

# Comparisons and Contrasting Ideas on The Character of Indian Nationalism

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## Abstract

This paper argues that a certain form of multiplicity could be observed in the character of India's nationalist movement. Many sects, and classes of nationalists have different motivations to fight for freedom, however, the common aspect for Indians was anti-colonialism. This paper attempts to revisit the theories of nationalism, and contextualise the multiplicity of Indian Nationalism.

**Keywords:** Imperial Colonization, Consciousness, Amnesia, Perspective, Multi-Lingual, Inclusiveness, Subjectively, Congruence, Solidarities, Imagined Community, Psyche, Patriotism, Evolution, Feudalistic, Populace, Assimilating, Subjectivity, Debunking, Jingoistic, Conflict, Negotiating, Illusionist, Spectrum, Aggregate, Bourgeoisie, Proletariat, Amalgamation, Assimilating, Interwoven, Integrative, Perplexing, Discourse, Hegemonic.



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## Introduction

The growth of Indian nationalism was a phenomenon that came up during the period of Imperial Colonization in India. It may refer to the ideas and principles that defined the Indian National Movement in 19<sup>th</sup> century. It often imbibes, as observed by some, the consciousness of Indians before 1947. There had been a great number of debates and ideas propounded to define the character of the term, which are sometimes congruent as well as contrasting in nature.

Before comparing the nature of the Indian nationalism as presented by some of the most eminent scholars, it is important to understand what the term 'Nation' connotes.

What would be the most concrete definition of the term "Nation" as it gained so much popularity in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. This growth of the idea of a "Nation" led to the birth the idea of nationalism in the annals of Indian history.

The definition of a nation isn't a solid one either. For most people, the definition of "Nation" would simply be, in a broad sense of speaking, a large group of people with a shared language, culture, ethnicity descent and history. However, this theory is too generalized and inadequate in nature as no nation can sincerely meet all of these requirements. The first definition or theory regarding 'Nation' was propounded by Ernest Renan in 1882 in his lecture called "What is a Nation?" to symbolize the nationalism in France after the French Revolution. He provided four points in his essay, which sums up to:

1. Will
2. Memory
3. Consciousness
4. Amnesia<sup>1</sup>

Although it is one of the foremost theories, it had its problems. For example, the points regarding Will and Memory are too generalized as was the point of Amnesia. How is one to forget or remember events of historical importance? How one does select them? And where is the surety of the fact that something can be forgotten so easily? Consciousness sounds a bit paradoxical. This is because the question arises, does a collective form of consciousness leads to nation or a nation forms a consciousness as a whole? Keeping these points in perspective, Renan's definition, albeit being partly valid, was inadequate to define nation.

Around 1912, Joseph Stalin gave another set of points to redefine a nation. According to him, the following ideas build a nation –

1. Historic continuity - a continuous living through centuries
2. Language – a common language spoken by all
3. Territory- without migrating, people holding a particular territory for a long time
4. Economic life – the people forming one common grid of economic life
5. Psychological makeup – one common psychology shared by everybody. <sup>[2]</sup>

Stalin's ideas, in contrast to Renan, were too exclusive. Where Renan included almost every facet of a community, Stalin's idea excluded communities with diverse cultural themes, which, in reference to India, cannot describe what a nation is. The point of a common language can or may work in Europe, but India being a multilingual country, the point is invalid.

The problem with both of the ideas was that Renan was subjectively looking at the things which constitute a nation; Stalin was being objective in his approach. Too much of inclusiveness or too much exclusiveness cannot provide a solid idea, for these ideas cannot be fully applied to every community or country which can be called as a nation.

It was in 1983 when Ernest Gellner provided a new and somehow more acceptable idea of nation. According to him, nation and nationalism are ideologies, rather a political principal that holds the political and national units in congruence. Further, he argues that nationalism is a product of transformation an agrarian to industrial concept following the industrial revolution in Europe.<sup>3</sup> This theory was criticized, refuted with the fact that industrial revolution wasn't a global phenomenon, but nationalism was. The Industrial Revolution made its mark on Europe only, what followed as consequence was the mercantilist endeavors and voyages to new worlds through sea routes (not discovery, since one cannot 'discover' what's already there) and the subsequent colonization of the eastern world. Nationalism was a worldwide event, in different timelines perhaps.

Tom Nairn also proposed a similar idea, although he talks about forging new solidarities amongst the elite class and the common people.

There were some other ideas which were developed over the course of time regarding the basic nature of nationalism. According to Eric Hobsbawm, it was just an "Invented Tradition"<sup>4</sup>, which legitimized the idea by referring to the golden age of a nation, establishing connectivity with the past and invoking selective traditions, legitimizing the movement. According to Benedict Anderson, it was an idea of "Imagined Community".<sup>5</sup> The Marxist theorists believed that nationalism was nothing but a false consciousness.

Inconclusive as they are, these theories which defined or rather tried to define the terms, found a way into our psyche to debate and argue about a certain sort of feeling or a phase that India went through during the 19<sup>th</sup>- 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Whether there was indeed nationalism or not cannot be accurately determined, there will always be one argument over the other to debunk or criticize. Keeping that in perspective, one must tread carefully to understand and compare the ideas and try drawing contrast between them.

As far as Indian Nationalism and national struggle is concerned, there has been many a theory regarding its nature as a whole, although it is undeniable that it was the British Imperialism in India which provided the backdrop. Prior to that, there was no concept of nationalism. One must remember that India has witnessed foreign rule quite a number of times, yet there is hardly any concept of a nationwide, collective feeling of patriotism prior to the coming of the British. The feeling that India is one nation arose on a pan-India level only during the period of British rule in India.

Amongst many theories, Bipin Chandra's theory for Nationalism in India speaks of a process, rather than an inherited notion. He argues that nationalism in India was basically a process, an evolution through time, a development of the people of the country. It was India's history itself, which led to the idea of nation and nationalism. He compares the rise of nationalism in Europe and India, providing the basic reasons like either the fall of the feudalistic society or the advent of Industrial revolutions in European nations in one hand, while on the other hand, nationalism in colonies or semi colonies of India, china or Japan was the product of efforts to avoid the colonial rule.<sup>6</sup> Pertaining to the Nationalist School of History, Chandra's view was that the core reason behind the nationalism in India was the pan-Indian anti colonialist feelings shared by everybody, from the elite classes to the mass populace. He staunchly proposed that it was the fact that the colonial empire had adversely underdeveloped India on the terms of economy, hindering the social development. A "Central Contradiction" as he put it, affected all the Indians in the same manner, oppressing without any discrimination of class, caste, language, religion et cetera, leading to the rise of the notion of a common enemy and a common goal.

India, as we all know, had many rulers who were not native to this country. Yet, as he Bipin Chandra points out, none had the tendency to undermine or exploit the country like Britain did. The Sultans or the Mughals, they came and settled down, assimilating themselves into the society except the Colonial Empire, which was just here to drain out everything. According to him, they weren't ruling India, they were destroying it.

For him, the idea wasn't an inherent one, nor was it an invention by a class to serve narrow interest; it was rather a process, an emotional, intellectual and an ideological process that gradually gained momentum with the due course of time. Throughout his article, one can clearly find the obvious inclination towards the anti-colonialist feeling that he upheld, further arguing that the process was vulnerable to the subjectivity of the political, cultural, ideological factors. The breaking of the nation in 1947 was due

to this very subjectivity. The failure to hold the ideological practices was what led to the partition.

India was unified on the base of an undeveloped and exploited economy, other than being unified on the diversification of class, caste, religion et cetera. The nationalist school argued that it was the colonial condition which strengthened the unification of India.

To summarize Bipin Chandra's theory, or perhaps the Nationalist School theory, Indian Nationalism was the product of a historical process rather than being an event. A process that was put in motion by the exploitation of the colonial rule and the subsequent anti-imperial feeling throughout India. In a more simplistic term, the British rule in India was nothing but derogatory and exploitative.

Another theory we find is Anil Seal's theory of nationalism in India, which is a sharp contrast to Bipin Chandra. In comparison to the previous argument where we find the "evils" of the imperial rule, Anil Seal, being one of the foremost advocates of the Cambridge School of History, speaks about the "opportunities provided by the British rule to the growth of India". According to him and more specifically the Cambridge school, nationalism was nothing but "a dusshera duel between two hollow statues, locked in motiveless and stimulated combat"<sup>7</sup> (The Emergence of Indian Nationalism). One must remember that the Cambridge school was basically an offshoot of the Imperialist school and in effect to that, it will be hardly surprising if Seal's theory denies any existence of a pan Indian nationalist feeling which was working against the British Empire in India. The existence of colonialism wasn't an economic, political, social and cultural struggle in India, rather nothing more than just a foreign rule to which India was no stranger.

Anil Seal's argument on nationalism is somewhat opposed to Bipin Chandra's argument. While Chandra said that it was the masses who felt the similarity or a commonness of a certain feeling regardless of their class-caste-religion-region division, Seal's argument denied this whole theory. Debunking the idea of any nationwide jingoistic feeling or any role of ideology, his argument was there was more of a factional contest between several contending social groups. The groups fought over the "patronage" from the colonial authorities, and those factions who were deprived of the so-called patronage or opportunities, resented it. It was a race for influence, status, resources, power.

Seal further argues, as mentioned above, there was no 'ideology' working behind nationalism or national movement; it was rather an aftereffect, fallout of the conflict between elites and commons, Hindu and Muslims, Brahmin and non-Brahmins et cetera. There was a vertical alliance, not a horizontal one. Instead of being a partnership of fellows, it became an alliance of bigwigs and followers. As he writes in 'Imperialism and Nationalism in India' "...local struggles were seldom marked by alliance of landlords with landlords, peasants with peasants, educated with educated...frequently, the Hindus worked with Muslims, Brahmins were hand in glove with non-Brahmins..."<sup>8</sup>

The colonial rule was a centralized model, Anil Seal says, so the deprived groups too needed to be a centrally formed power alliance, as a result, they formed a centralized structure which was named the Indian National Congress, with the leaders acting as power brokers with the imperial government, negotiating with the British government on the behalf of the local factions (Gandhi, Nehru and Patel). According to him, the grievances of the masses had really nothing to do with the colonialism in any regards. In summary, nationalism might just have been an illusionist concept, fueled by a race for power.

A Marxist approach provided by R.P Dutt, in contrast to Chandra and Seal, delves into the spectrum of the class division in the Indian society during the imperial rule.

As for we know, there indeed was a class discrimination or rather a division in India which, according to Dutt, was the main reason for the national movement. The basic Marxist approach says that the nation was an aggregate of internally divided classes and contradiction between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat class. Compared to the other theories regarding patriotism or a race for patronage, Dutt argues that the national movement was comprised of classes like the landlords, peasants, capitalists, proletariats and the bourgeoisie and the movement was more of a conflict's result.<sup>9</sup>

It is easy to assume that since there was an amalgamation of classes, there would be class interest too, leading to a clash with each other. It is a widely accepted idea that the sole purpose of the colonial rule was to exploit the resources for their own gains, which undoubtedly is a valid argument. Similarly, the Indians wanted to exploit the same resources for their growth, leading to a "Central Contradiction" in terms of interest between the British government and India.

However, there was an internal conflict too amongst the classes themselves due to the clash of interest. To curb this problem, since they were fighting the British Empire, the nationalist leaders set and provided a common set of interest for the classes, a common point for all to agree upon which was unanimously against the British interest, creating a certain balance between the different class group. The leaders of the national movement made it a point that if they are assimilating a certain demand by the capitalist class, they had to accommodate some demands of the proletariat group, the peasantry class and so forth in their common agenda to overthrow the British government, refuting the imperial idea of 'civilizing mission'. The movement, as Dutt argues was an outcome of the economic developments during the colonial era with the rise of capitalism and the development of market society in India along with some common interest between the divided classes. Dutt argues that if the common interest had not developed, the people of India would never have formed a nation. It was just the class interest, compared to any feeling that led to the movement.

Argument provided by S.R Mehrotra can be compared to that of Bipin Chandra quite easily. He too speaks of commonness amongst the most diverse population in the world, a sort of all Indian community. He argued that, it was the geographical spread of all the diversities that ultimately gave the underlying feeling of belonging a rise to the surface, backed by the interwoven pattern of one thing or the other. For example, a Tamilian person is racially different from a person from Maharashtra on linguistic grounds; However they are common on the basis of their religion. And he further argues that it was actually the British themselves, who, maybe quite unknowingly, brought India together by common laws, institutions and other administrative details in a more integrative process. Another means to unify the country, as Mehrotra spoke of, was the postal services and the railways that made the feeling of commonness stronger amongst the people of India. And there was of course the mindset against the imperial exploits and destructive nature of the colonial rule that triggered the dissent amongst the people of India. His ideas are basically a reproduction of Bipin Chandra's Nationalist School of History.

Contrasting against all other theories, Partha Chatterjee's theory is perhaps one of the most interesting one. Although he comes under the subaltern school of history, his idea of the constitution of a nationalist discourse partially reflects other school of thoughts too. Unlike others, he dissects the emergence on nationalism into three parts – The Moment of Departure, The Moment of Maneuver and The Moment of Arrival<sup>10</sup>. Although the theory is quite perplexing in nature, the division of the whole movement perhaps shows a sort of process, a certain linear progression, somewhat similar to the theory by Bipin Chandra's nation's building process, although they are more of Gramscian 'moments' defined by power relations.

The first dissection of the moment of departure, Chatterjee speaks of the marginalized groups began to question the existing power relation within the colonial empire. As he says in his article "moment of departure lies in the encounter of a nationalist consciousness with the framework of knowledge created by the post enlightenment rationalist thought"<sup>11</sup>. At this moment, nationalist idea was characterized by asserting that the eastern world is superior than the west in spiritual aspect of culture. The true modernity for the "oriental nations" involved combining the superior materialistic culture of the west with the spiritual idea of the east, implying an elitist program, for a cultural synthesis can only be understood by "supremely refined intellect" as Chatterjee claimed, regenerating a 'national religion'.

His next stage, the maneuver, requires the mobilization of the popular elements (the masses, peasants, rural people) in the cause of an anti-colonial struggle, while at the same time, distancing those elements from the state structure. In context of India, it meant building a nation where the peasants were a part indeed, but also a state from which they were distanced off. This was in the view of Gandhi's mobilization of the rural masses against the British Rule, which constituted a part of the nation but was not taking any leadership roles.

His final stage, the moment of arrival, the "nationalist discourse reconstitutes itself into a legitimate state ideology"<sup>12</sup>, or simply, the discourse succeeded into a hegemonic order in a consistent manner which embraced and constructed a new framework, rather a national identity consciousness, after avoiding all the earlier contradictions, difference and diverseness, finally coming to a unified, common idea of a nationalist formation. Nationalism was now a state ideology. It was progressive and rational and appropriated life of nation into state.

The idea of Nationalism is not a singular one. During the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, various notions of Nationalism arose. Although these ideas may have some similar

elements, but a comparison of all of them leads us to the conclusion that these ideas indeed were different viewpoints regarding one single notion of a nation and nationalism that came up during the 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century in India.

**Aim of the Study**

To understand the nature of nationalism in India and its varied variables.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, although, although it could be ascertained that the character of nationalism cannot be quantified, it must be noted that its development is subject to a society's interaction with its past. No 'nationalist movement' is alike; every nationalist movement was developed subject to multiple material experiences. So is true with India.

India's national character was a process that initially developed in the form of anti-colonial/imperialist movement. Never has there been such an 'ideological' resistance to occupation in the past as per the Indian experience. Previous instances of invasions assimilated the invader to this land; however, the colonial experience dictates that India was drained of its resources. But the discourse on nationalism isn't monolithic. The multiplicity of the issue demands us that we focus on various other aspects, like class, gender etc., for a comprehensive analysis. Only through such an approach could nationalism be understood in its entirety.

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**Footnotes**

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