

## What 'nation' did early Indian nationalism represent?

Indian society from the nineteenth century onwards was faced with the determined efforts of a class of foreign traders determined to gain political control over India above all else. The reaction of Indian social structures to the novel agricultural and economic viewpoints of the Europeans was, however, very slight. The economic frontier of European penetration lagged noticeably far behind the political one, in marked contrast to the pattern of many other British territories at this point in time. Indeed, such was the domestic political desire for control in India that Palmerston felt forced to lecture Lord Auckland in 1841 that 'It is the business of government to open and secure roads for the merchant' - uttered in order to encourage Auckland to plunge still deeper into Central Asia, where prospects for British commerce were negligible.<sup>1</sup> In this atmosphere it is hardly surprising to find that the East India Company saw few profits in interfering in the existing and traditional sources of tax revenue. Indeed, it was almost impossible for them to concentrate on any other facet of governance, since Indian communities tended to be self-sufficient - creating no large market for European imports. European economic strength in fact remained limited to purchases of finished primary produce such as indigo, and essentially left the status quo in place. Given the self-sufficiency of the Indian village, its surplus production was not drawn out by means of the exchange economy, but had to be pumped out by the engine of taxation. On both grounds of expediency and policy, therefore, the East India Company continued to act in many respects as an Indian ruler; it struck its coinage with the image of the puppet emperor at Delhi, maintained the use of Persian in official correspondence and in the law courts, administered Hindu and Muslim personal law, repressed Christian missionary activity and upheld the religious institutions of the country.<sup>2</sup>

However, Europeans did attempt to alter the nature of Indian society both in religious and also in economic terms. Much to the East India Company's displeasure, missionary work did indeed go on, but the Company also largely failed to convert the Indian village structure by means of cheap imports from Britain creating a dependent market system. In his *Das Kapital*, Karl Marx claimed that 'The simplicity of the organisation for production in these self-sufficing [village] communities that constantly reproduce themselves in the same form and when accidentally destroyed spring up again on the same spot with the same name - this simplicity supplies the key to the secret of the unchangeableness of Asiatic societies... The structure of the economic elements of society remains untouched by the storm clouds in the political sky.'<sup>3</sup> However, Marxian theory nevertheless claimed that the influx of Lancashire cotton destroyed Indian social structures. As Marx himself said 'English interference... dissolved these small semi-barbarian communities by blowing up their economical basis, and thus produced the greatest, and to speak the truth, the only *social* revolution ever heard of in Asia.'<sup>4</sup> The actual amount of genuine economic penetration was in fact nothing like the amount which Marx had envisaged. Even at the end of British rule, of the 63m people of Uttar Pradesh, only just over 2m owned land, despite the British attempts at liberalisation. The various village headmanships which had been a prime target of the European plantation-owners remained substantially in place. In Uttar Pradesh, 85% of land-owners were small-holders paying less than Rs.25; 13% paid between Rs.25 and Rs.250. However, 1.5% (30,142 people) paid over Rs. 250, and were thus responsible for 58% of the total revenue demand. Although the personnel may have changed, the traditional

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<sup>1</sup> Stokes *The Peasant and the Raj* p.91

<sup>2</sup> Stokes *The Peasant and the Raj* p.28

<sup>3</sup> Stokes *The Peasant and the Raj* p.20

<sup>4</sup> Stokes *The Peasant and the Raj* p.24

Indian hierarchy remained the same - a broad-based pyramid, but tapering rapidly to narrow pinnacle in the élites who owned the land.<sup>5</sup>

This is not to say that there were no changes in rural patterns of ownership which owed their genesis to British intervention and interference in Indian affairs. The 1838 legal innovations allowed all classes the right to transfer and alienate *malguzari* rights to engage for the government revenue. The effects of this were quite substantial, and example being in Aligarh district, where 2% of lands transferred each year - a change in ownership of 50% in the two decades between 1838-58. Yet although non-agricultural classes could increase their holdings (up to 18% in Saharanpur district by 1868), most was recycled inside the landed classes, whose style of living remained similar to beforehand.<sup>6</sup> The Conquest did also substantially decapitate the superior political élite, though less so in the protected and princely states. The intermediate political élite such as local notables suffered less drastically, and some were able to adapt themselves into landowners. British initiatives especially in the second half of the nineteenth century also affected the pattern of social relations in Indian society. After 1857 the development of district and provincial administration brought individual villages and areas much more into the field of vision for administrators in the central government, and increased the political and economic pressure on those sections of the old élites, whose dominance had been challenged by changes to land-ownership and cash-cropping. The new sophistication of provincial administration required interference at the subdistrict level, and thus in the hereditary jurisdictions of the old tahsildar class. Traditional caste rulership was increasingly at odds with a public service based on educational qualification. This is especially obvious in the field of the army, where the Mutiny itself was caused in part by the use of the General Service Enlistment Act of 1856 and the use of new greased cartridges, which threatened the Brahmin and Rajput dominance of the army. However, the failure of the Mutiny to reassert traditional hierarchies only sped on the process by which by the 1880s, the dominance of the local notable was being challenged by a new politician broker, operating on an enlarged scale.<sup>7</sup>

Ironically, despite the hardships of both the old ruling élites and villagers, it was from the ranks of this pre-1857 administrative élite - who had suffered least, and were able to profit from offices and land-holding - that Indian nationalist leadership was drawn. It was this class who benefited most from British legal and land reforms - as can be witnessed by the creation of a collaborative land-owning middle class in areas with undivided freehold (*zamindari*) tenures, such as Eastern Muzaffarnagar. Trouble during the Mutiny was far more prominent in areas where proprietary brotherhoods (*bhaiachara*) held land and made it hard for outsiders to oust them from local dominance. In this way, it could be said that the rise of nationalist leadership was a testament to the success of the British policy of trying to incorporate Indians into the governance of their own country. Indeed, Thomas Babington Macaulay deliberately set out to produce an anglicised middle class 'who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern - a class of persons Indian in colour and blood, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect.' Certainly, no early nationalist leaders ever seriously challenged the legal position of the Europeans in ruling over India - even while they might have agitated for Indian home-rule. Associations were founded from early on in the nineteenth century to press for reforms that seemed to have general application - and not to demand the independence to carry them out themselves or even the same self-governing federation status granted to Canada, Australia or later to South Africa. These reform associations, such as the Indian Association of Calcutta, the Bombay Presidency Association and the Madras Mahajana Sabha, also strove to overcome the religious differences which during the Mutiny had proved dangerous to British

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<sup>5</sup> Stokes *The Peasant and the Raj* p.205

<sup>6</sup> Stokes *The Peasant and the Raj* p.189

<sup>7</sup> Stokes *The Peasant and the Raj* p.44

interests. 'Since they were open groups, their members might belong to all castes and communities; since they commented on matters of concern to all, they claimed to stand for interests wider than those of their members.'<sup>8</sup> However, most importantly of all they remained loyal to the British Crown, a fact that the Indian National Congress took up at its formation in 1885. At the third Congress in 1888, WC Bonnerjee underlined that 'the principle on which the Indian National Congress is based is that the British Rule should be permanent and abiding in India and that, given this axiom, it is the duty of educated Indians to endeavour to the best of their power to help the rulers so to govern the country as to improve her material prosperity and make the people of all classes and communities happy and prosperous and contented as subjects of the British Empire.'<sup>9</sup>

The Indian National Congress was the first organisation which attempted to influence the government at an all-India level, but it nevertheless had only a limited impact on the Indian political scene. This was not least because it rotated its meeting point each year and thus could be exploited by different regional power-brokers and interest groups. Local rivalries often manifested themselves in whether a group chose to support the Congress or not. An example is the *madrash* of Deoband, who supported the Congress as much because their rival in Aligarh did not as for any intrinsic value in the Congress itself. The rivalry between Poona and the Bombay Presidency almost ruined the Congress of 1895, which was only saved because of a local compromise. Even so, as the *Report of the Indian National Congress* noted in 1898 'the centre of gravity, even in Indian politics, is in England, and ...the success of our political work depends on the amount of public sympathy we create in that country.'<sup>10</sup> It was the British committee of the Congress which managed to most effectively harness pro-Indian sentiment in Britain to implement specific goals - which were often more or less vigorously opposed in certain parts of India itself. The publication in 1890 of the magazine *India*, designed for a British audience, actually found a greater number of copies being sent to the sub-continent, since each province guaranteed to subscribe to a certain number of copies in order to finance the British Committee. Madras, for example, was expected to buy 2000 copies, but could only find 800 willing subscribers. However, despite these divisions, it was clear to all participants that Congress was only useful, and could only draw legitimacy from the fact that it continued to produce unanimous motions. Thus in order to continue claiming to represent 'India' they could only ever advocate policies which could not be strongly opposed. Its style of oratory therefore inevitably descended into political cliché to overcome the obvious divisions - words like 'boycott', 'self-help' and 'swaraj' were ones which sounded good but did not address the hard issues for fear of internal dissension. This search for uncontroversial symbol and cliché marked much of Indian nationalism from its early roots to recent times, and could easily be fostered by blaming many Indian wrongs on the failures of the people to unite, and even better on the incompetence of the British ruling authorities.

Indian leaders were greatly shaken by the famines in Orissa 1865-6 which cast great doubt on the complacent British view of a peaceful India progressing under benign foreign rule. Dadabhai Naoroji read his paper to the Society of Arts in London 1870, asking 'is Indian at present in a condition to produce enough to supply all its wants?' and he came to the conclusion that this was not so. Ideas about Britain's failure to secure the development of India up to the living standards of other nations did indeed strike a chord in Britain itself, such that RC Dutt said in 1901 'I do not think there is a question of graver import connected with any part of the British Empire than the present condition of India.'<sup>11</sup> Local newspapers helped in linking the perception of Indian

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<sup>8</sup> Johnson *Provincial Politics and Indian Nationalism* p.12

<sup>9</sup> Johnson *Provincial Politics and Indian Nationalism* p.14

<sup>10</sup> Johnson *Provincial Politics and Indian Nationalism* p.13

<sup>11</sup> Chandra *The Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism in India* p.6

poverty with the British ruling classes. The *Amrika Bazar Patrika* said in 1885 'The fact is, the people of India re willing to live in content under British rule if they can only get a full meal.'<sup>12</sup> The issue of poverty was therefore one which the British felt constrained to answer to justify their own presence on the subcontinent. So important was it that no less than two Secretaries of State for India needed to express this point in the House of Commons. Sir Henry Fowler said in 1894 'The question I wish to consider is whether that Government... has , or has not, promoted the general prosperity of the people of India; and whether India is better or worse off by being a Province of the British Crown. That is the test.'<sup>13</sup> Lord George Hamilton in 1901 confirmed this with the statement that 'I admit at once that if it could be shown that India has retrograded in material prosperity under our rule, we stand self-condemned, and we ought no longer to be trusted with the control of the country.'<sup>14</sup>

However, were Indians genuinely poor and more to the point, had British rule made them any poorer? For the Indian National Congress and other nationalist leaders, the issue was very easily resolved, since poverty was one area in which all castes and religions were united - and since the scapegoat was conveniently British. In 1891 their report declared that 'full fifty millions of the population, a number yearly increasing, are dragging out a miserable existence on the verge of starvation, and that, in every decade, several millions actually perish by starvation.'<sup>15</sup> Poona's *Sarvajanik Sabha* reinforced this by warning in 1881 that 'This indication of extreme poverty is so appalling that in any other country the Government would have been forced to take up this question into serious consideration under penalty of a revolution.'<sup>16</sup> Most powerful, however, was the application of figures and statistics, which gave bald figures for the handiwork of the British Raj government. Dadabhai Naoroji calculated the Indian GDP in 1873 as reaching Rs.3.4bn. For a population of 170m, the consequent calculation of income per capita produced the figure of only Rs.20 per year as an average. This derisory figure made all the more powerful the nationalist case for British incompetence, and the Government of India - with the benefit of their statistical machinery - was not slow to produce counter-figures. Evelyn Baring calculated 1882 GDP as Rs.5.25bn, making per capita income Rs.27. Lord Curzon announced that the 1897-8 figure was Rs.30. However, even these figures were unsatisfactory for nationalist leaders, especially in comparison of Indian per capita income (£2) with the UK (£35.2), USA (£27.2) and Europe (£18). India, according to some, was therefore 'nineteen times worse off than England,' that 'even the most oppressed and mis-governed Russia is prosperity itself,' and that 'India is the poorest country in the civilised world.'<sup>17</sup> Half-hearted British pleadings that Indians were not so rich, but also had less needs and material desires were instantly dismissed. As one administrator said, 'Judged from their own standpoint, the peasantry of Bengal are happy and prosperous.'<sup>18</sup> Indian leaders however denounced the aesthetic outlook, refusing to exalt poverty in the name of spiritualism.

Yet it remained the case that in attempting to dismiss British activities for their incompetence, it was very often not carried out in order to agitate for British withdrawal from India altogether. In fact, one of the main planks of the Indian National Congress's demands was to allow the literate classes of society - a class to which not un-coincidentally almost all Congress delegates belonged - should be allowed to gain offices in the existing bureaucracy. This was justified by Dadabhai Naoroji, who claimed that increased Indianisation of the administration was 'the most important

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<sup>12</sup> Chandra *The Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism in India* p.6

<sup>13</sup> Chandra *The Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism in India* p.7

<sup>14</sup> Chandra *The Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism in India* p.27

<sup>15</sup> Chandra *The Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism in India* p.9

<sup>16</sup> Chandra *The Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism in India* p.9

<sup>17</sup> Chandra *The Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism in India* p.19

<sup>18</sup> Chandra *The Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism in India* p.22

key to our material and moral advancement. All our political reforms will benefit us by very little indeed if this reform of all reforms is not made.<sup>19</sup> From this point of view, Indian nationalism can be said to have very largely served the class interests of the rising bourgeoisie who advocated it. Congress demands to hold an examination for the Indian civil service in India were opposed since according to the Public Service Commission of 1886 'contradictory evidence was given by witnesses belonging to those classes which have made the greatest progress in education; and others who feel that, in the present circumstances of the country, important classes of the community are practically debarred from success in examinations designed mainly as tests of educational qualification.'<sup>20</sup> Regional governments also bitterly denounced self-seeking attempts to Indianise the civil service; all the more so since different levels of competence in the English language gave certain sections of the community an advantage over others. Sayyid Ahmad Khan asked the third Congress in 1888 'Can any Bengali honestly say that the resolutions passed at the National Congress will be beneficial to any class of natives except Bengalis and Mahratta Brahmins... The Congress is nothing more or less than an civil war without the use of arms.'<sup>21</sup> British administrators also felt the disadvantages of a competitive examination exacerbating racial and ethnic tensions in their areas. As the Lieutenant-Governor of Punjab said, 'Unless you exclude certain classes, such as the Khattris, Kashmiri Pandits and Banias, which you cannot practically do, they almost invariably win.' Competition would result in recruitment 'not from among the classes who would naturally take the lead, but from amongst the men who obtain degrees in the universities.'<sup>22</sup> This class of literate men was not necessarily based on the old caste divisions, since there was a noticeable growth in the numbers of literate non-Brahmins. In Maharashtra, for example, the circulation of Marathi newspapers went up by over four and half times between 1887-1921, and the non-Brahmin readership rising from 4.4% in 1902 to 21.8% by 1921.<sup>23</sup>

Yet in conclusion, the educated élites who made up most of the nationalist leadership did tend to see changes in the patterns of governance as being beneficial to their own interests, which nevertheless remaining loyal to the idea of British sovereignty over India itself. The rise of this feeling was not because of an intrinsic social change in India as a whole, which threw up new problems and therefore solutions. There was very little social change in India at all, and even that was hardly due to the changing social élites. Traders tended to follow the same vocational paths as set down by caste rather than class. With a population that remained reasonably stable until the twentieth century, nationalism was not the result of a new urban bourgeoisie, since there was none. Rather, nationalist leaders were an eclectic set of Western-educated liberals seeking the offices and posts of government service. The fact that the British controlled these government posts caused resentment among the service élite, who felt little compunction in turning on their masters. Yet even this was in an attempt to genuinely reform the Indian government into one which followed if anything the Liberal Party's ideas for Irish Home Rule. Certainly it was no coincidence that the Indian National Congress was founded at the height of this debate in Britain itself, and for the notes of triumph in 1905 at the prospect of a renewed Liberal administration after the long and frustrating period of Conservative Unionism.

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<sup>19</sup> Johnson *Provincial Politics and Indian Nationalism* p.24

<sup>20</sup> Johnson *Provincial Politics and Indian Nationalism* p.26

<sup>21</sup> Johnson *Provincial Politics and Indian Nationalism* p.26

<sup>22</sup> Johnson *Provincial Politics and Indian Nationalism* p.27

<sup>23</sup> Johnson *Provincial Politics and Indian Nationalism* p.62