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Beginning of Modern Nationalism in India

Factors in the Growth of Modern Nationalism

The rise and growth of Indian nationalism has been traditionally explained in terms of Indian response to the stimulus generated by the British Raj through creation of new institutions, new opportunities, resources, etc. In other words, Indian nationalism grew partly as a result of colonial policies and partly as a reaction to colonial policies. In fact, it would be more correct to see Indian nationalism as a product of a mix of various factors:

- (i) Worldwide upsurge of the concepts of nationalism and right of self-determination initiated by the French Revolution.
- (ii) Indian Renaissance.
- (iii) Offshoot of modernisation initiated by the British in India.
- (iv) Strong reaction to British imperialist policies in India.

■ Understanding of Contradictions in Indian and Colonial Interests

People came to realise that colonial rule was the major cause of India's economic backwardness and that the interests of

the Indians involved the interests of all sections and classes—peasants, artisans, handicraftsmen, workers, intellectuals, the educated and the capitalists. The nationalist movement arose to take up the challenge of these contradictions inherent in the character and policies of colonial rule.

■ **Political, Administrative and Economic Unification of the Country**

The British rule in the Indian subcontinent extended from the Himalayas in the north to the Cape Comorin in the south and from Assam in the east to Khyber Pass in the west. While large areas of India had been brought under a single rule in the past—under the Mauryas or later under the Mughals—the British created a larger state than that of the Mauryas or the great Mughals. While Indian provinces were under ‘direct’ British rule, the princely states were under ‘indirect’ British rule. The British sword imposed political unity in India. A professional civil service, a unified judiciary and codified civil and criminal laws throughout the length and breadth of the country imparted a new dimension of political unity to the hitherto cultural unity that had existed in India for centuries. The necessities of administrative convenience, considerations of military defence and the urge for economic penetration and commercial exploitation (all in British interests) were the driving forces behind the planned development of modern means of transport and communication such as railways, roads, electricity and telegraph.

From the nationalists’ point of view, this process of unification had a two-fold effect:

(i) The economic fate of the people of different regions got linked together; for instance, failure of crops in one region affected the prices and supply in another region.

(ii) Modern means of transport and communication brought people, especially the leaders, from different regions together. This was important for the exchange of political ideas and for mobilisation and organisation of public opinion on political and economic issues.

■ **Western Thought and Education**

The introduction of a modern system of education afforded opportunities for assimilation of modern Western ideas. This, in turn, gave a new direction to Indian political thinking, although the English system of education had been conceived by the rulers in the self-interest of efficient administration. The liberal and radical thought of European writers like Milton, Shelley, John Stuart Mill, Rousseau, Paine, Spencer and Voltaire helped many Indians imbibe modern rational, secular, democratic and nationalist ideas.

The English language helped nationalist leaders from different linguistic regions to communicate with each other. Those among the educated who took up liberal professions (lawyers, doctors, etc.) often visited England for higher education. There they saw the working of modern political institutions in a free country and compared that system with the Indian situation where even basic rights were denied to the citizens. This ever-expanding English educated class formed the middle class intelligentsia who constituted the nucleus for the newly arising political unrest. It was this section which provided leadership to the Indian political associations.

■ **Role of Press and Literature**

The second half of the nineteenth century saw an unprecedented growth of Indian-owned English and vernacular newspapers, despite numerous restrictions imposed on the press by the colonial rulers from time to time. In 1877, there were about 169 newspapers published in vernacular languages and their circulation reached the neighbourhood of 1,00,000.

The press while criticising official policies, on the one hand, urged the people to unite, on the other. It also helped spread modern ideas of self-government, democracy, civil rights and industrialisation. The newspapers, journals, pamphlets and nationalist literature helped in the exchange of political ideas among nationalist leaders from different regions.

■ Rediscovery of India's Past

The historical researches by European scholars, such as Max Mueller, Monier Williams, Roth and Sassoon, and by Indian scholars such as R.G. Bhandarkar, R.L. Mitra and later Swami Vivekananda, created an entirely new picture of India's past. This picture was characterised by well-developed political, economic and social institutions, a flourishing trade with the outside world, a rich heritage in arts and culture and numerous cities. The theory put forward by European scholars, that the Indo-Aryans belonged to the same ethnic group from which other nations of Europe had evolved, gave a psychological boost to the educated Indians. The self-respect and confidence so gained helped the nationalists to demolish colonial myths that India had a long history of servility to foreign rulers.

■ Progressive Character of Socio-religious Reform Movements

These reform movements sought to remove social evils which divided the Indian society; this had the effect of bringing different sections together, and proved to be an important factor in the growth of Indian nationalism.

■ Rise of Middle Class Intelligentsia

British administrative and economic innovations gave rise to a new urban middle class in towns. According to Percival Spear, "The new middle class was a well-integrated all-India class with varied background but a common foreground of knowledge, ideas and values.... It was a minority of Indian society, but a dynamic minority.... It had a sense of unity of purpose and of hope."

This class, prominent because of its education, new position and its close ties with the ruling class, came to the forefront. The leadership to the Indian National Congress in all its stages of growth was provided by this class.

■ **Impact of Contemporary Movements in the World**

Rise of a number of nations on the ruins of the Spanish and Portuguese empires in South America, and the national liberation movements of Greece and Italy in general and of Ireland in particular deeply influenced the nationalist ranks.

■ **Reactionary Policies and Racial Arrogance of Rulers**

Racial myths of white superiority were sought to be perpetuated by the British through a deliberate policy of discrimination and segregation. Indians felt deeply hurt by this. Lytton's reactionary policies such as reduction of maximum age limit for the I.C.S. examination from 21 years to 19 years (1876), the grand Delhi Durbar of 1877 when the country was in the severe grip of famine, the Vernacular Press Act (1878) and the Arms Act (1878) provoked a storm of opposition in the country. Then came the Ilbert Bill controversy. Ripon's Government had sought to abolish "judicial disqualification based on race distinctions" and to give the Indian members of the covenanted civil service the same powers and rights as those enjoyed by their European colleagues. Ripon had to modify the bill, thus almost defeating the original purpose, because of the stiff opposition from the European community.

It became clear to the nationalists that justice and fair play could not be expected where interests of the European community were involved. However, the organised agitation by the Europeans to revoke the Ilbert Bill also taught the nationalists how to agitate for certain rights and demands.

Political Associations Before the Indian National Congress

The Indian National Congress was not the first political organisation in India. However, most of the political associations in the early half of the nineteenth century were

dominated by wealthy and aristocratic elements. They were local or regional in character. Through long petitions to the British Parliament most of them demanded—

- administrative reforms,
- association of Indians with the administration, and
- spread of education.

The political associations of the second half of the nineteenth century came to be increasingly dominated by the educated middle class—the lawyers, journalists, doctors, teachers, etc.—and they had a wider perspective and a larger agenda.

■ Political Associations in Bengal

The Bangabhasha Prakasika Sabha was formed in 1836 by associates of Raja Rammohan Roy.

The Zamindari Association, more popularly known as the ‘**Landholders’ Society**’, was founded to safeguard the interests of the landlords. Although limited in its objectives, the Landholders’ Society marked the beginning of an organised political activity and use of methods of constitutional agitation for the redressal of grievances.

The Bengal British India Society was founded in 1843 with the object of “the collection and dissemination of information relating to the actual condition of the people of British India... and to employ such other means of peaceful and lawful character as may appear calculated to secure the welfare, extend the just rights and advance the interests of all classes of our fellow subjects”.

In 1851, both the Landholders’ Society and the Bengal British India Society merged into the **British Indian Association**. It sent a petition to the British Parliament demanding inclusion of some of its suggestions in the renewed Charter of the Company, such as

- (i) establishment of a separate legislature of a popular character;
- (ii) separation of executive from judicial functions;

- (iii) reduction in salaries of higher officers; and
- (iv) abolition of salt duty, abkari and stamp duties.

These were partially accepted when the Charter Act of 1853 provided for the addition of six members to the governor-general's council for legislative purposes.

The East India Association was organised by Dadabhai Naoroji in 1866 in London to discuss the Indian question and influence public men in England to promote Indian welfare. Later, branches of the association were started in prominent Indian cities.

The Indian League was started in 1875 by Sisir Kumar Ghosh with the object of "stimulating the sense of nationalism amongst the people" and of encouraging political education.

The Indian Association of Calcutta (also known as the **Indian National Association**) superseded the Indian League and was founded in 1876 by younger nationalists of Bengal led by Surendranath Banerjea and Ananda Mohan Bose, who were getting discontented with the conservative and pro-landlord policies of the British Indian Association. The Indian Association was the most important of pre-Congress associations and aimed to "promote by every legitimate means the political, intellectual and material advancement of the people." It set out to—

- (i) create a strong public opinion on political questions, and
- (ii) unify Indian people in a common political programme.

It protested against the reduction of age limit in 1877 for candidates of the Indian Civil Service examination. The association demanded simultaneous holding of civil service examination in England and India and Indianisation of higher administrative posts. It led a campaign against the repressive arms act and the vernacular press act.

Branches of the association were opened in other towns and cities of Bengal and even outside Bengal. The membership

fee was kept low in order to attract the poorer sections to the association.

The association sponsored an all India conference which first took place in Calcutta on December 28 to 30, 1883. More than hundred delegates from different parts of the country attended. So, in a way the association was a forerunner of the Indian National Congress as an all-India nationalist organisation. It later merged with the Indian National Congress in 1886.

■ Political Associations in Bombay

The Poona Sarvajanik Sabha was founded in 1867 by Mahadeo Govind Ranade and others, with the object of serving as a bridge between the government and the people.

The Bombay Presidency Association was started by Badruddin Tyabji, Pherozshah Mehta and K.T. Telang in 1885.

■ Political Associations in Madras

The Madras Mahajan Sabha was founded in 1884 by M. Viraraghavachari, B. Subramaniya Aiyer and P. Anandachari.

Pre-Congress Campaigns

The associations organised various campaigns before the Indian National Congress appeared on the scene. These campaigns were—

- (i) for imposition of import duty on cotton (1875)
- (ii) for Indianisation of government service (1878-79)
- (iii) against Lytton's Afghan adventure
- (iv) against Arms Act (1878)
- (v) against Vernacular Press Act (1878)
- (vi) for right to join volunteer corps
- (vii) against plantation labour and against Inland Emigration Act
- (viii) in support of Ilbert Bill
- (ix) for an All India Fund for Political Agitation

- (x) campaign in Britain to vote for pro-India party
- (xi) against reduction in maximum age for appearing in Indian Civil Service; the Indian Association took up this question and organised an all-India agitation against it, popularly known as the Indian Civil Service agitation.

Summary

- **Factors in Growth of Modern Nationalism**

- Understanding of contradictions in Indian and colonial interests
- Political, administrative and economic unification of the country
- Western thought and education
- Role of press and literature
- Rediscovery of India's past—historical researches
- Rise of middle class intelligentsia
- Impact of contemporary movements worldwide
- Reactionary policies and racial arrogance of rulers

- **Political Associations Before Indian National Congress**

- 1836—Bangabhasha Prakasika Sabha
- Zamindari Association or Landholders' Society
- 1843—Bengal British India Society
- 1851—British Indian Association
- 1866—East India Association
- 1875—Indian League
- 1876—Indian Association of Calcutta or Indian National Association
- 1867—Poona Sarvajanik Sabha
- 1885—Bombay Presidency Association
- 1884—Madras Mahajan Sabha