UNIT 4  PERSPECTIVES ON INDIAN NATIONALISM–II

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4.1 INTRODUCTION

In the last Unit we discussed some major views on Indian nationalism – the colonialist, nationalist, and Marxist. In this Unit we will discuss some other views which are also of crucial significance so far as the interpretation of the national movement is concerned. A consideration of all these perspectives is aimed towards illustrating the point that not only was nationalism a complex phenomenon but also that history-writing is an intricate exercise informed by varying ideological and political practices.

4.2 THE CAMBRIDGE SCHOOL ON INDIAN NATIONALISM

As the term indicates, the ‘Cambridge School’ was the name given to a group of historians mostly working in the Cambridge University. Their works during the 1960s and 1970s advanced a certain point of view which resembled in many ways some of the ideas of the colonialist historiography and which was in opposition to the nationalist and Marxist approaches. The ‘Cambridge view’ was offered as an alternative explanation of the Indian nationalism. It sought to completely debunk the Indian national movement against the colonial rule led by leaders who had put their faith in the nationalist ideology. While both the nationalist and Marxist historians argued that Indian nationalism evolved as a result of the contradiction between Indian people and imperialism, the historians associated with the Cambridge School asserted that there was no real contradiction between imperialism and the Indian people and the central contradiction lay among the Indians themselves.

The Cambridge School had its precursor in the writings of John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson who, in their various works such as ‘Imperialism of Free Trade’ (1953), Africa and the Victorians (1961) and ‘Non-European Foundations of European Imperialism’ (1972), argued that colonialism was the result of internal political weakness of the Asian and African regimes which then collaborated with the Europeans for setting up the colonial rules. They, thus, emphasized on the continuity from pre-colonial to colonial periods and stressed the collaborative role of the natives. Gallagher’s student Anil Seal, in his early work on India titled The Emergence of Indian Nationalism (1968), argued that it was the English

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education which created a new middle class which clamoured for political representation. The British obliged them by offering posts in various institutions, such as universities, and seats in municipal councils and later in provincial assemblies. However, the claimants were many while the posts were few. This led to intense rivalry among the elite, particularly at regional levels because that is where the new avenues were open. Seal asserted that there was no conflict between the British and the Indians or between imperialist rule and the Indian people. Instead, the main contradiction was among the Indians, particularly among the educated elite, on the basis of caste, community and religion. He argued that

‘Much attention has been paid to the apparent conflicts between imperialism and nationalism; it would be at least equally profitable to study their real partnerships. Both British rule and Indian enterprise had a hand in bringing these [nationalist] mobilisations about’ [Anil Seal 1968: 342].

In opposition to the Marxist historians, Seal argued that Indian nationalism was not the product of ‘any class demand or as the consequence of any sharp changes in the structure of the economy’. He asserted that the emergence and growth of Indian nationalism can be comprehended by ‘a conceptual system based on elites, rather than on classes’. During the colonial era, there was intense competition among the elites for posts and positions offered by colonial regime. But such rivalries took place ‘between caste and caste, community and community, not between class and class’. Most of these mobilisations were horizontal, based on prescriptive identities such as caste and religion. In this sense, the Indian nationalism ‘did not square with…the genuine nationalisms of nineteenth-century Europe’ [ibid: 341]. Moreover, the so-called struggles which the Indian National Congress waged against the colonial rule were fake:

‘Many of the battles which the Raj and the Congress waged were mere feints between two sides each held back by the unreliable troops in its own front line. Non-co-operation, Civil Disobedience, the new constitution, the clashes of 1942 were all parts of this strange struggle between impotent rivals, a Dasehra duel between two hollow statues, locked in motionless and simulated combat. Towards the end, when they had come to control their own allies, the Muslim League broke up this mimic warfare, and at once a real ferocity appeared—between Indian and Indian’ [ibid: 351].

The leaders who led the Indian nationalist movement were all disgruntled people whose self-interest had not been met. Thus, according to Seal, Dadabhai Naoroji was raising the issues about drain of wealth and Indian impoverishment solely from the motive to keep himself in comfort in London.

Later, the historians of this trend shifted from the idea of horizontal mobilisation around caste and community to vertical mobilisation around factions. These factions are vertically organised structures of patron-client relationship operational in the localities and controlled by local magnates. The local struggles ‘were seldom marked by the alliance of landlord with landlord, peasant with peasant, educated with educated, Muslim with Muslim and Brahmin with Brahmin. More frequently, Hindus worked with Muslims, Brahmins were hand in glove with non-Brahmins; and notables organized their dependents as supporters, commissioned professional men as spokesmen and turned government servants into aides’ [Anil Seal 1973: 323].
These factions extended their reach to the towns and cities by employing the lawyers and politicians to serve their causes. Instead of the regions and the country, the localities were projected as the main centres of power. These vertically organised factions cut across the boundaries of caste, class, religion and region, and they were the most important factors in Indian politics, including the nationalist politics. Although the Cambridge School still considered that the desire for collaboration with the colonial regime was the predominant motive behind politics among Indians, it was no longer about education or conflict among the elites. It was now the competition for getting seats in various representative institutions such as municipalities and provincial assemblies which were thrown open by the British to the Indians. And this battle was now fought at the level of localities. It was, thus, the locality which controlled the Indian politics, the region (provinces) and the nation were secondary to it. The British had to concede to the existence of a legal underworld where the private justice of faction settled conflicts with the blows of lathis, or where, at the best, the strong could get their own way in the courts. In the mythology of empire, the age of Elphinstone, Munro and Thomason seems one of heroic social engineering; but under the pinnacles of their Raj lay a ground-floor reality where Indians battled with Indians, sometimes for the favours of the district officer, sometimes to do each other down without reference to him and his book of rules. At these levels, it might be the British who governed, but it was Indians who ruled’ [ibid: 328-29].

According to the Cambridge historians, the British colonial government was the first and the most important motor of change in Indian subcontinent. The emergence and growth of Indian nationalist movement took place within the constitutional, administrative and political matrix created by it. Right from the beginning the Indians were needed to man the lower rungs of administration, but very few Indians were in the decision-making process. Beginning in the later nineteenth century, however, certain constitutional measures at the local, regional and provincial levels gave opportunity to the Indians to participate in policy-making. The two World Wars and the Great Depression compelled the government to economize at the administrative and legislative levels, leading to the devolution of power. The 1919 and 1935 constitutional and political reforms allowed Indians to hold some amount of real power at the provincial level on the basis of a much expanded electorate. To properly take advantage of the opportunities offered by the British withdrawal from the administrative and legislative posts, the competing Indians developed broader networks than was hitherto done. Nationalist and anti-imperialist rhetoric was adopted for what were basically related to local issues. The local issues and factions were crucial to understand the wider linkages cutting across the localities and provinces. The regional and national leaders worked in the interests of the local bosses. Even the national organisations, such as the Congress and the Muslim League, contained factions within it whose levers were in the hands of local magnates. In this world of politics, the leaders were not driven by ideology but by pursuit of power. All individuals, all leaders and their followers, in all places were driven by personal self-interest consisting of search for power and resources. All talks of ideology and transforming society were mere facade behind which naked game of power was played out. [See, S.B. Upadhyay 2015].

The basic thesis of the Cambridge School was reflected in a series of articles published in the journal Modern Asian Studies and collected in the volume, Locality, Province and Nation (1973). Besides, there were several books published by these writers which put forward the basic arguments of the School: Gordon

## 4.3 THE SUBALTERN STUDIES

During the closing decades of the last century, the scholars associated with the journal *Subaltern Studies* shot into fame by vehemently criticising all other forms of Indian history-writing. They put forward their own interpretation of the modern Indian history as a whole, particularly of Indian nationalism. Beginning in the early 1980s, with the publication of the first volume of *Subaltern Studies* (in 1982), this trend of interpretation of Indian nationalism became quite influential among certain sections of Indian historians. It was declared to be a radical departure in modern Indian historiography which claimed to dissociate from all earlier views on Indian national movement. In what can be called the manifesto of the project, Ranajit Guha, in the very first volume of the *Subaltern Studies*, declared that ‘The historiography of Indian nationalism has for a long time been dominated by elitism – colonialist elitism and bourgeois-nationalist elitism.’ According to Guha, all types of elitist histories have one thing in common and that is the absence of the politics of the people from their accounts. He criticised the three main trends in Indian historiography – i) colonialist, which saw the colonial rule as the fulfillment of a mission to enlighten the ignorant people; ii) nationalist, which visualised all the protest activities as parts of the making of the nation-state; and iii) Marxist, which subsumed the people’s struggles under the progression towards revolution and a socialist state. According to him, there are no attempts in these works to understand and write about the way in which the subaltern groups view the world and practice their politics. Earlier historians were criticised for ignoring the popular initiative and accepting the official negative characterisation of the rebel and the rebellion.

In his essay ‘The Prose of Counter-Insurgency’, Ranajit Guha launched a scathing attack on the existing peasant and tribal histories in India for considering the peasant rebellions as ‘purely spontaneous and unpremeditated affairs’ and for ignoring the consciousness of the rebels themselves. He accused all the accounts of rebellions, starting with the immediate official reports to the histories written by the left radicals, of writing the texts of counter-insurgency which refused to recognise the agency of the people and ‘to acknowledge the insurgent as the subject of his own history’. According to Guha, they all failed to acknowledge that there existed a parallel subaltern domain of politics which was not influenced by the elite politics and which possessed an independent, self-generating dynamics. Its roots lay in pre-colonial popular social and political structures. However, this domain was not archaic: ‘As modern as indigenous elite politics, it was distinguished by its relatively greater depth in time as well as in structure’. In his view, there was now an urgent requirement for setting the record straight by viewing the history from the point-of-view of the subaltern classes. The politics of the people was crucial because it constituted an autonomous domain which ‘neither originated from elite politics nor did its existence depend on the latter’. The people’s politics differed from the elite politics in several crucial aspects.
For one, its roots lay in the traditional organisations of the people such as caste and kinship networks, tribal solidarity, territoriality, etc. Secondly, while elite mobilisations were vertical in nature, people’s mobilisations were horizontal. Thirdly, whereas the elite mobilisation was legalistic and pacific, the subaltern mobilisation was relatively violent. Fourthly, the elite mobilisation was more cautious and controlled while the subaltern mobilisation was more spontaneous.

The Subaltern historians, disenchanted with the Congress nationalism and its embodiment in the Indian state, rejected the thesis that popular mobilisation was the result of either economic conditions or initiatives from the top. They claimed to have discovered a popular autonomous domain which was opposed to the elite domain of politics. This domain of the subaltern was defined by perpetual resistance and rebellion against the elite. The subaltern historians also attributed a general unity to this domain clubbing together a variety of heterogeneous groups such as tribes, peasantry, proletariat and, occasionally, the middle classes as well. Moreover, this domain was said to be almost completely uninfluenced by the elite politics and was claimed to possess an independent, self-generating dynamics. The charismatic leadership was no longer viewed as the chief force behind a movement. It was instead the people’s interpretation of such charisma which acquired prominence in analysis of a movement.

This idea is present in most of the early contributions to the series. Gyanendra Pandey, in ‘Peasant Revolt and Indian Nationalism’ (SS I), argues that peasant movement in Awadh arose before and independently of the Non-cooperation movement. According to him, peasants’ understanding of the local power structure and its alliance with colonial power was more advanced than that of the Congress leaders. In fact, the peasant militancy was reduced wherever the Congress organisation was stronger. In Stephen Henningham’s account of the ‘Quit India in Bihar and the Eastern United Provinces’ (SS II), the elite and the subaltern domains were clearly distinguished from each other. He talks of two movements existing together but parallel to each other – ‘an elite uprising’, started by ‘the high caste rich peasants and small landlords who dominated the Congress’, and a ‘subaltern rebellion’ powered by ‘the poor, low caste people of the region’.

Shahid Amin, in his article ‘Gandhi as Mahatma’ (in SS III), studies the popular perception of Mahatma Gandhi. He shows that the popular perception and actions were completely at variance with the Congress leaders’ perception of Gandhi. Although the Mahatma’s messages were spread widely through ‘rumours’, there was an entire philosophy of economy and politics behind it – the need to become a good human being, to give up drinking, gambling and violence, to take up spinning and to maintain communal harmony. The stories which circulated also emphasised the magical powers of Mahatma and his capacity to reward or punish those who obeyed or disobeyed him. On the other hand, the Mahatma’s name and his supposed magical powers were also used to reinforce as well as establish caste hierarchies, to make the debtors pay and to boost the cow-protection movement. All these popular interpretations of the Mahatma’s messages reached their climax during the Chauri Chaura incidents in 1922 when his name was invoked to burn the police post, to kill the policemen and to loot the market. David Hardiman, in his numerous articles, focused on subaltern themes and argued that whether it was the tribal assertion in South Gujarat, or the Bhil movement in Eastern Gujarat, or the radicalism of the agricultural workers during the Civil Disobedience Movement, there was an independent politics of the subaltern classes against the elites.
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Similarly, Sumit Sarkar, in ‘The Conditions and Nature of Subaltern Militancy’ (SS III), argues that the Non-cooperation movement in Bengal ‘revealed a picture of masses outstripping leaders…and the popular initiative eventually alarmed leaders into calling for a halt’. Thus, ‘the subaltern groups…formed a relatively autonomous political domain with specific features and collective mentalities which need to be explored, and that this was a world distinct from the domain of the elite politicians who in early twentieth century Bengal came overwhelmingly from high-caste educated professional groups connected with zamindari or intermediate tenure-holding’.

Thus we see that in these and in many other essays in the earlier volumes, an attempt was made to separate the elite and the subaltern domains and to establish the autonomy of subaltern consciousness and action. This phase was generally characterised by emphasis on subaltern themes and autonomous subaltern consciousness. The subalternist historians forcefully asserted that both the colonial ideology and the bourgeois nationalist ideology failed to establish their hegemony over the subaltern domain. Moreover, the Indian bourgeoisie failed in its prime work of speaking for the nation, and the Congress nationalism was bourgeois and elite which restrained popular radicalism.

A few years after its inauguration as advocates of people’s voice in history and proponents of an autonomous subaltern political domain, the project of Subaltern Studies underwent significant changes. Under postmodernist and postcolonialist influences, many of its contributors began to question its earlier emphasis on autonomous subaltern consciousness. Gayatri Spivak, in particular, criticised the humanist viewpoint adopted by the earlier trend within Subaltern Studies. At another level, the idea of subalternity became much wider to include even the colonial elite as they were considered subaltern vis-à-vis the imperialist rulers, the phenomenon being termed by Partha Chatterjee as ‘subalternity of the elite’. Chatterjee’s influential book, Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World (1986), derived from the postcolonial framework of Edward Said which considered the colonial power-knowledge as overwhelming and irresistible. His later book, The Nation and its Fragments (1995), carries this analysis even further.

Subalternity as a concept was also redefined. Earlier, it stood for the oppressed classes in opposition to the dominant classes both inside and outside. Later, it was conceptualised in opposition to colonialism, modernity and Enlightenment. The earlier emphasis on the ‘subaltern’ now gave way to a focus on ‘community’. Earlier the elite nationalism was stated to hijack the people’s initiatives for its own project; now the entire project of nationalism was declared to be only a version of colonial discourse with its emphasis on centralisation of movement, and later of the state. The ideas of secularism and enlightenment rationalism were attacked and there began an emphasis on the ‘fragments’ and ‘episodes’. Thus, the subaltern historiography on Indian nationalism went through two phases. [For further details on Subaltern School, see S.B. Upadhyay 2015].

4.4 SOME OTHER VIEWS

Although the interpretations of Indian nationalism as hitherto described hold sway, they do not cover all the approaches. According to Sugata Bose, the need is to move beyond the debates between ‘secular statist and Subaltern fragmentalist histories’. It is because while ‘the secular, statist historiography relegates religiously informed nationalism, especially of the Muslim variety, to the status of ‘communalism’, the subaltern, fragmentalist kind unduly privileges the
fragment constituted by the Bengali Hindu middle classes, almost equating it in the process with the whole of the Indian nation’ [S. Bose 2001: 284, 291-2]. Here we will briefly discuss two books which offer a different interpretation of Indian nationalism from what we have discussed so far.

C.A. Bayly, in his Origins of Nationality in South Asia (1998), has argued that Indian nationalism was not an entirely modern product. It was built on the pre-existing indigenous ideas of territoriality, ethical government and public morality. Bayly traces the roots of regional patriotisms which existed before the onset of colonialism and which contributed significantly in the making of the modern Indian nationalism. He is critical of those scholars who consider Indian nationalism as basically a western product created in the late nineteenth century by the English-educated intelligentsia. According to him, patriotic sentiments in the subcontinent pre-dated the western influences, and ‘an analogy to European patriotisms…before the French Revolution…could be found in the sentiment of attachment to land and political institutions which developed rapidly in some regional Indian homelands between 1400 and 1800’. Such ideas developed around the ‘themes of perfect city, corporate kingship, humoural balance and good counsel’. Deriving from multiple sources (such as Hindu normative ideas, Greek and Islamic sources, and rational ideas of the Mughal elite), these ideas basically focused on particular regions and territories [C.A. Bayly 1998: 36].

Although Bayly does not entirely disagree with the view that ‘much of modern Indian nationalist organisation and ideology was consciously or unconsciously derived from western exemplars, especially as it was reflected in the central organisations of the national struggle.’ However, he emphasises that ‘the particularities of Indian nationalism have to be understood in the context of Indian forms of social organisation and ideologies of good governance that pre-date the full western impact’ [ibid. v]. According to him, the claim that Indian nationalism was completely a product of colonial times is a ‘drastic foreshortening of history which is implied in many recent critiques of nationalist modernity’. He argues that a strong sense of patriotism, which bound many Indians to their homelands, had been present since the seventeenth century. They had taken collective action to protect their homelands from outside intrusion. Towards the period leading to the decline of the Mughal empire, strong nationalist sentiments developed in many regions. Several regions provide the earliest expressions of such feelings. In Maharashtra, there was ‘a relatively strong and generalised Indian patriotism in which an emerging sense of commitment to regional culture coincided with the creation of a regional language and the formation of a relatively strong state’ [ibid. 26]. This was ‘a patriotism underpinned by language, devotional religion and economic integration’ which ‘was energized by an expanding state which promoted themes of war and remembrance’ [ibid. 36]. In Rajasthan and Central India, the Rajput sense of solidarity and resistance to the Mughals gave rise to ‘a sense of Rajput patriotism’. In Jat region, there was distinct sense of regional patriotism as the population in this area fought against the Mughals to protect their territorial space. In Telugu region in southern Deccan, a strong sense of ‘Telugu ethnicity’ had emerged as early as between 1400 and 1600. Further south, a sense of Mysorean patriotic identity was forged by Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan. Even in other regions, such as Bengal and Tamil Nadu, forms of patriotism could be found which defined the community. These forms of patriotism were different from various other pre-colonial bonds such as those formed around religion, sect, and caste. These patriotic sentiments helped the later reformist and nationalist ideologies and associations which emerged in the nineteenth century.
Rajat Ray, like Bayly, is critical of those theorists who consider that Indian nationalism was entirely a modern product, constructed from the discourses derived from Europe. He discusses the multiple social, religious and political bonds which gave rise to a common culture and mentality and thus created a ‘felt community’, a sense of Indianness, much before the advent of modern nationalism. This ‘felt community’ encompassed both the Hindus and the Muslims and transcended the barriers of regions. He argues that, although the idea of a larger community in pre-modern times was different from the modern idea of nation-state, there was a cultural community which cut across the regional, religious and caste boundaries. Ray insists that broader community, even ‘national’, bonds existed before the colonial period. The resistance by the remnants of the Mughal state to the increasingly assertive East India Company showed a broader attachment towards previous social and political order. Even more importantly, the various rebellions since the onset of the colonial rule culminating in the Revolt of 1857 showed a common bond among people and their allegiance to a territorial state. He argues:

‘At the instinctual level of the collective mentality, it was the violent protest of a black subject people against their white oppressors. . . It was not, however, the rebels who put the struggle in terms of a war between the races. .... At the level of conscious thought, they clothed the underlying race war in the ideological garb of a struggle between the true religions and the false one. The joint brotherhood of the religions expressed, in so far as they were capable of expressing it, the instinctive feeling that the native subject race constituted one people as against the white Christian rulers.’

The search for the roots of Indian national identity in the pre-colonial state forms, societies, and composite cultures in different parts of the subcontinent present a new perspective which is different from the mainstream understanding of Indian nationalism.

4.5 SUMMARY

Like nationalism in other countries, the Indian nationalism has also been subject to varying interpretations. In this Unit, two important trends of interpretation – the Cambridge School and the Subaltern School – have been discussed. While the Cambridge School historians try to debunk the phenomenon of Indian nationalism and question the idea of selfless leaders, the Subaltern historians question the official narrative of Indian nationalism. But the Subaltern historians underline the existence of a strong popular nationalism which was autonomous and more militant than the organised and official nationalism. Besides these interpretations, we have also briefly discussed another trend which points towards the presence of strong patriotic and even national sentiments in pre-colonial India.

4.6 EXERCISES

1) Discuss the interpretation of Indian nationalism given by the Cambridge School.

2) How do the Subaltern historians view the phenomenon of Indian nationalism?

3) Briefly discuss the view of C.A. Bayly and Rajat Ray on Indian nationalism.
SUGGESTED READINGS


Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, New York: Grove Press, 1986


