

The Growth of Indian Nationalism under British Rule: Phases and Ideological Shifts

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Abstract: The growth of Indian nationalism under British rule was a complex, multi-phased process shaped by economic exploitation, socio-cultural awakening, and political consciousness among Indians. Initially emerging as a moderate, constitutional movement seeking reforms within the colonial framework, Indian nationalism gradually evolved into a mass-based struggle demanding complete independence. This paper examines the phases of this evolution, including the early moderate phase, the extremist phase, and the Gandhian mass movement phase, analyzing the ideological shifts that occurred within each period. It also explores the role of socio-religious reform movements, the impact of Western education, the rise of an Indian press, and the experiences of economic deprivation under colonial policies in fueling nationalist sentiments. By mapping the ideological transitions from loyalty to the Crown to outright demand for Purna Swaraj (complete independence), this study highlights how Indian nationalism transformed from elite-led constitutional agitation to a broad-based mass movement, reflecting the aspirations of diverse social groups in India. The paper aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how Indian nationalism under British rule was neither linear nor monolithic but a dynamic interplay of shifting ideologies, leadership strategies, and mass participation that ultimately culminated in India's freedom in 1947.

Keywords: Indian nationalism, British colonial rule, socio-religious reform, economic exploitation, Western education, Indian National Congress, Swadeshi movement, Gandhian politics, mass mobilization, independence movement

1. Introduction:

The emergence and growth of Indian nationalism under British rule mark one of the most significant transformations in modern world history. The British conquest of India led to profound economic, social, and political changes, which, over time, sowed the seeds of discontent among Indians. This discontent gradually transformed into a coherent nationalist movement, challenging the legitimacy of British colonial rule and demanding Indian self-governance. Indian nationalism under British rule evolved as a response to colonial oppression, economic exploitation, and cultural humiliation. It was neither static nor monolithic; instead, it reflected diverse ideologies, methods, and aspirations across time. This paper seeks to examine how Indian nationalism grew under British rule by identifying its phases and analyzing the ideological shifts within the nationalist discourse.

2. Meaning and Nature of Indian Nationalism:

Nationalism in India was anti-colonial in nature, evolving as a response to foreign domination, unlike European nationalism, which was state building. It combined political, economic, cultural, and social dimensions, seeking self-rule and cultural self-assertion.

3. Role of Colonial Policies in Fostering Nationalism:

Economic exploitation through heavy taxation, destruction of traditional industries, and discriminatory trade policies led to mass poverty, creating fertile ground for nationalist sentiments. Political discrimination and racial arrogance of British officials angered educated Indians. Policies like the Vernacular Press Act (1878) and Ilbert Bill controversy (1883) exposed British hypocrisy regarding liberal values.

4. Importance of Western Education and Press:

Introduction of English education created a new middle class aware of liberal ideas like democracy, liberty, and rights. Vernacular and English newspapers (Kesari, Amrita Bazar Patrika, Hindu, Bengalee) acted as vehicles for nationalist propaganda, spreading awareness about colonial injustices. Formation of political associations (British Indian Association, Poona Sarvajanik Sabha) before INC helped in organized political articulation.

5. Cultural and Religious Reform Movements:

Movements like Brahmo Samaj (Raja Ram Mohan Roy), Arya Samaj (Dayanand Saraswati), Aligarh Movement (Sir Syed Ahmad Khan), and Ramakrishna Mission (Swami Vivekananda) revived pride in Indian traditions while encouraging social reform, indirectly supporting nationalism. Rediscovery of India's glorious past countered colonial narratives of civilizational inferiority.

6. Evolution of Phases with Key Examples:

Leaders believed in British sense of justice and used petitions and resolutions. Critiques like Dadabhai Naoroji's Drain of Wealth theory helped people understand economic exploitation. Demands included civil services reform, legislative representation, and reduction of military expenditure. Triggered by Partition of Bengal (1905), which was seen as 'divide and rule'. Boycott of British goods, promotion of Swadeshi industries, and national education became key tools. Leaders like Tilak popularized "Swaraj is my birthright", while cultural nationalism was promoted through festivals like Ganapati and Shivaji. Gandhi's Satyagraha provided a non-violent yet powerful mass movement strategy. His methods included non-cooperation, civil disobedience, Salt Satyagraha, and mobilization of peasants and women. Gandhi integrated social reform (Harijan upliftment, prohibition, Khadi promotion) with nationalism.

7. Early Resistance and Proto-Nationalism (1757–1857):

The initial period of British rule witnessed sporadic resistance from peasants, tribal communities, and local rulers. The Sannyasi-Fakir Rebellion (late 18th century), Vellore Mutiny (1806), and the tribal uprisings represented early forms of resistance rooted in local grievances rather than a pan-Indian identity. The Revolt of 1857 was the first major armed resistance with a semblance of unity, although it lacked a clear nationalist ideology. Leaders like Bahadur Shah Zafar, Rani Lakshmibai, and Nana Sahib mobilized diverse groups, but the revolt was driven by traditional concerns rather than modern nationalism. However, it sowed seeds of collective resentment against British rule.

8. The Moderate Phase (1885–1905):

The establishment of the Indian National Congress (INC) in 1885 marked the beginning of organized nationalist politics. The moderate leaders (Dadabhai Naoroji, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Pherozeshah Mehta) advocated constitutional methods, petitions, and dialogue with British authorities. Moderate leaders expressed loyalty to the British Crown, demanding reforms but not independence. They presented an economic critique exemplified by Dadabhai Naoroji's Drain of Wealth theory. They advocated for Indian representation in administration and legislative councils. The moderate phase involved educating the masses about colonial exploitation. It also emphasized promoting national consciousness through newspapers, pamphlets, and associations.

9. The Extremist Phase (1905–1918):

The partition of Bengal in 1905 triggered widespread protests and radicalized the nationalist movement, leading to the rise of extremist leaders like Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Bipin Chandra Pal, and Lala Lajpat Rai. During the extremist phase, the approach shifted from prayer and petition to direct action. Promotion of Swadeshi and Boycott Movements. The assertion of Swaraj, or self-rule, became the primary goal of Indian nationalism. Leaders used religious and cultural symbols to foster unity and mass mobilization. This phase also witnessed revolutionary nationalism, with secret societies like Anushilan Samiti and Ghadar Party attempting armed resistance against British rule.

10. The Gandhian Mass Movement Phase (1919–1947):

The end of World War I, the Rowlatt Act, and the Jallianwala Bagh massacre catalyzed a shift towards mass-based nationalist politics under Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi introduced non-violent civil disobedience, or Satyagraha, as a primary strategy. There was significant involvement of peasants, workers, women, and marginalized communities. Nationwide movements like Non-Cooperation (1920–22), Civil Disobedience (1930–34), and Quit India Movement (1942) were launched. Indigenous symbols such as Khadi and village industries were used to connect with the masses. Nationalism evolved from elite-led petitions to mass-based participation during this phase. The demand for complete independence, or Purna Swaraj, became explicit in 1930. Gandhian

nationalism emphasized ethical politics, social reforms like the eradication of untouchability, and Hindu-Muslim unity.

11. Ideological Diversification within Nationalism:

Leftist ideologies, including the CPI and trade unions, focused on class struggle and workers' rights. Ambedkar's Dalit movement sought social justice within the nationalist framework while maintaining a critical stance toward the Congress. Hindutva and communal politics, represented by the Hindu Mahasabha and the Muslim League, introduced religious dimensions that led to communal tensions and eventually Partition.

12. Factors Contributing to the Growth of Nationalism:

Economic Factors Colonial exploitation led to widespread poverty, famines, and economic stagnation, fostering anti-British sentiments in India. This period also saw the emergence of an educated middle class capable of articulating grievances against British policies. **Socio-Cultural Factors** Western education and Enlightenment ideas of liberty and nationalism significantly impacted Indian society. The revival of Indian culture through reform movements like the Brahmo Samaj and Arya Samaj supported nationalist sentiments. **Political Factors** Discriminatory policies and the racial arrogance of British officials angered educated Indians. The failure of constitutional reforms, such as the Morley-Minto and Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms, to meet Indian aspirations further fueled nationalism. **Communication and Press** The growth of vernacular and English newspapers fostered political awareness across different sections of society.

13. Impact on Society:

The growth of Indian nationalism under British rule had a profound and transformative impact on Indian society, reshaping its social fabric, consciousness, and collective aspirations. One significant impact was the gradual breaking of rigid caste barriers, particularly during the mass movements under Gandhian leadership, when people from different castes and communities participated together in protests, marches, and constructive programmes, fostering a sense of unity against colonial oppression. The nationalist movement spread political consciousness among the largely illiterate and marginalized masses, who had previously remained outside the sphere of formal politics. It brought the concepts of freedom, self-rule, and rights into the public discourse, empowering peasants, workers, women, and students to articulate their grievances and aspirations within a nationalist framework. Nationalism also fostered the creation and popularization of national symbols, songs, and literature that became instruments of unity and collective identity. Songs like "Vande Mataram" and the promotion of Khadi by Gandhi served as unifying forces, instilling a sense of pride and belonging among Indians. Festivals, public meetings, and processions were used strategically to create a shared national culture, countering colonial narratives of inferiority and disunity. The nationalist movement also gave rise to the Indian press in vernacular and English languages, which played a critical role in educating the public, exposing the exploitative nature of colonial policies, and generating debate on socio-political issues, thereby laying the foundation for a participatory democratic culture in India.

Additionally, the spread of nationalism led to an increased emphasis on education and social reforms. Leaders and organizations recognized the need for mass literacy and socio-cultural awakening to prepare society for self-governance. Social evils like untouchability, child marriage, and the subjugation of women were addressed alongside the political struggle, especially under Gandhian influence, linking social reform with the broader nationalist objectives. Women, who had been largely confined to domestic spaces, began to participate actively in protests, picketing, and organizational work, marking the beginning of their visibility in public and political spaces.

14. Critiques and Challenges:

While the Indian nationalist movement under British rule achieved remarkable progress in mobilizing the masses and articulating the demand for self-rule, it faced several critiques and challenges that limited its inclusiveness and effectiveness at various stages. One of the primary critiques of the nationalist movement was its early elite dominance, particularly during the moderate phase of the Indian National Congress, where leadership and participation were largely confined to English-educated, urban, upper-caste professionals and landlords. This created a disconnect between the nationalist leadership and the vast rural peasantry, who bore the brunt of colonial

exploitation but often remained outside the mainstream nationalist discourse in the initial decades. Another challenge was the issue of communal divisions, which were exacerbated by colonial policies of “divide and rule.” While leaders like Gandhi emphasized Hindu-Muslim unity, the nationalist movement struggled to fully integrate the aspirations and concerns of religious minorities, leading to periodic communal tensions. The emergence of separate electorates under the Morley-Minto Reforms and the subsequent growth of communal organizations like the Muslim League and the Hindu Mahasabha deepened communal consciousness, which the nationalist movement could not entirely resolve, culminating in the tragic partition of India in 1947.

The movement also faced critiques regarding its failure to address the structural socio-economic inequalities within Indian society comprehensively. While Gandhian nationalism integrated some elements of social reform, such as the upliftment of Harijans and the promotion of Khadi and village industries, deeper economic radicalism was not fully embraced until the rise of leftist movements in the 1930s. Leaders like Bhagat Singh and organizations like the Communist Party of India highlighted the limitations of a purely political struggle without simultaneously addressing issues of land redistribution, labor rights, and class exploitation, which were often sidelined by the mainstream nationalist agenda.

15. Conclusion

The growth of Indian nationalism under British rule was a dynamic, multi-phased process characterized by ideological shifts from loyalty to radical demands for complete independence. What began as sporadic, localized resistance evolved into an organized, mass-based movement that successfully mobilized diverse sections of Indian society. British colonial policies, economic exploitation, and the introduction of Western education paradoxically facilitated the rise of nationalist consciousness that eventually led to India’s independence in 1947. The story of Indian nationalism under British rule is not merely the account of a colonial state’s gradual erosion, but a testament to the resilience, adaptability, and transformative potential of an oppressed people in their quest for self-determination. From its humble origins as an elite, urban, and largely moderate plea for administrative reforms, Indian nationalism evolved into a powerful, inclusive, and uncompromising demand for complete independence that ultimately brought the British Raj to an end in 1947. At the core of this evolution lay the interplay of economic exploitation, social awakening, and political mobilization. The exploitative policies of the British—whether it was the ruin of India’s traditional industries, the famines induced by revenue extraction, or the racial discrimination embedded in administration and judiciary created widespread discontent. This discontent found its first organized expression through the early nationalist leaders, who, inspired by Western liberal thought and constitutionalism, believed that dialogue, petitions, and appeals to British sense of justice could secure India’s rightful place within the Empire.

However, when these constitutional methods yielded little tangible progress, frustration within the nationalist ranks gave birth to a more assertive, militant phase led by the Extremists. Leaders like Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Bipin Chandra Pal, and Lala Lajpat Rai infused the movement with a spirit of self-reliance and confrontation. The Swadeshi Movement in response to the Partition of Bengal became a turning point, proving that economic boycotts, indigenous enterprise, and mass mobilization could challenge colonial authority far more effectively than polite petitions. This marked the first major ideological shift: from faith in gradual reform to an insistence on self-rule and indigenous strength. Yet, the real transformation came with Mahatma Gandhi, who democratized nationalism by rooting it in India’s villages and ordinary people. Gandhi’s genius lay in combining age-old moral principles with modern political tactics. His methods of Satyagraha and non-violent civil disobedience redefined resistance, making it morally superior and difficult to suppress with brute force.



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