

The Rise of Assertive Nationalism

Assertive Nationalism

The Indian National Congress in its initial years was dominated by the early nationalists who wanted self-government for the Indians. They believed in agitating within constitutional limits. After 1905, emerged the nationalist leaders who believed in radical policy. They wanted complete independence from British control. They had mass followers. These nationalists came to be known as assertive nationalists because they advocated active resistance to British imperialism. They asked the people to make sacrifices and overthrow the British rule.

Causes for the Rise of Assertive Nationalism

Recognition of the True Nature of the British Rule

- The work of the early nationalists had exposed the economic exploitation of India by the British. Political developments such as the passing of the Vernacular Press Act and reduction in the number of Indian members in the Calcutta Corporation convinced the Indians that the British would never work in the interest of Indians and its people and the latter will have to fight for their rights.

Failure of the Early Nationalists

- The young members of the Indian National Congress were not happy with the progress made by the early nationalists. They criticised the methods of peaceful agitations.
- The assertive nationalists believed that the early nationalists were loyal to the crown, and hence, their main objective was to improve their chances of getting seats in the Central Provincial Legislatures and judicial services.
- The failure of the early nationalists in receiving concrete reforms for the country led to the increasing demands for taking a radical approach for Indian nationalism.

Deteriorating Economic Condition

- There were recurrent famines in the country from 1896 to 1900. Millions of people died in these famines. Nothing was done on the part of the government to provide relief to the people during famines.
- While on one hand, people were dying of hunger, Lord Lytton held a grand durbar at Delhi for proclaiming Queen Victoria as 'the Empress of India'. This agitated the people and provided conditions favourable for the growth of assertive nationalists.

Influenced by International Events

- The assertive nationalists were inspired by many international events which were taking place in the world. In 1904–05, Japan defeated Russia in the Russo–Japanese War. It was for the first time that an Asian nation was defeated by a European nation.
- The Boers fought for three years in South Africa against the British Empire. These events made the people realise that the European nations were not invincible and the British could be thrown out of the country through united efforts.

Nationalist School of Thought

- Since the beginning of the nationalist movement, many nationalists believed that no sacrifice is adequate for the independence of the country. These nationalists were Rajnarain Bose, Ashwin Kumar Dutt and Vishnu Shastri Chiplunkar.

- The other assertive nationalists were Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Aurobindo Ghosh, Bipin Chandra Pal and Lala Lajpat Rai. They wanted nothing less than complete independence and were ready to follow any means to achieve the same.

Repressive Policies of Lord Curzon

- Lord Curzon was known for his repressive policies. He passed the Act of 1898 which made it an offence to provoke people against the English, the Calcutta Corporation Act which reduced the strength of Indian elected members and the Indian Universities Act of 1904 which imposed strict official control over Indian universities.
- All these measures created resentment in the Indians and they began to believe that equality would be granted to them only if the British would leave India.

Partition of Bengal

- The Partition of Bengal provided a congenial environment for the growth of assertive nationalism. Lord Curzon partitioned Bengal into East Bengal and West Bengal.
- Although the government said that the province of Bengal was partitioned for administrative convenience, it was clearly visible that it wanted to create a rift between the Hindus and the Muslims as East Bengal was a Muslim majority region and West Bengal was a Hindu majority region.
- The protests of the people were suppressed brutally by the government which gave rise to assertive nationalism in India.

The main aim of the assertive nationalists was the attainment of Swarajya or complete independence and not just dominion status in India.

Methods of Assertive Nationalists

The main methods adopted by assertive nationalists were

Swadeshi

- Swadeshi means the use of goods which are produced by indigenous industries.
- Swadeshi aims at making the country self-reliant and self-sufficient. The assertive nationalists used Swadeshi as a tool not only to promote the Indian industries but also to hit the British economic interests.

Boycott

- The assertive nationalists stressed on the boycott of foreign goods in an effort to boost local Indian industries.
- It also aimed at providing employment opportunities to the people. It also proved an effective weapon for harming British interests in India.

National Education

- A national scheme of education was planned as an alternative of the government-controlled universities.
- The assertive nationalists urged students to enrol in national schools. Many national schools were established in East Bengal.
- Assertive nationalists also aimed at providing education to people through vernacular (local) languages.

Passive Resistance

- The assertive leaders followed the policy of non-violent resistance and strong political action to achieve the independence of the country.
- They thus urged the people not to cooperate with the government and to boycott government-controlled educational institutions, courts and services.

The assertive nationalists often recalled the glorious past of the country. They invoked religious beliefs of the people to boost nationalism among the countrymen. For example, Tilak revived the Shivaji festival in 1895.

They were also ready to sacrifice their lives for attaining the freedom of the country.

Repressive Measures of the Government

Because assertive nationalists demanded complete independence and followed radical methods to achieve the same, they were brutally suppressed by the government. In 1908, Tilak was sentenced to six years of rigorous imprisonment in Mandalay prison in Burma. Lala Lajpat Rai was deported to Burma without any trial.

Achievements of the Assertive Nationalists

The achievements of the assertive nationalists were

- They exposed the hollowness of the belief of British sense of justice and fair play.
- They instilled among the Indians the spirit of active nationalism. They made people realise that the policy of non-violent resistance is essential to drive the British out of the country.
- They expressed their opinion and nationalistic ideas in vernacular languages and thus had a large mass base.
- By promoting the principles of swadeshi and boycott of foreign goods, they promoted the principles of self-reliance.
- They stressed that nothing less than complete independence was acceptable to the people of India.
- Many nationalist schools were set up during the period of assertive nationalism. The National Council of Education was set up in 1906 which later developed into Jadavpur University.
- Swadeshi and boycott movements spread all over India and drew people towards the nationalist movement.
- It was due to the efforts of the assertive nationalists that the partition of Bengal was cancelled in 1911.

Prominent Assertive Nationalists

Bal Gangadhar Tilak

- Bal Gangadhar Tilak is known as the 'Father of Assertive Nationalism'. He broadened the base of the Indian National Congress.
- He was born in a Brahmin family at Ratnagiri in Maharashtra. After obtaining degree in Law, he founded the Poona New English School.
- He founded the Deccan Education Society under the guidance of Ranade in 1884.
- Tilak was the first nationalist who openly declared that Swaraj is the goal of the people. He said, Swaraj is my birthright and I shall have it". He believed that India will not get freedom by sending petitions but by concrete actions.
- Tilak started the Ganpati festival to spread and propagate nationalist ideas through songs and speeches. He started two newspapers, Kesari and



Bal Gangadhar Tilak

Mahratta, in which he preached nationalist ideas among the people. He also wrote two books, Gita Rahasya and The Arctic Home of the Vedas.

- He started the Home Rule League at Pune in 1916 for attaining self-government.
- He is considered a forerunner to Gandhi. Like Tilak, Gandhi also believed in the principle of 'Swarajya'. Both Tilak and Gandhi had mass following. Tilak preached the ideas of Swadeshi, boycott and prohibition which were also upheld by Gandhi.

Bipin Chandra Pal

- He was born in Sylhet (now a part of Bangladesh) in 1858. He is known as the 'Father of Revolutionary Thought' in India.
- He was a social reformer. After visiting various countries, he became aware of the people's struggle against foreign rule in different parts of the world. He joined the Indian National Congress in 1886.

Contributions

- He was a journalist who spread his nationalist ideas through newspapers such as Bengal Public Opinion, The Tribune and New India. His writings were considered seditious by the British government.
- He was in favour of imparting national education to students. According to him, national education should become the basis of the Indian National Movement.
- He was a social reformer who advocated widow remarriage and female education. He opposed the oppressive caste system.
- Bipin Chandra Pal supported the development of indigenous industries in India.



Bipin Chandra Pal

Lala Lajpat Rai

- He was popularly known as 'Punjab Kesari' or 'Sher-e-Punjab'. He was an eminent lawyer, educator, social reformer and a strong critique of the British rule.
- He joined Congress in 1888. He gave fiery speeches against the British government. As a result, he was deported to Mandalay.
- He was a supporter of the workers' movement and became the first President of the All India Trade Union Congress. He was elected as the President of the Indian National Congress. He also joined the Swaraj Party and left it later.



Lala Lajpat Rai

Contributions

- He started a monthly magazine Young India to inspire people to join the national movement for attaining Swaraj. He also founded Punjabi, Vande Mataram (an Urdu daily) and People (an English weekly).
- He contributed immensely to society as a social reformer. He was closely associated with the Arya Samaj movement. He played a significant role in expanding D. A. V. College at Lahore in 1886. He founded many orphanages, schools and hospitals. He also founded 'Servants of the Peoples Society' for the welfare of people belonging to lower castes.
- He visited many countries to create and mobilise public opinion in favour of India's struggle for independence. He joined the Ghadar party in America in 1914.
- Through his writings in Young India, he inspired many Indian youths to participate in the Indian struggle for independence.

He led a procession at Lahore against the Simon Commission in 1928. He received grave injuries during the lathi charge and died a month later.