

## What were the main problems of an Indian national movement in the years leading to the First World War?

One of the principal problems facing the early Indian nationalists was quite plainly that until the transport and communication revolution that came with the railways, there was no Indian nation to represent. As the Bengali nationalist Bipinchandra Pal put it in 1916, 'Our language has . no word corresponding to the English word nation . . And the reason is that our social synthesis practically stopped with the race-idea. We never had, therefore, this nationalist aspiration before.'<sup>1</sup> Indians before this date overwhelmingly lived in isolated villages with a viewpoint which stretched 30km at most. Even for urban-based intellectuals, in bustling, export-based areas, any sense of empathy with even other town-dwellers elsewhere in India was hard to generate. The only obvious common linkage was the fact that across India, it was the same British administration which was in overall control. Surendranath Banerjea called his autobiography *A Nation in Making*- and for him as for most of the other early nationalist leaders, their very self-consciousness was the product of Indian the British Liberal tradition. Certainly Western-style education was beginning to create a whole new class of Indian imbued with an understanding of English political outlook. The numbers studying English rose from 298,000 in 1887 to 505,000 in 1907; circulation of English-language newspapers grew from 90,000 to 276,000 over the same period.<sup>2</sup> This remained a tiny proportion of the total Indian population, but was nevertheless more than three times as large as the European population. As Lal Mohan Ghose said in a speech in Bombay: 'You [the British] have for a long time past given us the blessings of a liberal education. Our minds are expanded under the generous influence of Western culture. We are deeply grateful to you for all these benefits. But remember, that the study of European history is not calculated to deaden, but on the contrary to rouse and fire those instincts of patriotism, which have slumbered in the national breast of India for centuries.'<sup>3</sup> Despite the veiled threat under words which the British administration could safely ignore, for many, Britain's role in India had been fundamentally creative - where there had formerly been a mere collection of diverse regions, races, religious and linguistic groupings, British education and technology provided the materials to welding them into a new national unity.<sup>4</sup>

This acknowledged debt to the colonial power for making the concept of nationalism even possible, posed a serious problem for those who sought to champion the cause of a united India. It appeared that despite the imposition of foreign, white ways, the nationalists had nevertheless to thank the British for unifying the country. Dadabhai Naoroji, in his Presidential Speech to the 2nd Congress of December 1886, said 'It is under the civilising rule of the Queen and people of England that we meet here together, hindered by none, and are freely allowed to speak our minds without the least fear and without the least hesitation. Such a thing is possible under British rule and British rule only. (Loud cheers) Then I put the question plainly: is this Congress a nursery for sedition and rebellion against the British Government (cries of no! no!); or is it another stone in the foundation of the stability of that Government (cries of yes! yes!)?'<sup>5</sup> The cheers ringing out from the hall clearly showing how far from direct opposition the upstart Congress set out to be. In this definition of the Indian nation, the legitimacy, authority and acceptance of foreign rule was unquestioned, despite the fact that it was incontrovertibly 'un-Indian.' Outside the infant Congress, others fundamentally disagreed, with the *Indian Mirror*

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<sup>1</sup> Judith M. Brown, *Modern India: the origins of an Asian Democracy*, (Delhi, 1985), p.149

<sup>2</sup> Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India: 1885-1947*, (Basingstoke, 1983), p.65

<sup>3</sup> Judith M. Brown, *Modern India: the origins of an Asian Democracy*, (Delhi, 1985), p.150

<sup>4</sup> Judith M. Brown, *Modern India: the origins of an Asian Democracy*, (Delhi, 1985), p.149

<sup>5</sup> ed. CH Philips, *The Evolution of India and Pakistan: select documents*, (London, 1962), p.139

declaiming, 'With the loss of our country we have lost our national religion, our national literature, our national science and philosophy and our national traditions. It is not surprising that under such circumstances, the growth and progress of the Indian people as a nation should be in abeyance. . . . In our present denationalized condition, we are neither fish nor flesh, neither Indian nor English.'<sup>6</sup> Later on, as Congress politics became more factional, the Extremist leader B.G. Tilak returned to this theme. 'One fact is that this alien Government has ruined the country,' he said, 'Your industries are ruined utterly, ruined by foreign rule; your wealth is going out of the country and you are reduced to the lowest level which no human being can occupy. In this state of things, is there any other remedy by which you can help yourself? The remedy is not petitioning but boycott.'<sup>7</sup> However, even by trying to concentrate on indigenous traditions and Aryan culture, it was impossible to unite a country which did not share the same traditions. Muslims, who formed the largest minority in British India, were openly beginning to question the possibility of belonging to an Indian nation. Sir Syed Ahmed Khan wrote a private letter in 1888, 'I object to every Congress in any shape or form which regards India as one nation.'<sup>8</sup>

One demand which intellectuals did share was a demand for Indian political representation in the administration of the country. Or, more accurately, a demand for the intellectuals themselves to be represented. Lal Mohan Ghose's speech called on the British to 'Open up a career for those whom you yourselves have fitted for a high and useful career, and remember, above all, that the surest way to make the people of this country disloyal and to array them in bitter opposition to the British Government, is to close and shut up every avenue for the legitimate vent and gratification of their ambition and aspirations.'<sup>9</sup> This was not necessarily a demand which Liberal British opinion was unwilling to grant - Lord Minto admitted that 'by far the most important factor we have to deal with in the political life of India is... the growing strength of an educated class, perfectly loyal and moderate in its views, but which, I think quite justly, considers itself entitled to a greater share in the government of India.'<sup>10</sup> The Government of India even planned 'to give to India something that may be called a constitution framed on sufficiently liberal lines to satisfy the legitimate aspirations of all but the most advanced Indians, whilst at the same time enlisting the support of the conservative elements of native society.'<sup>11</sup> However, the source of any such concessions was only the Government of India itself, and through it the British Parliament. This was precisely the arena where educated India had no presence and no lobby with which to pressure the authorities for reforms - an arena where the less-numerous Europeans scored a notable success in defeating the Ilbert Bill. Surandranah Banerjea later recalled that 'The Ilbert Bill controversy helped to intensify the growing feeling of unity among the Indian people. They could not remain insensible to the lesson that it taught, of combination and organisation; a lesson which in this case was enforced amid conditions that left a rankling sense of humiliation in the mind of educated India.'<sup>12</sup> Whether either this statement or his earlier statement that 'The Civil Service agitation had disclosed the essential unity of Indian aims and aspirations, the Contempt Case had accentuated the feeling'<sup>13</sup> was true or not, the National Conference and Congress of 1883 did provide the first time that the Indian community had ever organised itself at national level. A.O.Hume, Congress's greatest supporter in the ICS, said that 'Congress is National, and it deals only with those questions on which the entire nation is

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<sup>6</sup> Judith M. Brown, *Modern India: the origins of an Asian Democracy*, (Delhi, 1985), p.150

<sup>7</sup> ed. CH Philips, *The Evolution of India and Pakistan: select documents*, (London, 1962), p.162

<sup>8</sup> Judith M. Brown, *Modern India: the origins of an Asian Democracy*, (Delhi, 1985), p.151

<sup>9</sup> Judith M. Brown, *Modern India: the origins of an Asian Democracy*, (Delhi, 1985), p.150

<sup>10</sup> Judith M. Brown, *Modern India: the origins of an Asian Democracy*, (Delhi, 1985), pp.140-1

<sup>11</sup> Judith M. Brown, *Modern India: the origins of an Asian Democracy*, (Delhi, 1985), p.143

<sup>12</sup> ed. CH Philips, *The Evolution of India and Pakistan: select documents*, (London, 1962), p.137

<sup>13</sup> ed. CH Philips, *The Evolution of India and Pakistan: select documents*, (London, 1962), p.136

practically agreed. If all or practically all the representatives of any province or any community object, the Congress must drop the subject.<sup>14</sup>

Yet the precise nation which Congress really could represent was vague, and certainly did not include the bulk of India's 300m population. Lord Dufferin pointedly stated that 'The chief concern of the Government of India is to protect and foster the interests of the people of India, and the people of India are not the seven or eight thousand students who have graduated at the Universities, but the voiceless millions whom neither educational nor civilisation, nor the influence of European ideas or modern thought, have in the slightest degree transfigured or transformed from what their forefathers were a thousand years ago.'<sup>15</sup> This charge was substantially borne out by the experience of groups who contributed largely to Congress delegates. In Bengal the Indian Association tried to reach beyond Calcutta, meeting with considerable success: by 1887-8 the Association had 124 branch associations. However, most members remained educated men - attempts to generate support in the villages on issues such as tenant right won limited success, despite the general lack of sympathy among the educated Hindu classes to Bengal's predominantly Muslim peasantry. Lord Curzon was therefore able to echo Dufferin by saying: 'as to their relationship with the people of India, the constituency which the Congress Party represents cannot be described as otherwise than a microscopic minority of the total population.'<sup>16</sup> The proceedings of the Congress certainly did not help refute this charge, since the issues which it attempted to pursue in Calcutta were those which offered the most opportunity to educated men such as themselves. Dadabhai Naoroji insisted that increased Indianisation of the administration was 'the most important 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>17</sup> Although apparently relevant to all Indians, there was in fact only a very small constituency who stood to benefit from the opening of the Indian Civil Service, or greater political representation - the members of Congress themselves. The Public Service Commission of 1886 criticised moves towards this, as '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>18</sup> A history of Western education and facility in the English language would give some groups an advantage over others - and as Sayyid Ahmad Khan questioned, '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.'<sup>19</sup> Elsewhere in India, the same pattern remained true. The Lieutenant-Governor of Punjab commented '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>20</sup> Yet such was the fragility of the Congress itself, and so great the doctrinal and religious differences even among liberals, that Congress was forced to resort only to the most uncontentious of demands. Article 9a) of the 1906 proceedings still set out that 'All examinations held in England only should be simultaneously held in India and in England and that all higher appointments which are made in India should be by competitive examination only.'<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> ed. CH Philips, *The Evolution of India and Pakistan: select documents*, (London, 1962), p.142

<sup>15</sup> ed. CH Philips, *The Evolution of India and Pakistan: select documents*, (London, 1962), p.143

<sup>16</sup> Judith M. Brown, *Modern India: the origins of an Asian Democracy*, (Delhi, 1985), p.139

<sup>17</sup> Gordon Johnson, *Provincial Politics and Indian Nationalism*, (Cambridge, 1973), p.24

<sup>18</sup> Gordon Johnson, *Provincial Politics and Indian Nationalism*, (Cambridge, 1973), p.26

<sup>19</sup> Gordon Johnson, *Provincial Politics and Indian Nationalism*, (Cambridge, 1973), p.26

<sup>20</sup> Gordon Johnson, *Provincial Politics and Indian Nationalism*, (Cambridge, 1973), p.27

<sup>21</sup> ed. CH Philips, *The Evolution of India and Pakistan: select documents*, (London, 1962), p.160

Cliches and anachronistic demands masked to some extent the deep political divides that lay underneath the veneer of a national movement - divides which even threatened to undermine the aims of the original Congress founders. WC Bonnerjee had set out that 'the principle on which the Indian National Congress is based is that the British Rule should be permanent and abiding in India.'<sup>22</sup> Indeed, this role as gathering Indian supporters for a reformed British India did hold some attractions for a nervous British government buffeted by the battles over Home Rule in Ireland. A.O.Hume tried to sell the idea of an all-India body by saying: 'Do you not realise that by getting hold of the great lower middle classes before the development of the reckless demagogues, and carefully inoculating them with a mild and harmless form of the political fever, we are adopting the only certain precautionary method against the otherwise inevitable ravages of a violent and epidemic burst of the disorder?'<sup>23</sup> Hume's political vaccination failed to dampen Indian radicalism, and in sympathy again with the methods of Nationalist Ireland, boycott became the accepted way to react to Curzon's partition of Bengal. However, political activism was not what Congress was designed to encourage - certainly not political activism by the masses - and some Congress leaders did not attempt to hide the reluctance in their acquiescence. G.K. Gokhale used his Presidential address in December 1905: to stress that 'It was thus as a political weapon, used for a definite political purpose, that they had recourse to the boycott. But a weapon like this must be reserved only for extreme occasions.' As he continued, 'that occasion must be one to drive all classes, as in Bengal, to act with one impulse, and make all leaders sink their personal differences in the presence of a common danger.'<sup>24</sup> Yet the most prominent supporter of the boycotts, B.G. Tilak, saw no reason to sink personal differences: 'When... Mr. Dadabhai's views, which now go for Moderates, were given to the public, he was styled an Extremist, so you will see that the term Extremist is an expression of progress. We are Extremists to-day and our sons will call themselves Extremists and us Moderates.'<sup>25</sup>

Frustrations with the pace of sought-for reforms nevertheless hid the fact that through judicious British concessions many of the potential supporters of Extremism had been assuaged. Lord Morley commented on the reform proposals of 1908, by admitting that 'The absence of an Indian member from the Viceroy's Executive Council can no longer, I think, be defended.'<sup>26</sup> The Government of India also admitted in 1911 that 'it is certain that in the course of time, the just demands of Indians for a larger share in the government of the country will have to be satisfied.' Even by this time, for many, the pace of reform was already quite adequate. C.W. Bolton's report on the state of support in June 1899 demonstrated to him that 'The Congress Movement excites much less enthusiasm than it did some years ago. It has lost much of its interest to the educated classes since the expansion of the Legislative Councils and the election of representative members, which were the principal demands of its promoters, were conceded to by the Government.'<sup>27</sup> Lord Curzon furthered this belief in a letter to Lord Hamilton in November 1900: 'while I am myself sensible of the desirability of consulting and conciliating public opinion in India, the composition of the Congress, at any rate in recent years, had deprived them of any right to pose as the representative of more than a small section of the community. My belief is that the best men in the Congress are more and more seeing the hopelessness of their cause, and indeed many of their papers have begun to argue that they had better trust to me to give them as much as I can, instead of wasting their energies in clamouring for what no Viceroy is likely to give them at all.'<sup>28</sup> Even at the nadir of Congress fortunes in

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<sup>22</sup> Johnson *Provincial Politics and Indian Nationalism* p.14

<sup>23</sup> ed. CH Philips, *The Evolution of India and Pakistan: select documents*, (London, 1962), p.143

<sup>24</sup> ed. CH Philips, *The Evolution of India and Pakistan: select documents*, (London, 1962), p.157

<sup>25</sup> ed. CH Philips, *The Evolution of India and Pakistan: select documents*, (London, 1962), p.161

<sup>26</sup> ed. CH Philips, *The Evolution of India and Pakistan: select documents*, (London, 1962), p.85

<sup>27</sup> ed. CH Philips, *The Evolution of India and Pakistan: select documents*, (London, 1962), p.149

<sup>28</sup> ed. CH Philips, *The Evolution of India and Pakistan: select documents*, (London, 1962), p.151

1907, reforms were still possible, and Morley commented to Minto that 'If Gokhale would have the sense to see what is to be gained by this line, the 'split' when it comes should do him no harm, because it would set him free to fix his aims on reasonable things, where he might get out of us 60 or 70 per cent of what he might ask for.'<sup>29</sup>

In some ways, the National movement did indeed suffer from the fact that it claimed to represent a nation whose national self-consciousness had not yet arisen. India's immense size left most people in awe, even before the railways demonstrated the sheer vastness of the terrain under British control. For most educated Indians, the maximum range of political action remained securely tied into their particular region. The history of Indian secular associations again showed strong regional links without an overall consciousness of nationhood. Indeed, the British had even recognised some of the more prominent local associations, such as Bengal's British India Association, the Bombay Association and the Poona Sarvajanic Sabha. Regional Governments sometimes recognised their roles in forming and expressing an important part of public opinion, and at least in Bengal, British Indian Association leaders were appointed to the Viceroy's Council and the Bengal Legislative Council. In some areas, in fact, regionalism was a growing political force, becoming a marked phenomenon of provincial public life in some parts of India. A common language bonded speakers of the same vernacular, and in return created mistrust towards Indian groups speaking other languages. This could spread as far as hostility to groups who appeared to 'colonise' areas outside their own linguistic regions because of their education and consequent access to administrative employment. Bengalis were particularly successful at finding jobs as junior civil servants, clerks, and lawyers. In Bihar consequent anti-Bengali feeling rose so high that some began to demand a separate province where Biharis would have the monopoly of provincial administrative posts.<sup>30</sup> The British recognition of such trends, and more so the tendency to exploit them, provided a major reason why early Indian nationalists found such trouble in maintaining even the semblance of national unity. The local government reforms proposed by Morley and Minto set in place a new political scene for some educated Indians to gain direct experience in government, and they won the support of a large number of people whose sympathies were otherwise with the national-level aims of the Congress. British manipulation of the levers of political influence again deliberately set out to sabotage national spirit by raising the alternative of limited regionalism.

Yet the most consistently damaging factor in the search for a genuinely 'national' outlook was the lingering mistrust between revivalist Hindus and the Muslim population of much of upper India. Even when the agitation following Curzon's partition of Bengal took populist and direct forms of protest such as boycott and the Swadeshi movement, the issues concerned educated urban Hindus and the Hindu landowners. Muslims refused to take part, even to the extent of religious riots in some districts. Muslims formed a section of Indian society which had seen less exposure to Western education, and did not share substantial interests with the people who made up the Congress, or even saw value in its existence. Economic moves by 'representative' local government in provinces such as the United Provinces heightened suspicions against Hindu landowners, while religious revivalism among Hindus caused a greater sense of caution among the Muslim population in order to protect their own religious freedoms. Religious conflicts over sacrifice of cows provided a running sore throughout the period up to the First World War - and as with so many topics, the Congress was powerless and in any case unwilling to provide a solution. Syed Ahmad Khan went as far as to say of the topics debated at the 1887 Congress: 'Can any Bengali honestly say that the resolutions passed will be natives except Bengalis and Mahratta Brahmins . . . the Congress is nothing more or less than a civil war without the use of

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<sup>29</sup> ed. CH Philips, *The Evolution of India and Pakistan: select documents*, (London, 1962), p.165

<sup>30</sup> Judith M. Brown, *Modern India: the origins of an Asian Democracy*, (Delhi, 1985), pp.169-70

arms.<sup>31</sup> The fact that an all-India Muslim League was felt necessary gives a vivid demonstration of the failure of the Indian National Congress to bring religious and other minorities onto its platform. Even were the Congress to make genuine attempts to meet the aspirations of the Muslim professionals, other trends were visible in the Muslim community, which seemed to point to a much greater cooperation with the rest of the Islamic world rather than other Indians. The Khilafat movement saw many Muslims believe that their ultimate political support would come from the influence of the Ottoman Sultan rather than from brown Indians of different religion. Certainly, as quickly as Hindu revivalism had come about, so too did a process of Muslim self-development. 1867 had seen the founding of the first purpose-built Islamic *madrasah* at Deoband in UP. Founded on deliberately abstemious and mendicant principles, the seminary was managed with such care that by 1890 only an average of 42 rupees per student per year had been spent - 'what jewels for cowries,' as its Principal commented.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, the very foundation was in deliberate contrast to the styles of living of the Hindu landowners of the region. 'As long as the *madrasah* has not fixed sources of income,' said the founder, 'it will, *insh'allah*, operate as desired. And if it gain any fixed income, like *jagir* holdings, factories, trading interests, or pledges from nobles, then the *madrasah* will lose the fear and hope that inspire submission to God and will lose His hidden help.'<sup>33</sup> The formula was evidently successful, since by 1880 there were 20 Deobandi daughter schools, and the figure reached 8,934 by the centenary in 1967. Maulana Mahmudul-Hasan said in 1904, 'In Hindustan previously knowledge was so scarce... that one could scarcely find someone to read the funeral prayers. And today knowledge is so widespread that every city, nay, every *qasbah*, indeed probably every village, has its own *maulawi* there.'<sup>34</sup> None of this was thanks to the Congress, and neither was it due to British divide-and-rule policies. Viceroy Dufferin flatly denied any deliberate contrivance of religious disunity as a means of promoting British power: 'The diversity of races in India, and the presence of a powerful Mahomedan community, are undoubtedly circumstances favourable to the maintenance of our rule; but these circumstances we found and did not create, nor had they been non-existent, would we have been justified in establishing them by artificial means. It would have been a diabolical policy on the part of any Government to endeavour to emphasize or exacerbate race hatred among the Queen's Indian subjects for a political object.'<sup>35</sup>

In truth, the British government did use religious differences to separate potential rivals to their control - witness the post-Mutiny army. However, there was no real requirement for a divisive religious policy in the years before the First World War. British rule was under very little threat, except from those reforms which British Liberal ministers wished to confer on Indians anyway. If it was left to the politicians of the Congress, with Indianisation of the Civil Service and seats of the Viceroy's Council, there would have been no possibility of maintaining a nationalist movement. Their own fractiousness, shallow political unity and deep regional prejudice made for a combustible movement - their ultimate success required many patient years of grassroots work in the post-war era.

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<sup>31</sup> Judith M. Brown, *Modern India: the origins of an Asian Democracy*, (Delhi, 1985), pp.178-9

<sup>32</sup> Metcalf *Islamic Revival in British India* p.97

<sup>33</sup> Metcalf *Islamic Revival in British India* p.98

<sup>34</sup> Metcalf *Islamic Revival in British India* p.136

<sup>35</sup> Judith M. Brown, *Modern India: the origins of an Asian Democracy*, (Delhi, 1985), pp.143-4