contributors to this volume refused to take the cultural underpinnings of either nationalism or regional sub-nationalism for granted. They attempted to look into individual motivations behind political involvement and argued how individuals who were dominant in the localities started asserting their own rights, pointed at in Christopher Bailey's 'Rais' of Allahabad, or David Washbrook's 'Reddys of Andhra country side'. They were organizing in response to opportunities for power that the imperial government offered through constitutional reforms, local factions. The magnetic quality of power was drawing them to politics, for such powers could be effectively used to pursue self-interest and buttress their local dominance. For such narrow purposes the local notables, who belonged to either powerful trading or land holding groups, forged connections with lawyers, journalists and the educated classes. Such connections were effectively used in electoral politics and nationalist mobilizations. In the process local factionalism was grafted into the larger frame work of national politics represented by the Congress. The factional alignments in the Congress, according to this view had their roots in local rivalries. According to this view the only general factors in Indian politics was the 'Government Impulse', implying that in response to the government initiative towards devolution of power from 1882 onwards, factions were transformed into broad base party

organizations to strengthen their claims to power. Consequently the shifting alliances of the local factions determined the fortunes of the political parties.

### ***Critique of the Cambridge School***

The observations of the 'Cambridge Cluster' of historians are not baseless; they are simply following the logic of power, something which one of the more distinguished scholars like Tapan Roychowdhury had labelled as 'Animal Politics'. This particular version of Indian nationalism has always left behind a more acute sense of dissatisfaction for its excessive preoccupation with power and factionalism and its utter neglect of ideology which was capable of generating nationalist idealism. There were certainly important moments in Indian history when ideological motivations persuaded men to sacrifice their lives and career for achieving freedom from foreign rule. The Congress also had outlined its own programme of national reconstruction and an element of idealism was manifest among Congress men as well when they participated in large scale agitations against foreign rule. The mass nationalism which arose from painstaking attempts by the local organization of the Congress to mobilize people in anti-colonial movements of course provided an alternative to the extremely conceited view that it was concern for power alone that inspires people into political action. The standard nationalist interpretations suggest that during the Gandhian era, the mainly urban intellectual nationalism of the late nineteenth century came to be fused with scattered and sporadic popular protest movements emanating from below. Professor Bipan Chandra for example talks about the pressures that such large scale mobilizations came to bear upon imperial rule. There were occasions however when the Congress leadership struck compromises with the imperial rule by agreeing to participate in the constitutional process created by the British Raj. Yet it was only a short term arrangement. The Congress frequently returned to the agitational mould in order to exert greater pressures on imperial governments creating a situation in the 1940s when the British decided to leave India.

The story of the emergence of the Congress's popular mobilizations has come out from a large number of regional studies on the national movement. The focus has often been on the political career of leaders like Vallabhbhai Patel, Jawaharlal Nehru, Rajendra Prasad or Subhash Chandra Bose, whose roles as popular leaders have figured prominently in studies of Indian nationalism. It is not as if the Congress hegemony in Indian politics remained unchallenged. Muslim separatism for example, emerged in the early twentieth

century as one such challenge, that ultimately accounted for the partition of the country preceded by gruesome communal riots. Yet the recognition of such discordant tendencies does not take away from the history of nationalism its ideological commitment to freedom from British rule.

### ***The Subaltern Historiography: The Thesis of Self-mobilization of the Peasantry***

During the decade of the 1980's a new interpretation on Indian nationalism was represented by historians who contributed to the series of volumes of subaltern studies, and began to raise questions about the intentions and impact of the strategy of mass-mobilization by the Congress. The new historiographical position represented by the subaltern studies put greater emphasis on the independent self-mobilization by the peasants, under stressing in the process what had earlier been studied as a successful strategy of popular mobilization. Gyanendra Pandey for example, in an influential essay in the first volume of the subaltern studies, joined issues with Mazid Siddiqi's version of peasant politics in Uttar Pradesh. Pandey criticized Siddiqi for ignoring the autonomy of peasant politics and their capacity of self-mobilization under independent peasant leadership. According to this interpretation it seemed no longer sufficient to analyze the imperfections in the nationalist mobilizations, for whatever be the imperfections; they arose from some fundamental divergences of a long-term nature rooted in conflicting consciousness and aspirations. If the Congress and the peasants came together, their togetherness survived only for a short duration. The class alignments in the Congress made the separation between the two levels of politics inevitable.

It is generally accepted that since pre-colonial times the peasants had been participating in various types of protest activity. Such kinds of protests continued during colonial rule as well. The subaltern studies group came to attach greater importance to the continuity of such independent movements, often directed against local oppressor who might have been politically aligned with the Congress, despite the emergence of a pan-Indian multi-class framework of protests against foreign rule. While in the standard nationalist accounts the people, peasants or the urban poor, belonged to a hierarchy within the nationalist formation, the subaltern studies identified the divergence between the elite and the people as the



source of a major divide in Indian politics. Apparently the peasants were the peasants first and the peasants last. Occasional convergences of their autonomous movements with the town based nationalist movements did not conceal the more prominent and profound divergences manifest in the peasants' sense of distance from the outsider leadership.

The subaltern story of accommodating independent peasant mobilization of course gave a distinct space to the politics of the ordinary people in the grand narrative of nationalism. Their insights enabled historians to recognize that people while participating in the nationalist movements spoke in many voices, had distinct aspirations and looked upon the leaders of the movements as deliverers from oppression. For many such rural followers of the Congress Gandhi Maharaj represented a promise of a just and equitable world, 'Ramrajya' to use Gandhi's own language. Yet in their appreciation of nationalism such historians had betrayed a one-track concern with peasants' independent consciousness. The result had been a tendency to assess nationalism in terms of preoccupations which are more consistent with the ideals of egalitarian reconstruction of the nation rather than the story of its creation under British rule. To look at the national movement from the position of an ideal type peasant rebellion has the danger of missing out on the impact of a process of mobilization through which the peasants came to identify with the nationalist ideal. The mobilization on a grand scale indeed widened the geographical orbit of the nation. There were leaders who carried the message of nationalism from the town to the country, even though many of them eventually failed to achieve prominence in the politics of post-independent India. With the rise of mass-nationalism the intermediary levels of leadership became important in the Congress. New aspirants for Congress leadership at the national level had to depend on their support, while many of these intermediary leaders like, Rajendra Prasad moved up in the Congress hierarchy. It is very difficult to visualize a situation where men like Rajendra Prasad who had intimate rural connections were looked upon as outsiders.

*The* subaltern historiography in a sense has been a continuation of an already existing left-wing critic of the Congress, proceeding from the assumption that the main objective of the Congress movement was to create a free world, using freedom in a much larger sense than

what was implied in the limited objective of freedom from British rule, they tended to ignore somewhat the multi-class imperatives of nationalism. Nationalism wished to create an independent nation state. Its ideals were certainly nurtured by a feeling of cultural greatness but in practice the national movement required constant negotiations with forces that stood in the way of achieving the ideals of a free and independent nation. These are problems which cannot be understood adequately by studying local politics or independent peasant movements. The study of nationalism requires therefore a Unitarian framework and a certain empathy for those who tried to translate the nationalist dream into a political reality.