

Chapter

4

The Rise and Growth of National Consciousness

The rise of national consciousness in the 19th century India was partly a result of the British rule and partly occasioned by it. The British rule brought about political, economic and social changes resulting in the oppression of almost all classes of Indian people. All the same, it also brought about uniform system of administration, development of railways, education, post and telegraph and printing press. Though the primary objective of the new administrative framework was to run an effective administration, it also ended up providing favourable conditions for the rise and growth of Indian nationalism. Hence, Indian nationalism grew partly as a result of British colonial rule and partly as a reaction to it.

FACTORS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE RISE AND GROWTH OF INDIAN NATIONALISM

The British Rule along with its various direct and indirect consequences provided the material, moral and intellectual conditions for the rise and growth of national consciousness in India.

Impact of British Rule

The British had set foot in India to serve their own interests and the consequently, the rule they established in India was a colonial one. Thus, **clash of interests** with the subject population was inherent to the British rule in India.

Most classes of Indian society gradually discovered that their interests were suffering at the hands of the British rulers. The peasants realized that the government took away a large part of their produce as tax. It supported the zamindars and the money lenders who exploited them in various ways. The artisans could see that the government had ruined their industry by encouraging foreign competition and had done nothing to compensate them. The workers in industries, mines and plantations saw that their living conditions were pitiable and their labour was thoroughly exploited.

Even the educated middle class and the Indian capitalist class, which had earlier shown faith in British rule, was gradually disillusioned. They were able to see the true nature of British colonial rule in India and how it served the British in keeping India educationally and economically backward.

Thus, the British rule in India evoked a strong reaction from various sections of Indian people (with the only exception of the zamindars, landlords and the princes who remained loyal to the

British rule till the end). This united the Indians against their common enemy-the British raj in an anti-imperialist movement which gradually took the form of a full-fledged national movement.

The colonial policies of the British rule and their consequences are discussed below-

Direct Consequences of British Rule

- **Economic Exploitation of India:** The British rule in India led to the ruin of Indian agriculture and handicraft industries, badly impoverishing the Indian peasants and artisans in the process. The peasants were impoverished owing to heavy land revenue and commercialisation of agriculture. A large number of peasants were reduced to landless labourers (20 per cent of population in 1901).

Indian artisans and industrialists also suffered as restrictions were imposed on import of Indian manufactured goods in Britain while British manufactured goods were allowed to enter Indian markets freely. The Indian handicrafts could not face competition from machine made goods from Britain and suffered a severe blow. The Indian artisans and industrialists could see that the British tried to use India as source of cheap raw materials for their own industries and as market for their finished goods.

Thus, various classes of Indian people suffered economic hardships under the British rule. Yet this discontent could not automatically lead to the rise of national consciousness due to factors such as vastness of the country, lack of means of communication, lack of education, absence of a common language, common system of administration, etc. But these factors were also annoying the British as they were coming in the way of effective British control over the country. Hence, British took several measures with the aim of bringing about ease of governance which simultaneously contributed to the rise of national consciousness among Indians.

- **Unified System of Administration:** During British rule, large parts of India were brought under uniform system of administration for ease of governance and better exploitation of resources. Important measures adopted for bringing about this uniformity were related to land revenue administration, police, law and order machinery and judicial system.
- **New Means of Transport and Communication:** Driven by administrative convenience, fool-proof defence and economic penetration, the British carried out a planned development of modern means of transport in India. A network of roads was built to link all metropolitan with mofussil areas. 1853 onwards, the British planned to link all presidencies with each other and the hinterland with major ports via the railways.

The British intention was to develop a cheap means of transport for carrying goods but far more than anything else, the development of railways unified the country. Railways were laid through the length and breadth of the country, bringing the people from different parts of India into closer contact with one another. People from different classes had to buy the same ticket and travel in the same compartment which gave them the opportunity to interact, unite and finally emerge as one nation.

Post and Telegraph were given impetus. All major towns were linked with telegraph. Letters and newspapers could be sent anywhere in India at the cheap rate of ½ anna

or even less, bringing about a transformation in the socio-political life of the people. National literature could now be circulated in every nook and corner of the country. In fact, pan India organizations like the Indian National Congress could not have been conceived in the absence of modern transport and communication facilities.

- **Introduction of Printing Press:** Modern press, both English and vernacular, was also an offshoot of the British rule in India. With the introduction of the printing press, a large number of newspapers and other inexpensive literature emerged, accelerating the pace at which news and views could be exchanged. The literate nationalists used this medium to expose British excesses and spread nationalist ideas across the country.

Some of the prominent nationalist writers of the period included Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and Rabindranath Tagore (in Bengali), Lakshminath Bezbarua in Assamese, Vishnu Shastri Chiplunkar in Marathi, Subramanya Bharati in Tamil, Bharatendu Harishchandra in Hindi and Altaf Hussain Hali in Urdu. Many of their novels, essays, plays and poetry had magically touched the hearts and minds of the people.

Despite numerous restrictions imposed on the press from time to time, Indian journalism continued to make rapid strides. Soon the press emerged as the primary medium of public education and the mirror of Indian nationalism.

- **New Education System:** In 1835, the British inaugurated the system of English education in India with the intention of creating a loyal class of English educated Indians who could carry out clerical tasks. According to Macaulay, the idea was to form 'a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect.'

However, the English system of education opened to the Indians the floodgates of European liberal thought. It familiarised the Indians with the modern European ideas of equality, liberty, nationalism and democracy. The English educated Indians became aware of nationalist movements in Europe. They were exposed to the works of western liberal thinkers like John Milton, Bentham, John Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer, Rousseau, Voltaire, Mazzini and Garibaldi. Some of them visited England for higher education. There they saw firsthand the life of people in a free country. Thus, realising the hypocrisy of the British in India, this educated Indian middle class itself took on the leadership of the Indian national movement.

Moreover, English itself became the lingua franca of the Indian nationalists. In the absence of such a common language, it would have been very difficult for the nationalists to organise a movement of all India character.

Sir Charles Trevelyan famously stated in 1835 that the British Raj in India could not last forever and was bound to die one day either at the hands of those who subscribed to the indigenous model of political change or at the hands of those who subscribed to the British model of political change. If it was to die at the hands of the latter, i.e. the English educated, 'it would take a long time and the severance of the British connection with India would be neither violent nor harmful to Britain, for cultural and commercial bonds would continue.'

- **Policy of Continuous Expansion:** The British followed the policy of continuous expansion in India, annexing even those states which were not at war with the British. Important among these were the **annexations of Sind (1843), Punjab (1849), Rangoon and Pegu (1852), and Awadh (1856)**. Jhansi, Satara and Nagpur were also annexed. This made the India rulers highly apprehensive of the British.
 - **Racial Discrimination:** The British in India adopted an attitude of racial superiority and discriminated against Indians in all matters including social and judicial. Trevelyan pointed out in 1864- 'the testimony of a single one of our countrymen has more weight with the court than that of any number of Hindus, a circumstance which puts a terrible instrument of power into the hands of an unscrupulous Englishman'.
- Irrespective of class or caste, all Indians were looked down upon as an inferior people. Extreme racial humiliation was inflicted upon them by reserving clubs, railway compartments and other public places exclusively for the Europeans. Thus, racial domination and discrimination infuriated every self-respecting Indian, to whichever class he belonged. It began to be seen as a form of 'national humiliation' and united the Indians as 'one people' against the British.
- **Foreign Character of the British Rule:** A foreign rule invariably unites the subject population against their common oppressor and arouses patriotic feelings in them. This was true even in case of British Rule in India.

Indirect Consequences of British Rule

The above mentioned colonial policies further gave rise to the following factors:

- **Political unity of India:** It was under the British that political unity of India was achieved for the first time in modern era. The British conquered the whole of India from the Himalayas in the north to Cape Comorin in the south and from Assam in the east to Khyber Pass in the west. They created **a political entity larger than that under the Mauryas or the great Mughals**. Moreover, common laws and common institutions began to shape India in a common mould.
- **Economic and administrative unity of India:** The unified system of government introduced by the British throughout the country also welded India into one nation. The destruction of local self-sufficient economy and introduction of colonial economy at an all India scale also brought about economic unity. The economic fate of the people all over the country got interlinked and scarcity in one part began to affect prices in other parts of the country too.
- **Psychological unity of India:** The harmful effects of the British colonial rule on the lives of all sections of Indian people, united them against one common enemy—the British rule. In the course of time, the feeling of solidarity among the oppressed people brought them together in an **anti-imperialist struggle** which gradually grew in to a full-fledged national movement.

Later, the British tried hard to keep India divided through the policy of divide-and-rule. They sowed the seeds of communalism and regionalism. Yet, in the end, the forces uniting India into one nation proved more powerful than the divisionary forces.

- **Establishment of peace and orderly Government in India:** The British rule brought about peace and orderly government in India in contrast to the chaotic conditions that prevailed in the 18th century. The British set up an administration that was highly centralised and impersonal, which did not change with the change in top administrators. Further, the district administration was kept in the firm hands of the highly trained and professional Indian Civil Servants. A unified civil as well as judicial administration further consolidated the political unity achieved.

Edwyn Bevan said, 'the British Raj was like a steel frame which held the inured body of India together till the gradual process of internal growth had joined the dislocated bones, knit up torn fibers, and enabled the patient to regain inner coherence and unity.'

- **Rise of the middle-class intelligentsia:** The English system of education and administration gave rise to a new urban middle class in towns. It emerged as a well-integrated all-India class with a common foreground of knowledge and ideas. The class also gained a prominent status in society because of its knowledge of English and close links with the ruling class. Men such as **Surendrenath Bannerjee** and **Aurobindo Ghose** formed the nucleus of newly arising political unrest. Gradually this class emerged as the new soul of modern India and provided leadership to the Indian National Congress in stages of its growth.
- **Intellectual awakening among Indians:** In the backdrop of new education system, 19th-century India was marked by process of socio-cultural ferment. Among those who benefitted from modern education and emerged as the leading intellectuals of 19th-century India were—**Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Keshub Chandra Sen, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, MG Ranade and Sir Syed Ahmed Khan**. They threw light on the achievements of Indians in the field of art, architecture, literature, philosophy and science and contributed to the growth of national consciousness.

Here it must be remembered that it was not the English education system that gave rise to the national movement. It only facilitated such a development. In reality, the British authorities tried to inculcate docility and servility among the children studying in Indian schools and colleges. Though English became the lingua franca of early nationalists, it soon became a hindrance in the spread of mass nationalism. Leaders such as Gandhi and Tilak were conscious of the bigger role of regional languages in the national movement.

- **Progressive character of socio-cultural reform movements:** In the 19th century, the educated Indians began to re-examine their socio-cultural beliefs in the light of the new Western Scientific knowledge they had acquired. This process led to the rise of various socio-religious reform movements among the Hindus such as the **Brahmo Samaj, the Prarthana Samaj, the Arya Samaj and the Ramkrishna Mission**, etc. Similar movements arose among the Muslims, the Sikhs and the Parsis.

In the sphere of religion, these movements attacked religious superstition, idolatry, polytheism and hereditary priesthood. In the social sphere, they attacked social evils such as the caste system, untouchability, sati, child marriage, purdah system, etc. These movements sought to reorganise the society along progressive lines guided by the ideals

of democracy, equality, liberty and reason. Since many of them drew inspiration from India's rich cultural past, they enthused their followers with a sense of self-respect and patriotism.

Thus, even without having any political agenda, the 19th-century reform movements inspired numerous people with a spirit of nationalism.

- **Impact of rediscovery of India's past:** A consequence of foreign rule was that many Indians lost self-confidence. The foreign rulers also constantly forwarded the thesis that Indians had always been unable to rule themselves. Their backward religion and society made them unfit for democracy. Many nationalists tried to counter this propaganda by turning to the achievements of ancient Indian rulers such as Ashoka and Akbar. In this task, they also took the help of new researches on ancient Indian past.

European scholars such as Max Muller conducted researches on ancient Indian past and rediscovered India's rich cultural heritage. Archeologists like Marshall and Cunningham presented a new picture of India's ancient past, a past as great and glorious as the ancient civilisations of Greece and Rome. The scholars praised the wisdom and philosophy of the Vedas and the Upanishads. Further, the theory of Aryan origin of Indians as well as Europeans also boosted the morale of the Indian people. These factors together also inspired the Indians with a sense of national pride and patriotism.

However, some negative consequence emerged when some nationalists went to the extreme and began glorifying India's past uncritically. Grippled in a false sense of pride, it prevented some Indians from benefitting from the fresh and healthy ideas emerging in other parts of the contemporary world. This tendency also weakened India's struggle against its socio-cultural backwardness. Yet another negative tendency was to glorify India's ancient past at the cost of the medieval period. This encouraged Muslims to look upto Arabs and Turks for cultural past and encouraged communal feelings.

Additional Factors that Contributed to the Rise of Indian Nationalism

In addition to the above, the following factors also contributed to the rise of national consciousness in India.

Impact of Contemporary European Movements

In Europe, the national liberation movements of Ireland, Italy and Greece also stirred great national emotions in India. Leaders like Surendranath Banerjee and Lala Lajpat Rai often referred to national heroes like Mazzini and Garibaldi in their speeches. Thus, there is no doubt that nationalist movement in other countries greatly inspired the national leaders in India and strengthened Indian nationalism.

Lord Lytton's Reactionary Policies

Lord Lytton's short-sighted policies acted like a catalyst and accelerated the national movement against the British. During his Viceroyalty, the upper age limit for ICS exam was reduced to 19 years from 21 years, thus making it practically impossible for Indians to compete for it. The

holding of the Grand Darbar in 1877, even as the country was in severe grip of famine, solicited severe criticism. He introduced two highly unpopular legislations—the Vernacular Press Act and the Indian Arms Act, stirring a great storm of opposition in the country.

The Ilbert Bill Controversy (or White Mutiny, 1883)

During Lord Ripon, the Ilbert Bill (written by Sir Ilbert, the law member of the Viceroy's Council) sought to give Indian members of the ICS the same judicial powers as their European colleagues enjoyed and accordingly, Indian judges could try European accused. This raised a lot of hue and cry among the Europeans who all stood united to oppose the bill in what came to be known as the White Mutiny of 1883.

The most vocal opposition to the Bill came from British tea and indigo plantations owners in Bengal. English women also opposed the bill and argued that 'ignorant' Bengali women are neglected by their men, and hence the Bengali men should therefore not be given the right to judge cases involving English women. On the other hand, the Bengali women supported the bill and pointed out that more Indian women had academic degrees than British women did at the time, alluding to the fact that the University of Calcutta became one of the first universities to admit female graduates to its degree programmes in 1878, before any of the British universities had done the same. In face of opposition by a majority of English women, Ripon had to modify the Bill in favor of the Europeans and an amendment was introduced whereby a jury of 50% Europeans was required if an Indian judge was to face a European on the dock.

This controversy proved to be an eye-opener to the Indian intelligentsia. It proved to them that justice and equality could not be expected where the interests of European community were involved. It also demonstrated to them the value of organized protest. The bitter controversy ended up deepening antagonism between the British and the Indians and emerged as a prelude to the formation of the Indian National Congress in 1885.

THE INDIAN RESPONSE AND THE RISE OF A NATIONAL MOVEMENT

The different classes of the Indian people responded to the British exploitation which gradually took the form of a national movement. The Indian response can be broadly divided into two forms.

1. Opposition by the peasants and tribals (in the form of peasant and tribal movements) and,
2. Opposition by the middle classes (in the form of a new consciousness among the middle classes leading to an organised national movement).

Thus, Indian response to British exploitation first emerged in the form of popular uprisings, which first united the Indians against the British and embraced the people in a rudimentary wave of national consciousness. This national sentiment was further strengthened and channelised by the educated middle classes in the form of an organised national movement.

Peasant and Tribal Movements

Throughout the 19th century, Indian masses struggled against the British rule. It is noteworthy that the early uprisings were **not consciously nationalist uprisings**, but, over a period of time, they helped in the emergence of national consciousness. In the beginning, these uprisings were directed against oppressive British policies. Sometimes they were also triggered due to oppression by a zamindar, money lender or a state official.

It was in the **Revolt of 1857** that we saw, for the first time, some sort of national sentiments inspiring the people. Even though the revolt was brutally crushed, popular uprisings in India continued unabated. Tribal movements were the most militant and the tribals revolted more often and more violently than any other community in India. Even though all these revolts ended in failure, they contributed immensely in uniting the Indians against the British and fostering a national consciousness among them.

Middle Class Consciousness

In the context of British rule in India, the 19th century saw the emergence of new consciousness among the educated Indian middle class. The educated Indians, which included lawyers, teachers, journalists, doctors, merchants, traders, etc., began to critically examine the Indian society and started making efforts in the direction of socio-culture reforms. **Ram Mohan Roy** emerged as a pioneer reformer in this field. Other prominent reforms included the likes of Dayanand Saraswati and Swami Vivekananda. The prominent social evils targeted were untouchability, sati, rituals, etc.

More than any other class, it was this class that was able to analyse the true nature of the colonial rule. In the beginning, they supported the changes brought about by the British, in the field of administration, education, and means of communication, thinking that they would benefit the masses. But gradually they understood that the real motive was to assist in the consolidation of the British Raj.

While other Indian classes (peasant, workers and tribals) voiced their protest in the form of popular uprisings and revolts, the educated middle classes voiced their protest chiefly in two forms: 1) literary activities, and 2) associations and organizations.

Literary Activities

Again, Ram Mohan Roy was a pioneer in this field. He wrote several books and published several articles on various themes. Prominent literary activities in the 19th century included the following:

- Ram Mohan Roy started a journal named **Sambad Kamudi** (in Bengali).
- Din Bandhu Mitra wrote the play **Nil Darpan** depicting the plight of indigo cultivators.
- Bankim Chandra wrote **Anand Math**, full of nationalist aspirations.

A large number of periodicals and newspapers were also published in different languages. By 1877, there were as many as 169 newspapers in the vernacular.

Associations and Organizations

This was the second method adopted by the middle classes for joint action against the British policies harming their interests. Some of the early organizations were the Landholders' Society (1838) and the Bengal British India Society (1853). They chiefly adopted the method of petitioning against the Company with the aim of bringing about reforms in the Company's Charter.

In 1858, when the British Crown took over the Indian administration, it was hoped that exploitation would end and the British government would work for the welfare of the Indian people. But such was not the case and the organizational activities of the Indians further intensified. London India Association was formed in England, Indian Association (1876) in Maharashtra and the Indian National Conference (1883) in Bengal. As opposed to earlier organizations, the ones formed now were political in character. Their agenda included protesting against British policies through resolutions and petitions, garnering support for their cause through public meetings and statements, exchange of views on national issues, etc. These organizations prepared the ground for the formation of an all India organization—the **Indian National Congress in 1885**.

GROWTH OF NATIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE 19TH CENTURY

The full flowering of the national consciousness had to wait until the second half of the 19th century. It was during this period that the Indian National Congress was formed in 1885.

At its root, modern Indian nationalism arose to meet the challenge of the foreign rule. The British Raj itself, along with its direct and indirect consequence provided the material, moral and intellectual ground for the development of an anti-imperialist movement in India which subsequently grew into a full-fledged national movement.

With the passage of time, more and more sections of people realised that their interests clashed with the British interests in India and that the welfare of the Indian people would never gain priority over and above British imperial interests. Even those who had earlier supported the British rule, in the hope that it would modernise India were gradually disenchanted.

It was during the latter half of the 19th century that even the British shed all pretensions of benevolence and of guiding India towards self-governance. Instead of helping give freedom to people, press and speech, they simply strangled it. The British officials and leaders adopted a hostile attitude towards higher education, particularly scientific and technical education.

British Response

The growth of Indian nationalism in the latter half of 19th century was certainly not liked by the British. Their first response was of denial and they denied the very idea of India as a nation-

- In 1883, JR Steeley described India as mere '**geographical expression**' with no sense whatever of national unity.

- In 1884, John Strachey stated while addressing the alumni of Cambridge University, 'this is **the first and most essential thing to learn about India-that there is not, and never was an India.**'

In the beginning of the 20th century, when Indian nationalism began to demonstrate visible strength, the British modified their response.

- The authors of Montford Report claimed credit that the British rule was the harbinger of nationalist upsurge in India. It stated, '**the politically minded Indians...are intellectually our children.** The present intellectual and moral stir in India...is rather a tribute to our work.'
- R. Coupland wrote, '**Indian nationalism was the child of the British Raj.**'

What Coupland failed to mention was that Indian nationalism, in reality, was an unwanted child of the British Raj whom it refused to acknowledge at first and tried to strangle it subsequently.

In a final analysis, it would be correct to say that a number of factors contributed to the rise of Indian nationalism in the 19th century. It was partly a product of the worldwide upsurge of the ideas of nationalism and self-determination initiated by the French Revolution, partly the result of modernisation initiated by the British in India, partly a result of the popular uprisings, Indian Renaissance and partly developed as a strong reaction to the British colonial policies in India.

Note: Read in detail about the Popular Uprisings and Revolts, 19th-Century Socio-Cultural Reform Movements and the Indian National Movement, in the upcoming chapters.



Practice Questions – Preliminary Exam

1. Which of the following was not a factor in the rise of national consciousness in India?

1. Indian railways
2. English education system
3. Establishment of Peace and Orderly Government in India

Select the correct answer from the following options.

- (a) 1 only
- (b) 1 and 2
- (c) 3 only
- (d) None of the above

2. 1. National consciousness in India was not a new phenomenon as India as a nation had always existed.

2. National consciousness in India grew as a result of British rule.

Which of the above statements is/are correct? Select the correct answer from the following options.

- (a) 1 only
- (b) 2 only
- (c) both
- (d) neither

3. 1. The early popular uprisings may be termed as the beginning of national consciousness in India since they were nationally conscious movements.
2. Middle class consciousness played the most significant role in the growth of national consciousness in the latter half of the 19th century.

Which of the above statements is/are correct? Select the correct answer from the following options.

- (a) 1 only
- (b) 2 only
- (c) both
- (d) neither

4. Which of the following is/are true?

1. There was no racial discrimination in judicial matters in the 19th century in India.
2. The British gave importance for the development of railways for the benefit of their subject population.

3. The British introduced English education system in India to prolong British rule in India.

Select the correct answer from the following options.

- (a) 1 and 2
- (b) 1 and 3
- (c) 2 and 3
- (d) 3 only



Practice Questions – Main Exam

1. 'Rediscovery of India's past was a mixed blessing for the nationalist movement'. Examine.
2. In what way was Indian nationalism the result of British rule in India? Evaluate.
3. What was the Indian response to the British rule in India?

4. Write short notes on the following:

- (a) Role of the Indian Intelligentsia in growth of national consciousness.
- (b) Role of the Indian Renaissance in the rise and growth of Indian nationalism.

Answers

Practice Questions – Preliminary Exam

1. (d)
2. (b)
3. (b)
4. (d)