

Origins of Indian Nationalism: Some Questions on the Historiography of Modern India

It is rather difficult to study the history of nationalism dispassionately. Whether we want to or not we all tend to take a partisan view of the subject. The outstanding phenomenon of contemporary history (1966) is the rise of nationalism in Asia and Africa. We have already gone through what one author has called the 'climax of nationalism' in Europe, which ended in two bloody wars and the mass slaughter of millions in the name of racial superiority.¹ It may be said that during the second world war the forces of nationalism suffered a severe blow in Europe and in America. But it has now become one of the most important forces in Africa, Asia and Latin America. It is generally recognised that all the outstanding and dangerous political conflicts such as Vietnam or Southern Rhodesia are direct or indirect effects of the rise of nationalism in these parts of the world. We may take a gloomy and pessimistic view of the future of the world and agree with professor Carlton Hayes that:

modern nationalism has partaken of the nature of religion, moderns may regard their medieval ancestors' veneration of images, icons and relics as savouring of superstition, but let them replace, say, a statue of St. Joseph with a graven image of Abraham Lincoln, an icon of the blessed Virgin with a lithograph of Martha Washington or of the somewhat mythical Molly Pitcher, and a relic of the Holy Cross with a tattered battle flag and they display a fitting reverence. If we recall the likenesses of national fathers and heroes which adorn both the sumptuous clubs of the wealthy and the simple cottages of the poor we can appreciate the religious appeal of contemporary nationalism.²

¹ Hans Kohn, *The Age of Nationalism*, New York, 1962, pp. 61-71.

² Carlton J. H. Hayes, *Nationalism: a Religion*, New York, 1960, p. 171.

As nationalism of the present age has an ever-growing number of jealous and quarrelsome sects, there is no hope of peace in the near future. Toleration came only after bloody civil wars costing many lives during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, so international toleration could only be possible after many more wars. Europe and America may have learnt their lessons; Africa, Asia and Latin America have a long way to go. As a Christian Professor, Hayes finds the only way of hope in this world in Christianity. He commented:

As a Christian, I earnestly believe that in measure as lands in Africa and Asia tolerate Christian missions (that are themselves without taint of European imperialism), and under the influence of Christian faith and morals, the rising obsessive nationalism on those continents will be rendered less exclusive and belligerent and more in keeping with international cooperation and peace.³

I do not, however, share Hayes's views — neither his diagnosis nor his medicine. I am inclined to take a rather more optimistic view. I agree with Professor Kohn⁴ that nationalism is a stage forward towards pan-humanism. The present phase of aggressive nationalism is essential for the establishment of social justice, equality of opportunity and freedom from want for the common man in Africa, Asia and Latin America. I do not think it is essential to appeal to the religious sense and hope to replace one superstition for another, Christianity for nationalism, as Professor Hayes does. The international secular political creeds such as liberalism and socialism will eventually have such desirable sobering effects on nationalism (especially socialism, since economic uplifting requires a collective-cum-state initiative).

In my opinion, whatever the future shape of the world, the rise of Afro-Asian nationalism marks the beginning of a new era in human history, so it is worth applauding. Thus it is not possible to study nationalism without any bias; we either consider it an evil, a dangerous force sweeping across the continents demanding thousands of human lives, or a progressive force which is at present going through its teething troubles and ultimately leading to international co-operation and peace.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

⁴ Hans Kohn, *The Idea of Nationalism: A study in its origin and background*, New York, 1945.

Whatever opinion we may choose to take we still have to define the term 'nationalism'. The words 'nation' and 'nationalism' are not easy to define. This is not just a problem of semantics; any term describing social and political groups such as family, state, class, etc., is subject to varied interpretations, but the terms 'nation' and 'nationalism' have so much emotive force in them that they defeat any attempt to make a scientific definition. The psychologist may consider the problem of nationalism as the problem of group integration. The psychological factor undoubtedly is important; it is the desire to unite and the feeling of sharing a common culture which makes an aggregate of individuals a nation. But this approach would ignore the fact that a nation is a human group which has evolved historically; in other words it belongs to a more or less definite epoch in history. In the ancient and medieval periods there were empires, kingdoms, tribal republics, city states, but not nations. Undoubtedly there were 'nationalities', meaning cultural and ethnic groups, for a long time. Thus in ancient periods there were Goths, Romans, Teutons in Europe and Indians and Persians in Asia, and so on.

In Europe the nation states emerged with the breakdown of Christendom and the rise of mercantile capitalism. But during the sixteenth, seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries a nation was identified with the rulers and the dynasties and the so-called international laws were in fact agreements between or among the rulers. It is only under the impact of the 'double revolution' — the French and the Industrial — that nationalism in the modern sense of the term developed in Europe. It may be said that 'nationality', meaning the cultural entity of a mass of people, was identified with 'nation' only during the course of the nineteenth century.⁵ It developed simultaneously with the idea of popular sovereignty. It grew when the notion of rulers and the ruled underwent a complete revision. In France, Great Britain and the U.S.A. nationalism found expression through economic and social changes. In Germany in the early nineteenth century it found its expression through cultural awakening of the classes, which later turned into the desire for the formation of a nation-state. So the growth of nationalism could be described as a 'process of integration of the masses of the people into a common political form'.⁶ It seems to me that the Marxist definition of a nation,

⁵ E. J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution, Europe 1789-1848*, London, 1962, pp. 132-145.

⁶ Kohn, *The Idea of Nationalism*, p. 4.

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which was also generally accepted by a study group of members of the Royal Institute of International Affairs, is a workable definition.⁷ So a nation may be defined as an aggregate of individuals, historically evolved, living within a given territory, having faith in a common heritage and culture, living or aspiring to live under a centralised government over the territory. The movements for national freedom are led by a group in the nation which has gained new strength owing to economic changes since the development of mercantile capitalism. Such movements may aim at getting a better deal for this class, but nationalism cuts across class and group interests in a given society and is conducted in the name of national unity. Although national movements are primarily political in nature, they affect all major sectors of life of the society — cultural, economic and political.

When we apply these definitions of a 'nation' and 'nationalism' to the Indian situation, we find that India has never been a nation. It is generally described as a sub-continent of many nations and other cultural groups. The diversity of culture is easy to see; there are numerous social groups, regional languages and different faiths without even including the tribal peoples. There has been much controversy among scholars over the question of the unity of India. What is not often recognised by many historians is the fact that despite the regional and cultural diversities there is an essential unity of culture in India. India has inherited a rich civilisation from the past which is shared by all. This culture perhaps originated in the Indus valley, developed in the Ganga-Jamuna doab and spread throughout the sub-continent before the beginning of the Christian era. Even the Kaveri delta, the heartland of Tamil culture, was not quite free from the influence of the Gangetic civilisation. This civilisation was carried by the Brahmins — even now the Brahmins are the only varna or jati which exist universally throughout the sub-continent — and Sanskrit was its lingua franca. We can say that Brahminism is the apotheosis of Indian civilisation, and despite the differences, it is widely accepted by the Indians throughout the country. If we had a neat mind like that of the late nationalist historian Sardar K. M. Panikkar, we could look at the development of modern India merely as an interaction of two cultures, Brahminical and Western.⁸ But this would exclude the Muslims. Although Islam brought

⁷ J. Stalin, *Marxism and the National and Colonial Questions*, Calcutta, 1952, p. 7; cf. *Nationalism: A report by a study group of members of the Royal Institute of International Affairs*, Oxford, 1939, pp. xx and 249-63.

⁸ K. M. Panikkar, *Foundations of New India*, London, 1963, pp. 11-23.

a new creed to India which in the final analysis failed to assimilate fully with the non-Islamic religions, there was no cultural apartheid in India during the pre-modern period. We may, according to our political creeds, exaggerate or minimise the differences between the two cultures, but what is indisputable is the fact that Islam was Indianised to a great extent, and, on the other hand Brahminism was profoundly influenced by Islam. There was a court culture at the top level which was shared by a Hindu-Muslim elite. They shared a common interest in polo, elephant fighting, court music, miniature painting and a common code of dress. The lingua franca was Persian. At the village level the newly-converted lived as another *jati* often paying reverence with equal zeal to the local deities, especially the malevolent ones such as the snake goddess and the smallpox goddess. Thus we can describe India as a cultural area or a 'nationality', according to our definition, with sub-cultures within this area, Islam being one of them.

It is generally suggested that India never obtained political unity until the coming of British rule, but it is not easy to draw a precise map of the Indian civilisation. There has always been some disputed territory. Thus Afghanistan had always been a part of India, both culturally and politically, until the emergence of Ahmed Shah Abdali in the eighteenth century. The British succeeded in bringing the southern part of India under one administration, but never 'recovered' Afghanistan. This unification lasted less than a century only and there had been empires before the British which had succeeded in bringing a large part of the sub-continent under one administration. Moreover, the unification of India was a dream which was present throughout her history. This was the central theme of the epic *Mahabharata*, and in *Arthasastra*, *chakravarti-khesetra*, the land of the universal emperor, covered almost the whole of the sub-continent. Thus there had always been a desire, at least among certain social groups who mattered in the Indian politics of ancient times, to bring the whole sub-continent under one government. This ideal received practical expression in the foundation of various empires from time to time.

The Indo-Muslim Empire during the period of the Delhi Sultanate (1206-1525) achieved control of the greater part of north India. There was a complex administrative machinery managed at the top level by the Muslims, especially by those of foreign extraction, while the junior posts were manned by the Hindus. However, it was Akbar who first found a theoretical basis for the unity of the two communities. Akbar established a cult of divine monarchy which demanded loyalty from

subjects of all sects. It seems that the Mughals succeeded in establishing a system of polity based on the cooperation of the two main communities. The Mughal empire can be called the Rajput-Mughal Empire. The conception of the divine right to rule lasted until the very end of the empire. Even Raja Rammohun Roy, despite his modernity, was a loyal subject of the Mughal King Akbar II (then a nonentity in practical politics).⁹ The Mughals started the work of developing administrative unity; their efforts were frustrated in the eighteenth century, but completed by the British in the nineteenth century. Without the Mughals, as Spear has said, 'The British could not have organised India as they did, if the people had not already been, as it were, apprenticed to the idea of unity. Nor in consequence could independent India have grown so quickly in unity and strength.'¹⁰

So it is possible to recognise an all-India culture and a process of administrative unity, despite communal and regional differences, during the pre-British period. All this has contributed towards the growth of nationalism in India. But there was no nation-state and no nationalist government at this period. Efforts have been made by many historians to trace the growth of nationalism in India to the resistance movements of the Marathas and Sikhs during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It is indisputable that at times the Maratha resistance against the Mughals and later against the British took the character of nationalism, meaning a fight for political independence by a group which has some cultural affinity. But this did not leave any lasting effect upon the growth of nationalism in modern India. It is correct to say that the myth of Shivaji played a more important role in modern Maratha nationalism than did the historical rebellion.¹¹

However, if we are ready to widen the scope of our definition and agree with Edmund Burke that nationalism is an uprising of a whole community under the leadership of the governing class in defence of what they consider ancient liberty and against violent innovations, one could see the rise of regional nationalism in India since the end of the seventeenth century. Thus Chait Singh, the Maharajah of Benaras, may be considered as the first anti-British nationalist hero; at least Burke thought so:

⁹ Raja Rammohun Roy to the Heir-apparent, Delhi, 10 November 1830, as published in B. N. Banerjee's *Raja Rammohun Roy's Mission to England*, Calcutta, 1926.

¹⁰ Percival Spear, *A History of India*, vol. 2, London, 1965, p. 51.

¹¹ For the Modernist-Nationalist views on Shivaji see M. G. Ranade, *Rise of the Maratha Power*, Bombay, 1900.

The subjects of this unfortunate prince did what we should have done; what all who loved their country, who loved their liberty, who loved their laws, who loved their property, who loved their sovereign would have done on such an occasion ...The whole country rose up in rebellion and surely in justifiable rebellion.¹²

Such backward-looking nationalism defending 'ancient liberty' played an important role in the development of the modern nationalist movements in India. But the genesis of Indian political development of the modern period cannot be traced back to the armed revolts of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The social base of the new development was entirely different.

So nationalism is a modern force in India. The political agitation of the middle classes for the Indianisation of the administration and for the gradual democratisation of the Indian legislatures, was one manifestation of the growing nationalism in the late nineteenth century. But the political agitation was the culmination of a social change which had been taking place ever since the emergence of British power in Bengal in the eighteenth century. It seems there is general agreement among scholars that the development of modern India is somehow related to the establishment of the British Raj. That the two centuries of British rule had brought fundamental changes to Indian life is not in dispute. What, however, is not clear is whether the changes were due to the conscious efforts on the part of the British officers working as guardians to alter the Indian way of life or whether they were the mere unconscious tools of history. We are not sure through what agencies, if any, the British changed the Indian way of life — the civil service, English law, English education or the Christian Missionaries — or how far the traditional society conditioned the growth of modern India.

This leads us to the question of historians and methods of history. All history, it is said, 'veers over into Whig history'. The method of history which studies the past with reference to the present is called by Professor Butterfield a Whig interpretation of history.¹³ However, it is not a vice or virtue peculiar to the English Protestant Whig historian to study 'the past with an eye on the present'. It is to be found in most historians; either consciously or unconsciously they mirror the age in

¹² *The Works of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke*, Bohm's edition, London, 1873, vol. viii, pp. 39-40.

¹³ H. Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History*, London, 1959, p. 6.

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which they live. In an age when political controversies are sharp and issues are clear-cut, historians, like other citizens, tend to take rather partisan views and history is then used to serve their own political interests. Thus during the time when the movement for national freedom in India was at its height, history was used as a weapon both to further the Indian cause and to attack it. Being humiliated by foreign rule, India had to assert her personality and prove the ability of her sons to manage their own affairs. So the Indians drew heavily on their past glories. The British on the other hand had to find a *raison d'être* for their authoritarian rule in India and so used history to explain the existing situation. It is my contention that the Independence Act of 1947 has not basically affected English historical writings on India. There is now (in 1966) a new Whig interpretation of history by the British historians. We have now an evolutionary theory which looks at Indian history as a process of development since Bentick and Macaulay. The history of India is presented to us as the history of British India only. It deals almost solely with the administrative policies and the problems of implementing such policies. Attention is drawn almost exclusively to British activities, as it is considered that the history of India should be looked upon, as Dodwell put it, as 'a great British effort to transform into an organic state the inorganic despotism which the crown had inherited from the Company and the Company from the previous Indian governments'.¹⁴ To them the development of modern India owes little or nothing to the traditional society and culture.

It is suggested that in Asia and Africa there are two different types of nationalism. In Africa one is called 'Western-educated', the other is called 'tribalism'.¹⁵ In India it is called moderate and forward-looking, and extremist and backward-looking. It seems to me that the moderates are thought to be on the side of God for they alone appreciated the virtues of British institutions and helped the gradual growth of, what the Montague Declaration called, the 'self-governing institutions in India'. The extremists are ignored or condemned for they are on the side of Satan and responsible for the fragmentation of Indian society. Professor Hugh Tinker of the School of Oriental and African Studies in London has recently suggested that we should look upon the development of recent Indian history as an area of cooperation between Britain and

¹⁴ H. H. Dodwell, *Cambridge History of India*, Cambridge, 1923, vol. vi, p. vii.

¹⁵ Hayes, *Nationalism*, p. 161.

India and not an area of conflict between the two.¹⁶ This thesis, which is generally upheld by the British historians, implies that Indian development owes nothing to the traditional society or to Gandhi, Bose, Nehru and the mass movements, but to the British efforts. The British historians, I am afraid, have not given us any satisfactory answer to the questions concerning the political development in modern India. The history of India cannot be understood solely in terms of Western impact and the British administrative reforms as this fails to explain the immense dynamism of Indian society; we cannot in these terms understand how India withstood the cultural challenge of the West and showed an amazing vitality which proved wrong all the old theories of its being a stagnant society.

Nor can we learn why all the Indian leaders from Rammohan to Gandhi insisted that all their plans for social reforms were not innovations, but were to be found in early India, so that they had to dig out passages from classical Indian texts to gain sanctions for their actions. In other words, if we think that nationalism was solely the product of British rule, not only do we belittle the achievements of the Indian leaders, but we take away a full dimension from Indian history, by underestimating the role of the traditional society and institutions in moulding modern India. We shall then be asked to reject Indian political ideas as secondhand and shall fail to distinguish the difference between borrowing and assimilating. Vivekananda did not just borrow the Christian idea of service, but he grafted it on to the Indian idea of asceticism. Similarly, old institutions such as the caste system survived, constantly readjusting themselves with the changing times. India also inherited a complex administrative system from the Moghuls, as I have already mentioned, especially in relation to the collection of land revenue. The British kept many features of the old system, and it has had a lasting influence on the modern Indian organisation of land and taxation.¹⁷

This does not mean that the Indian historians necessarily give us a corrective antidote to the British interpretation of history. Indian historical writing can be equally tendentious, and by adding the speech for the defence to the speech for the prosecution we do not gain true

¹⁶ Hugh Tinker, *Reorientations: Studies on Asia in Transition*, London, 1965, pp. 77-106.

¹⁷ For my criticism of modern British scholarship on Indian history see S. N. Mukherjee (ed.), *South Asian Affairs*, no. 2, *St. Antony's Papers*, no. 18, Oxford, 1966, pp. 9-18.

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history. Indian historians have also developed their own interpretation of history. They concentrate their attention on the Congress movements, the political agitations during the early part of the twentieth century or to Gandhi and his associates. They trace the origins of Indian nationalism to the Western impact only. According to this theory, Indian leaders set about to change their society being inspired by English education and being challenged by Christian missionaries. This is how Sardar Panikkar understood the Indian development and Dr Tara Chand put out a similar thesis.¹⁸ This only concentrates on the new elite, ignores the masses and fails to discover the lines of communication between the masses and classes, and the necessary organic unity between the cultural and social changes in the nineteenth century and the political unrest of the twentieth century.

Likewise the Pakistani official historians have their own interpretation of history. They call upon their readers to look at the history of India, since the death of Aurangzeb in 1707, as a history of clashes between the Muslims and non-Muslims.¹⁹ Ironically, they find many supporters among the Hindu nationalist historians such as Professor R. C. Majumdar.²⁰

It has been suggested that the sociological method with Namier-type dissection of the Congress Party may give us some answers to many bewildering questions concerning India.²¹ This may be a sound method for the study of comparatively static political structures, like the mid-eighteenth century British parliament, but it can hardly explain a dynamic political movement like nationalism. The study of the group feuds and the social background of the Indian political leaders are important, but Indian development cannot be understood solely in terms of power politics. Men in India did not go into politics during the pre-independence period purely for power. They made considerable sacrifices; some lost their careers, wealth and even their lives. They were inspired by ideas and fought for a cause which they considered great. We need to know the social causes to explain a complex situation; the Namierite dissection will not reveal all the veins and arteries of Indian nationalism.

¹⁸ Tarachand, *History of the Freedom Movement in India*. New Delhi, 1965, pp. 1-38.

¹⁹ I. H. Qureshi, *The struggle for Pakistan*, Karachi, 1965, pp. 1-17.

²⁰ R. C. Majumdar, *History of the Freedom Movement in India*, Calcutta, 1971, pp. xi-xxi.

²¹ J. Gallagher, 'Imperialism and Nationalism in Modern Indian History', in *Problems of Historical Writings in India*, Delhi, 1963.

The historians of ancient India have now discovered that they can interpret some of the ancient records and archaeological finds better when they see them through the light of studies of tribes and of 'the social clusters that survive even in the heart of fully developed areas in and around cities with others which mark all strata of a caste society'. In other words, social anthropological and sociological tools are useful to understand ancient India, for in India 'people of the atomic age rub elbows with those of the Chalcolithic age'. This particular law has to be recognised by the historians of modern India.²²

We have to work through a multidimensional model both in the towns and in the villages, among the cultivated elite and the inarticulate peasants. It will then be possible to understand such complex development as the rise of a class of collaborators who later turned into an anti-imperialist force and found a common platform with the masses of the villages. We will also be able to find the link between the social upheaval in the nineteenth century and the political unrest during the twentieth century. So we should work in close collaboration with scholars from other disciplines — sociology, anthropology, economics, political science and the historians of literature. The study of literature is important; according to Professor Nelson Blake, novels and poems leave a record of experience of the author which can never be found among the traditional records in libraries and archives. Thus Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* describes mid-nineteenth century life along the Mississippi better than any other contemporary record.²³ It is needless to add that literature cannot be used as a primary source of history indiscriminately. But to get a feeling of the age, literature can be a great guide. In India men expressed their views more freely in fiction and in poetry than in political pamphlets or private papers.

I have already said that the political agitation of the new classes was the culmination of a social change which started in Bengal during the second half of the eighteenth century. In other words, nationalism is a product of the disruption of the old economic and social order. This disruption took place not so much because the British officers set out to change the destiny of India but because of the growth of a market society. A market society may be defined as a society in which production and distribution of goods and services is regulated by the

²² D. D. Kosambi, *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History*, Bombay, 1956, pp. 7-8.

²³ Nelson N. Blake, 'How to learn history from Sinclair Lewis and other uncommon sources', *Stetson University Bulletin*, vol. iv, July 1964, no. 2, p. 2.

market. In such a society each individual's capacity to labour is his own property and is inalienable. Such a society through the free market of land and labour provides opportunities for individuals and for social groups to acquire unlimited wealth and power and thus alter their social position. This is an ideal type, but the basic features of such a society could be found in Europe since the days of mercantile capitalism. This may be called an 'open society' or 'an economic frontier'. Personally I prefer the term 'market society' for although it puts the emphasis on the economic factor — the market — it describes the social and political relationships between individuals and social groups fairly adequately.

Professor Brown has said that nationalism in Europe was a by-product of a long period of unusual economic growth led by a segment of the nation which had gained new strength and which in the name of national ideas and national symbols worked to broaden the base of the political structure and to force greater political and social mobility. Under such circumstances we have the birth of what he has termed an 'open society'. However, he thinks that in Asia the established ruling groups remained in power and made adjustments to the new situations without making any basic alterations in the traditional social relationships.²⁴ This may be true for Japan, but India followed the European pattern at least in this respect.

Land was and still is a source of wealth and power both at the village level and at the top. The sale and transfer of land in India means the transfer of power from one group of individuals to another group of individuals. In the village in Orissa described by Professor Bailey, land changed hands with the encroachment of what he has called the 'economic frontier', and consequently power changed hands along the same lines. According to the records that are available for before 1885, the *Kshatriya* caste owned all the land, but by 1952-54 only 28 per cent of the land belonged to this group. The rest of the land belonged either to other caste groups in the village, or to new-comers from outside, who bought land with money earned from activities other than agriculture.²⁵ This has happened in a comparatively remote village where the economic frontier and the administrative machinery was slow to arrive. The pace of change in the Ganga-Jamuna valley, where there were better communications and an older administrative machinery, must have been far greater. We do not know enough until some graphic

²⁴ Delmar M. Brown, *Nationalism in India*, Los Angeles, 1955, pp. 1-5.

²⁵ F. G. Bailey, *Caste and the Economic Frontier*, Oxford, 1958, pp. 165-73.

studies at the grassroot level are done. In Bengal similar changes also took place, and a new class of Zamindars emerged. Such social changes were possible because there was a free market in labour and land which provided the facilities for the acquisition of wealth and power. It is irrelevant for our purpose to argue whether the trade followed the flag or the flag followed the trade, but it is sufficient to say that the growth of the market society is somehow related to the establishment of the British Raj in the eighteenth century. During the course of the nineteenth century the market society and British power spread throughout the sub-continent. British trade penetrated the country and the new land regulations changed the entire way of life. Such regulations did not create a new set of rights; for the ownership of land as a de facto right was already in existence in many parts of the country, and it was recognised by many English officers before Cornwallis. But the regulations clearly defined such rights, and what is more important they made land an alienable commodity and allowed capital to purchase an unlimited amount.

One direct effect of the market society was the creation of a new urban elite. This elite increased in number and wealth, lived in Calcutta, Bombay and Madras and other trade and administrative centres throughout India, lived on trade and money-lending, a share of the land revenue and on salaries received as junior administrative officers. This group cannot be fitted into the traditional system of social stratification. Those who could earn enough wealth or achieve some intellectual standing through the new English education were accepted as members of the new elite. Although members were mainly Hindus, caste did not play an essential part in selection.

This group can be described as the new middle class. They were a de facto group — that is, there was no legal or religious sanction behind their status in society. They recognised very clearly that they owed their status to the British administration and the new economy. Originally, their religious and social reforms were directed against the traditional institutions. The history of modern India since the beginning of the nineteenth century may be described as the history of the struggle of this new class to find an identity. As the traditional norms which kept the old society together were inadequate, a new code of behaviour was necessary. This is one reason why there was such a wave of social and religious reforms pressed for by this class, and later came the demands for political reforms. During the course of the nineteenth century, this class grew in strength — undoubtedly with the help of the British. They

eagerly cooperated with the British officers and took no part in the anti-British revolt of 1857. They gradually began to utilise their strength for a better deal for themselves. They were, as Lord Dufferin thought, a 'microscopic minority', but what Lord Dufferin and many other notable British officers failed to understand was that it was a growing minority, and what is more important is that the middle class waged their struggle in the name of national ideals and through national symbols, and helped to broaden the base of the political structure and forced an even greater political and social mobility.²⁶ The aims of Sir Surendranath Banerjee's Indian Association, the predecessor of the Indian National Congress, were: 'one, the creation of a strong body of public opinion in the country; two, the unification of Indian races and peoples upon the basis of common political interests and aspirations; three, the promotion of friendly feelings between the Hindus and Mohammedans and lastly inclusion of the masses in the great public movements.'²⁷

This was an Indian nation in the making. However it was only after the emergence of Gandhi as a political guru in 1920 that the masses and the classes were brought together on one political platform. The new elite, who had believed in Britain and was influenced by the Western ideologies, was finally disillusioned. The celebrated Montague-Chelmsford reforms failed to satisfy Indian opinion. In India the recommendation of the Rowlatt Report to try seditious cases without juries or witnesses was enacted in January 1919. Mahatma Gandhi declared *hartal*. He was arrested and riots followed in the Punjab. The Amritsar massacre and the vote of approval of the repression by the House of Lords finally led Gandhi to call upon the Indians to dissociate themselves from what he called the satanic government. There were men of Sir S. N. Banerjee's generation who still had faith in Britain, but they lost control of the public. The disillusionment can be noticed in the history of one family, the Tagore family. It was the poet's grandfather who actively supported the British and was a friend of the Free Traders. The poet himself was inspired by English liberalism and had faith in the 'generosity of the English race'. But in his last testament written from his death bed, *The Crisis of Civilisation*, Tagore said:

The wheels of fate will some day compel the English to give up their Indian empire. But what kind of India will they leave

²⁶ S. Gopal, *British Policy in India, 1858-1905*, Cambridge, 1965, pp. 167-76.

²⁷ Sir Surendranath Banerjee, *A Nation in the Making*, Bombay, 1963 (reprint), pp. 39-40.

behind, what stark misery? When the stream of their centuries of administration runs dry at last, what a waste of filth and mud will they leave behind! I had one time believed that the springs of civilisation would issue out of the heart of Europe but today when I am about to quit the world, that faith has gone bankrupt altogether.²⁸

Thus a class of collaborators turned into an anti-imperialist force.

However, if we concentrate only on the elite, we do not get the full picture. We ignore the fact that the market society changed the way of life even in the villages and the local administrative centres. It created a social erosion which affected the very basis of the society. Although the masses came to the political arena only after the emergence of Gandhi as leader in 1920, the movements for social and religious reforms have been going on since the nineteenth century even among the lower strata at the village level. In fact as far as one could detect from the evidence at present available, it seems that the traditional society reacted to the new system in three ways. Firstly, there was a constant shift of status at all levels, social groups expressed in terms of caste and religion moved up or down according to their capacity to control the new productive forces and work within the new administrative machinery. Sanskritisation, meaning the way of elevating the ritual rank of a social group who have gained economically, is one manifestation of this social mobility. Secondly, there were numerous social and religious movements such as the new Sakti cult in Bengal and the Faraidiyah movement among the Bengali Muslim peasants. Ramkrishna was only one of the many traditional religious leaders who emerged during the nineteenth century. One knows of him because his ideas were interpreted to us by Vivekananda. Thirdly, the old society rejected the market and took up arms against the British. There were continuous struggles by peasant groups, tribes, princes and some religious sects throughout the nineteenth century. The 1857 revolt was the most important expression of such reaction against the British and the new system, although it was not the last. It may be considered a negative response to the market society. But they were not always backward-looking. There were men like Tipu Sultan of Mysore who were eager to adapt the new techniques — military, political and economic — to use against the British and their allies. The armed struggles should not be

²⁸ R. N. Tagore, *The Crisis of Civilisation*, Calcutta, 1941.

thought of as purely anti-British, but also anti-market society. The peasant revolts were directed as much against the new landlords and money-lenders as against the British. Nor could they be regarded as purely religious, directed against other religious groups like Muslims against Hindus or Christians. It is significant to note that Shah Abdul Aziz, the great Muslim theologian, issued his famous fatwa only in 1803 when the Mughal king Shah Alam was brought under British protection, declaring that India had ceased to be Dar ul Islam, and has become Dar ul Harb — the land of the enemy. But Shah Aziz did not issue such a fatwa during the Maratha occupation of Delhi between 1782 and 1803 when Shah Alam was a figure-head under the Maratha protection. Shah Aziz found in the ascendancy of the East India Company the total disintegration of the traditional Muslim society. Hence he wrote to Hindus and Muslims to unite to fight against the British.²⁹

So the growth of nationalism in India is a complex problem. It can be understood only through a multidimensional method; otherwise we tend to put emphasis on one group at the expense of others. If modern Indian politics is conducted through three idioms, — modern, traditional and saintly (meaning the tradition of Gandhi and Bhave) — as suggested by Professor Morris Jones, then this is a continuation of a development which has been taking place since the nineteenth century. From the 1920s onwards each idiom has influenced the other and all helped to shape the present political structure of India. It is easy to be dazzled by the elite or to get lost in the villages and forget the necessary link between the two. The nationalist ideas reached down to the villages, and the traditional society conditioned the modern system. The multidimensional approach alone will enable us to find all the threads that go to make up the complete pattern of fabric of Indian politics.

²⁹ Ziyh-Ul-Hasan Faruqi, *The Deobond School and the Demand for Pakistan*, London, 1963, pp. 2-6.