

How far did the appeal of colonial nationalism depend upon its invocation of an imaginary golden past?

Giving an adequate definition of the extent of colonial nationalism remains problematic, since many types of political viewpoint falls into the same general description. Nationalists generally believe that the world is divided into distinct cultures, which should have their own separate political identities. Yet some believe these distinct identities already exist, others that they are a long-term goal, and still others who believe that it is their responsibility to ensure that political responsibility comes quickly. However, in a colonial context, the definition of political identities fitting neatly over cultural identities becomes much harder to maintain. India was hardly a homogenous country - and indeed it was only since British rule that it had been united as a country in its current form. The main determinants of cultural nationhood, at least based on the European model, were either not present in India or were somewhat strained. India did not have a single language - in fact several hundred languages remain in India even after two centuries of unification under a single sovereign government. India also has a multiplicity of different religions - and even where a particular religion is widespread, such as with Hinduism, the forms it takes are extremely variable. This cosmopolitanism defies religion as another cultural linkage across the country. India also had no indigenous political institutions available for use nationwide - and the demands for Western-style parliamentary representation underlined the dependency on borrowing institutions from Europe, not India itself.

This left an even greater need in Nationalist minds to confirm India's right to nationhood by means of a genuine shared cultural heritage - and Gandhi was in no doubt that a fuller Indian self-confidence was necessary for the attainment of self-government. As he said, 'Swadeshi means being proud of India and Indian things and resisting the sense of inferiority inculcated by Western domination: If we have no regard for our respective vernaculars, if we dislike our clothes, if our dress repels us, if we are ashamed to wear the sacred [thread], if our food is distasteful to us, our climate is not good enough, our people uncouth, our civilization faulty... in short, if everything native is bad and everything foreign pleasing . . . I should not know what Swaraj can mean for us.'¹ However, fine words from leaders of the Congress could not disguise the fact that creating a national history was impossible if Indians themselves disagreed as to whether they consisted of a single nation or not. For seculars such as Nehru, 'Real or Indian nationalism was something quite apart from these two religious and communal varieties of nationalism [Hindu and Muslim] and strictly speaking, is the only form which can be called nationalism in the modern sense of the word.'² Members of the two main religious groups had entirely different opinions about the state of nationhood. Romesh Chandra Dutt said he wanted to portray 'the glories of our past and the greatness of our national heroes,' but in the context of these works, "national" means Hindu: the heroes in the novels are Rajputs, Marathas, Bengali Hindus, and a few North Indian Hindus. Others who contributed to the romanticization of the Hindu past were Bankim Chatterjee, Rabindranath Tagore, Dwijendralal Roy, and B. G. Tilak.³ On the other hand, Muslim leaders such as Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan speculated whether 'Is it supposed, the different castes and creeds living in India belong to one nation or can become one nation, and their aims and aspirations and the same? I think it is quite impossible and when it is impossible there can be no such thing as a National Congress.'⁴ Each one of these three groups also had their own separate views on the heroic figures of Indian history - many of whom had actually fought against each other. Therefore while Muslims venerated the memory of past

¹ Richard G. Fox, *Gandhian Utopia: experiments with culture* (Boston, 1989), pp.46-7

² Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction Of Communalism*, (Delhi, 1992), p.240

³ Leonard Gordon, *Bengal: the nationalist movement 1876-1940* (New York, 1974), p.46

⁴ P. Hardy, *The Muslims of British India*, (Cambridge, 1972), p.129

Moghul rulers of India, some Hindus like Tilak and Dutt chose to honour Shivaji, Aurangzeb's greatest enemy. Worse than this, any attempt to retell history seemed to stoke what would increasingly become a serious problem in the twentieth century of communal conflict. As one reader recalls, The historical romances of Bankim Chandra Chatterji and Ramesh Chandra Dutt glorified Hindu rebellion against Muslim rule and showed the Muslims in a correspondingly poor light. Chatterji was positively and fiercely anti-Muslim.⁵ Religious differences could even spark differences about which language was used as a medium for telling the definitive history of India and the Indian people which they assumed they represented. The issue of Urdu and Hindi competing for the Government of India's official publications symbolises the strength of the relevant political traditions. Many was the occasion when the secular nationalists despaired of convincing a sceptical British government of the fundamental unity of British India aside from the religious question. Karan Singh said 'India is a nation that has always nurtured religion . (it is something in the soil . . . if India forgets Her spiritual heritage it will become one of many nations; it will not even remain a single nation.'⁶ Gandhi claimed in *Hind Swaraj* that 'India cannot cease to be one nation because people belonging to different religions live in it. The introduction of foreigners does not necessarily destroy the nation, they merge in it.'⁷

Yet since the colonialists asserted that it was a 'scientific' and demonstrable truth that it was impossible to unite Indians, Nationalists needed a version of Indian history based around the idea of its 'fundamental' unity. One way of doing this was to highlight the period of Muslim rule immediately preceding the arrival of the British, as being a period of great harmony. 'At almost any time in recorded history', wrote Nehru, an Indian from any part of the country would have felt more or less at home in any other part, but a stranger and an alien in any other country.'⁸ More specifically, nationalists applauded the 'enlightened' policies of the Emperor Akbar, saying that his was 'perhaps the first conscious attempt to formulate the notion of a secular State. He also initiated a liberal social and religious policy which aimed at bringing about a fusion of the diverse elements which constitute the Indian people.'⁹ Nehru suggested that 'Akbar became the great representative of the old Indian idea, of a synthesis of differing elements and their into a common nationality. He identified himself with India and India took to him although he was a newcomer.'¹⁰ The committee appointed by Congress to inquire into the Hindu-Muslim rioting that occurred in Kanpur asserted that 'The prevailing impression is that the Hindu-Muslim problem in its present form is an age-long problem. This is an extremely wrong impression, created by interested parties through deliberate misrepresentation about the propagation of Islam in India, about the nature and incidents of Muslim rule, and generally about relations which subsisted during this period between the Hindus and the Musalmans. All the main controversies which at present embitter and have latterly divided the two communities... did not and could not have existed during the Muslim period.'¹¹ This conclusion echoed that of Gandhi, who declared with tragic irony in *Hind Swaraj* that 'They have long since ceased to fight. How, then, can there be any inborn enmity? Pray remember this too, that we did not cease to fight only after British occupation. The Hindus flourished under Moslem sovereigns, and Moslems under the Hindu.'¹²

Almost no Indians, however, shared the idea of Moghul rule being the source of India's civilisation. Instead, Indians of all main religious groups admitted that by the time the first

⁵ Leonard Gordon, *Bengal: the nationalist movement 1876-1940* (New York, 1974), p.46

⁶ Richard G. Fox, *Gandhian Utopia: experiments with culture* (Boston, 1989), p.40

⁷ Mohandas Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj and other writings* (Cambridge, 1997), p.52

⁸ Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction Of Communalism*, (Delhi, 1992), p.248

⁹ Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction Of Communalism*, (Delhi, 1992), p.249

¹⁰ Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction Of Communalism*, (Delhi, 1992), p.249

¹¹ Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction Of Communalism*, (Delhi, 1992), pp.250-1

¹² Mohandas Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj and other writings* (Cambridge, 1997), p.53

Muslims arrived in India - either as traders or invaders - they encountered a highly sophisticated and well-ordered society. In his book, *A History of Civilisation in Ancient India*, Dutt divided the pre-Muslim history of India into five periods: Vedic, Epic, Rationalistic, Buddhist, and Puranic. For Tilak, the true source of Indian civilisation was the message of the Vedas and Gita for providing spiritual energy and moral enthusiasm to the nation. His belief in human fellowship also followed from this Vedantism. In a speech he once declared: 'if the Vedantic ideal is higher, it includes the national ideal which is lower. The two are not irreconcilable if you know how to reconcile them. The two ideals are mutually consistent and both of them demand a kind of self-sacrifice and self-control.'¹³ Gandhi, as well, hoped that the teachings of the Vedas would continue to provide the blueprint for Indian society in the twentieth century - an example is his attempt to "resuscitate" the varna system of caste duties in his Indian ashram. For him, the ancient varnas did not symbolize a hierarchy, and therefore, his ashram could not admit of Untouchability or any other distinction "of high and low " Gandhi derived this contemporary principle: "Talents of all kinds are a trust and must be utilised for the benefit of society. The individual has no right to live unto himself. Indeed, it is impossible to live unto oneself. We fully live unto ourselves when we live unto society."¹⁴ Another, ringing endorsement of the Vedic era comes from Romesh Chandra Dutt, in his 1892 book *A Brief History of Ancient and Modern Bengal for the Use of Schools*. 'For a Hindu boy, the history of Bengal should not commence with the conquest of the country by Bakhiyar Khalji. He should know of the cultured Vedeas who cultivated Vedic learning and composed the Upanishads in North Behar and developed those systems of Mental Philosophy and Logic which are still admired in Europe... He should know of the Kesari and Ganga Kings of Orissa who ruled over the country for over a thousand years, and covered it with temples and edifices which still claim our admiration. And he should know of the Pala and the Sena Kings of Bengal, the former of whom extended their rule for a time over the whole of Northern India.'¹⁵ When he wrote his brief but more comprehensive book the *Civilization of India* some years later, Dutt called the Rationalistic period the "age of laws and philosophy,"¹⁶ By the time he wrote this, Dutt had decided that instead of the age of the Vedas and the Upanishads, the 'Rationalistic age' (1000-320 BC) represented the height of Indian culture. He set a high value on the achievements in science and mathematics, philosophy and drama, that took place in this period. For the more mystically inclined, this period was the end of the "wonder that was India." Dutt also praised Buddhism as a religion of "love and equality" which was accepted by a "living nation."¹⁷ However, the key factor was one which had already been highlighted by nationalists as regards the subsequent Muslim rule: "The waves of foreign conquest did not weaken the Hindu nation or the Hindu rule. Each new race of invaders from the first to the fifth century after Christ, settled down in India, accepted Hinduism or Buddhism, and thus merged into and strengthened the confederation of Hindu races in ancient India."¹⁸

Yet it still remained highly confusing to pinpoint the precise moments when 'Indian culture' definitively emerged. Gandhi, in *Hind Swaraj*, suggested that it was organic and unchanging - 'I believe that the civilisation India has evolved is not to be beaten in the world. Rome went, Greece shared the same fate, the might of the Pharaohs was broken, Japan has become westernised, of China nothing can be said. In the midst of all this, India remains immovable, and that is her glory. It is a charge against India that her people are so uncivilised, ignorant and stolid, that it is not possible to traduce them adopt any changes. It is a charge really against our merit.

¹³ Arti, *Indian Nationalism and Tilak: a critical analysis* (New Delhi, 1999), p.11

¹⁴ Richard G. Fox, *Gandhian Utopia: experiments with culture* (Boston, 1989), p.41

¹⁵ Leonard Gordon, *Bengal: the nationalist movement 1876-1940* (New York, 1974), pp.46-7

¹⁶ Leonard Gordon, *Bengal: the nationalist movement 1876-1940* (New York, 1974), p.48

¹⁷ Leonard Gordon, *Bengal: the nationalist movement 1876-1940* (New York, 1974), p.49

¹⁸ Leonard Gordon, *Bengal: the nationalist movement 1876-1940* (New York, 1974), p.51

What we have tested and found true on the anvil of experience, we dare not change.¹⁹ In fact, it was a commonplace of Orientalist discourse that India had no definite history because Indians did not share the same linear view of time and events. In fact, this was a great exaggeration, especially in areas which had longer contact with non-Indians.²⁰ What scholarship that was done in the areas of Indian prehistory was largely carried out either under the auspices of or directly by Europeans. It was therefore the results of European research which was taken on by Indians as explanation of their own origins. Gandhi himself admitted this - if only to condemn it. "These thoughts are put into our minds by selfish and false religious teachers. The English put the finishing touch. They have a habit of writing history: they pretend to study the manners and customs of all peoples... They unite about their own researches in most laudatory terms and hypnotise us into believing them. We, in our ignorance, then fall at their feet."²¹

The search for an authentic Indian culture, therefore, provided a major route for the explanatory tendencies of Orientalist scholars, and a way to prove their own preconceived ideas. Even would-be advocates of India perpetrated negative images in spite of themselves; Max Muller, who instructed Europeans on what India could teach them, nevertheless maintained that the Indian "character" developed the transcendent, 'not the active, the combative, and acquisitive, but the passive, the meditative, and reflective.' Even for Carpenter, dealings with Indians while investigating India's past led to sad reflections about the agendas of their collaborators. "The Hindu especially with his subtle mind and passive character is thus unreliable; it is difficult to find a man who will stick with absolute fidelity to his word, or of whom you can be certain that his ostensible object is his real one."²²

If even India's foreign defenders were unwittingly persuaded by the Orientalist stereotype, many babu Indians also found themselves drawn into a world system of cultural domination by European ideals. The ICS man Hugh Trevaskis "explained" the backwardness of India by reference to the pessimism and fatalism of Hinduism and Islam. In almost identical terms, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyaya deplored the backwardness of India: "The present state of the Hindus is a product of this excessive otherworldliness. The lack of devotion to work, which foreigners point out as our chief characteristic, is only a manifestation of this quality. Our most important characteristic - fatalism - is yet another form of this otherworldliness . . . Because of this otherworldliness and fatalism, this land of the Aryans has come under Muslim rule. And it is for the same reason that India remains a subject country till this day . . . for the same reason again that social progress in this country slowed down a long time ago and finally stopped."²³ Such an analysis would have made Gandhi proud - but neither Gandhi nor Bankim had any evidence for the lack of social progress except that which the British chose to discover.

Indeed Bankim himself highlighted the voracity of Europeans in seeking to provide definitive histories for India, while the Indians themselves showed little enthusiasm. He was especially critical of Western writings on India: 'of all intellectual sins this was the worst, the most irredeemable. Of the many ways of reducing oneself to a verbose stupidity, no other was as effective as the devoted study of western criticism of Indian texts.'²⁴ Later, he said 'Europeans [here used in the narrower sense of Englishmen] create history even when they go duck-

¹⁹ Mohandas Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj and other writings* (Cambridge, 1997), p.66

²⁰ Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Unhappy Consciousness: Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and the formation of nationalist discourse in India* (Delhi, 1995), p.108

²¹ Mohandas Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj and other writings* (Cambridge, 1997), p.56

²² Richard G. Fox, *Gandhian Utopia: experiments with culture* (Boston, 1989), pp.94-5

²³ Richard G. Fox, *Gandhian Utopia: experiments with culture* (Boston, 1989), p.95

²⁴ Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Unhappy Consciousness: Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and the formation of nationalist discourse in India* (Delhi, 1995), p.110

shooting, but between themselves, a whole nation of Bengalis have not achieved a history.²⁵ If Indians attempted to create a nationalist history, therefore, they would have to construct one out of European research and massive anachronisms to suit modern political circumstances. Bankim pilloried this when he said ‘we settle down to read the history of Bengal, we read that the Pala and Sena dynasties were rulers of Bengal: all these are errors for, at the time of the Senas, Palas or Bakhtiyar, there was no kingdom known as Bengal. . . First was religious unification, linguistic unification, later this came under a single, unified rule and turned into modern Bengal. That political unification has happened comparatively recently, during British rule. The Muslims were never able to unify the land of the Bengalis. The Mughals did to a large extent, but even they could not become the rulers of modern Bengal. Thus, the sense in which Greece has a history, or Rome, in that sense, Bengalis have no history.’²⁶ Even Gandhi’s work saw some prompting from European writers, and he admitted that he recognized the future society India should strive for, after reading John Ruskin’s *Unto This Last* in South Africa. Ruskin repudiated Europe’s capitalism with its concern for “money-gain” and “coin-glitter” rather than the “true gain, which is humanity”²⁷ The preface of *Hind Swaraj* that Gandhi had ‘endeavoured humbly to follow Tolstoy, Ruskin, Thoreau, Emerson and other writers besides the masters of Indian philosophy.’²⁸ On the other hand, if Orientalist stereotypes did influence the discourse of history, it could of course be parodied back to the British themselves. After a royal audience, when reporters chided him for waiting upon the king in his scant Indian garb, Gandhi is said to have remarked that the king had worn enough clothing for both of them.²⁹

The construction of a golden past also had absolutely no bearing on whether it heralds a golden future. Gandhi entirely ignored this point, due to his belief that India’s future should remain exactly similar to its past - he disowned a nationalism that would make India English. ‘And when it becomes English, it will be called not Hindustan but Englishtan. This is not the Swaraj that I want.’³⁰ Later on, he made a specific reference to the Western concept of ‘moral and material progress, by suggesting that ‘just as in the West, they have made wonderful discoveries in things material, similarly Hinduism has made still more marvelous discoveries in things of religion, of the spirit, of the soul . . . We are dazzled by the material progress that Western science has made. I am not enamoured of that progress. After all, there is something in Hinduism that has kept it alive up till now . . . And the reason why it has survived is that the end which Hinduism set before it was not development along material but spiritual lines.’³¹ Even more explicitly he condemned the West by saying that ‘The tendency of Indian civilization is to elevate the moral being, that of the Western civilisation is to propagate immorality. The latter is godless, the former is based on a belief in God. So understanding and so believing, it behoves every lover of India to cling to the old Indian civilization even as a child clings to the mother’s breast.’³² Yet Gandhi’s model of India’s development, concentrating on anti-industrial, autarkic village communities was anathema to most of the other Western-educated Congress members - and if taken to its logical conclusion, would have compromised the national awareness to which Gandhi dedicated his life. Nehru on the other hand, had a vision for India which rejected the restrictions of its past: ‘Whither India? Surely to the great humanity of social and economic equality, to the ending of all exploitation of nation by nation and class by class, to national freedom within the framework of

²⁵ Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Unhappy Consciousness: Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and the formation of nationalist discourse in India* (Delhi, 1995), p.124

²⁶ Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Unhappy Consciousness: Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and the formation of nationalist discourse in India* (Delhi, 1995), pp.125-6

²⁷ Richard G. Fox, *Gandhian Utopia: experiments with culture* (Boston, 1989), p.42

²⁸ Mohandas Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj and other writings* (Cambridge, 1997), p.6

²⁹ Richard G. Fox, *Gandhian Utopia: experiments with culture* (Boston, 1989), p.44

³⁰ Richard G. Fox, *Gandhian Utopia: experiments with culture* (Boston, 1989), p.85

³¹ Richard G. Fox, *Gandhian Utopia: experiments with culture* (Boston, 1989), p.40

³² Richard G. Fox, *Gandhian Utopia: experiments with culture* (Boston, 1989), p.86

an international cooperative socialist world federation.³³ More explicitly, he said in his Presidential Address at the 1936 Congress that 'I see no way of ending the poverty, the vast unemployment, the degradation and the subjection of the Indian people except through socialism. That involves vast and revolutionary changes in our political and social structures, the ending of vested interests in land and industry, as well as the feudal and autocratic Indian States system. . . Some glimpse we can have of this new civilisation in the territories of the USSR.'

³³ Judith M Brown, *Nehru*, (Oxford, 1998), p.46