Shodh Prabha: A Multidisciplinary Journal
ISSN: 3108-2726 (Online), 3108-2890 (Print), Volume-1, Issue-1, (Jan - Feb) 2025

The Evolution of Indian Nationalism: From Moderates to Extremists (1885–1919)

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Abstract

Indian nationalism of 1885-1919 is one of the most decisive ways of Indianism. This was a time of slow but decisive change in the character, ideology and approach of the Indian National Congress (INC) to the constitutional and reformist politics of the Moderates to the radical, assertive and mass oriented politics of the Extremists. The colonial economic exploitation, racial discrimination, and deprivation of political rights of Indians in the British rule were deep-rooted in the emergence of nationalism in late nineteenth century India. Nonetheless the nationalist consciousness did not come into being in a vacuum but there was intricate interplay between political leaders, the educated elites, vernacular press, reform movements, and awakening of the socio-religious and cultural identities. The moderate stage (1885-1905) was marked by devotion to the British Crown, belief in constitutional approach and dependence on petitions and persuasion. At the beginning of the twentieth century however, this disillusionment in British policies, coupled with influences on an international scale like the Russo-Japanese War and the emergence of anti-colonial movements, resulted in a new breed of leaders Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Bipin Chandra Pal and Lala Lajpat Rai who were the embodiments of militant nationalism. The Extremist stage (1905-1919) reorientated the aims and the means of Indian nationalism with the focus on self-reliance, swadeshi and mass mobilization. The paper delves into the historical arc of Indian nationalism in this revolutionary period examining the ideological discussions, socio-political forces and cultural trends that informed the shift in politics between the Moderate and Extremist politics. The paper also puts this development into the context of the wider world of the anti-imperialist movements and holds that the synthesis of these two stages gave rise to the later Gandhian era of mass nationalism.

Keywords: Indian Nationalism, Moderates, Extremists, Indian National Congress, Swadeshi Movement, Colonial Politics, National Consciousness, Anti-Imperialism.

Introduction

The development of Indian nationalism between 1885 and 1919 is a pivotal time in the politics of colonial India, as it is the period when the nationalist thought and action was radically changed. The Indian national congress, which was formed in the year 1885, was first a medium through which the educated Indian elite could air their political desire in the context of British constitutionalism. It is believed that the founding fathers of the Congress, where Allan Octavian Hume, Dadabhai Naoroji, W. C. Banerjee and Surendranath Banerjee were included, thought that the British rule could be restructured through rational appeal and constitutional concession. They were influenced by the belief in British liberal traditions and the most common assumptions that the colonial state could be convinced to implement some reforms by means

of discussions, petitions, and resolutions. This period of the nationalist movement is often known as the Moderate phase (18851905), and it was characterized by a civilized, intellectualized type of politics with the goal of securing a gradual acquisition of political rights which included: representative institutions and governmental reforms.

But towards the end of the nineteenth century, when the twentieth century began to emerge, the flaws of this method started becoming more evident. Even the more moderate intelligentsia previously loyal to the Crown, were estranged by the repressive measures of the British government, racial arrogance and economic exploitation. Relevation of the Drain Theory by Dadabhai Naoroji and critical works by R. C. Dutt made the economic basis of colonial exploitation known, in which the malaise in British professions of goodwill was revealed. The administrative efficiency, as the reason selected by Lord Curzon in 1905 to partition Bengal, was taken by many to signify the desire to divide and weaken nationalist forces on communal grounds. This had been a breakthrough event and it had sparked the Swadeshi and Boycott Movements and the emergence of Extremist nationalism spearheaded by aggressive leaders like Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Bipin Chandra Pal, and Lala Lajpat Rai sometimes referred to as Lal-Bal-Pal trio.

Controlling the shift of the Moderates to the Extremists did not just amount to a change of political orientation but rather an ideological transformation. The Extremists opposed the thinking of the Moderates of gradualism and British justice and called upon self-reliance (Swaraj) and direct action. Some of their approaches were to promote indigenous industries, national education and mobilization of the masses using festivals, newspapers and public demonstrations. Focusing on emotional and cultural nationalism was a shift to the rationalist and reformist inclination of the previous phase. Whereas the Moderates could attain freedom by constitutional talking, the Extremists could attain it by awakening of people and self-assertion.

This ideological difference brought about serious internal differences in the Congress and this culminated in the Surat Split of 1907 which officially divided the organization into two camps. However, in spite of these sectarian divisions the two camps aided in the expansion of nationalist awareness. The Moderates were at the core of the before, they expressed the political demands and created a body of educated political elites, but on the other hand, the Extremists provided the movement with the lifeblood and enthusiasm, as well as the involvement of masses. The two of them formed the circumstances that led to the rise of Gandhian nationalism in the post-1919 period- a marriage between the constitutional politics and mass mobilization of nationalism based on moral and spiritual opposition.

Moreover, the development of Indian nationalism at the time should be interpreted in the context of overall socio-cultural changes. Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj, and Ramakrishna Mission had already set about a renaissance of the Indian thought, reimagining the native traditions and claiming cultural pride. Nationalistic ideas were spread among the masses by the vernacular press in such publications as Kesari, The Hindu, and Amrita Bazar Patrika. At the same time, the emergence of educated middle classes, women groups and regional political associations helped to create a growing feeling of collective identity without language and religious limits.

The years 1885-1919 can therefore not only be taken as a time period but also as an ideological pathway of slow petitioning to aggressive self-determination. It shows how Indian political awareness was growing against the colonial domination and world modernity. The paper at hand, thus, aims at exploring the history of Indian nationalism in the multidimensional perspective: its political, cultural, intellectual paths; the relationship between the Moderates and Extremists; and the role of the ideological struggle between these two sides in reinforcing the nationalist cause.

Historical Background:

Indian nationalism has deep origins in socio-economic and intellectual changes that were accompanied by the British colonial rule. Despite the introduction of Western education, modern means of communication, and unification of administration by the British the same things unknowingly helped in the birth of the national consciousness spirit. The period of the initial part of the nineteenth century was marked by the emergence of the educated middle class, which grew more conscious of the inconsistencies of the colonial rule. Although British education was spread with the principles of liberty, equality, and self-governance, the colonial life was based on racial discrimination, economic exploitation and political subordination.

The nationalistic feeling was given rational ground through the economic analysis of colonialism. Early scholars like Dadabhai Naoroji, in his legendary book Poverty and Un-British Rule in India (1901), unveiled the process of the Drain of Wealth showing how British economic policies made India poor. On the same note, R. C. Dutt in Economic History of India explained how India worse land revenue systems, deindustrialization and inequitable trade policies decimated the self-sufficient economy. This nationalism in economics was further strengthened with the case of Ilbert Bill (1883) that showed the racial arrogance of British administrators who were against giving the Indians judicial powers equal to their own. These incidents disappointed the Indian elites who previously were convinced of the moral superiority of the British liberalism.

At the same time, the Indian press became one of the most important means of the political awakening. The Hindu, Amrita Bazar Patrika and Kesari newspapers were not just involved in creating political awareness but also brought the various linguistic and regional groups together under the umbrella national identity. This awakening was solidified by the effect of the socio-religious reform movements the Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj, Theosophical Society as well as the Ramakrishna Mission which tried to balance modernity with the spiritual traditions of India. Such movements brought back cultural pride, promoted social reform, and challenged the claims of civilizing superiority of colonialists.

Therefore, by 1880s the intellectual and emotional foundation of nationalism was already established. These forces came to a crystallization into the form of a political movement with the establishment of the Indian National Congress (INC) in 1885. The initial Congress leaders were of the view that the political development of India could be realized by having slow reform in the British constitutional system.

The Medium Period (1885-1905): Constitutional Nationalism.

The time between 1885 and 1905 is what is referred to as the Moderate Phase of Indian nationalism. This period of leadership was marked by the belief of the leadership in the justice of the British and the idea of peaceful constitutional agitation (Dadabhai Naoroji, Surendranath Banerjee, Pherozeshah Mehta, Gopal Krishna Gokhale and W. C. Bonnerjee). Moderates aimed at educating and unifying the Indian nation, making the Indian people politically aware, and gaining administrative and legislative reforms with the help of petitions, speeches, and resolutions.

The aims of the Moderates were small but liberal. Their demands were to increase legislative councils, to put more Indians in civil services, to reduce land revenue, and the press and the freedom of speech. During Congress meetings like Calcutta session (1886) and Bombay session (1889) resolutions were made demanding the separation of the judiciary and the executive, cut down on military spending and treating Indians equally in the workplace. It had their principle which was captured in the concept of self-government within the Empire which implied independence without challenge by Naoroji.

But the success of the Moderates was not much. The British government had been adamant to petitions and resolutions made, even after two decades. The Indian Councils Act of 1892, put as a reform, made only ornamental changes to the situation which restricted the representation and provided no real legislative authority. In addition, British authorities usually rejected leaders of the Congress as disloyal agitators. The constitutionalism that had been subjected to by the Moderates and their elitist leadership have estranged the masses to the extent that the nationalist movement was reduced to the urban educated classes.

However, the moderates were also very important in the background. They constructed the organizational structure of the national movement, secular and inclusive politics, and established an ideological base of democratic government. Their tactics of argument, logic and non-violence would go on to inform Gandhian politics and their expression of economical demands would create a platform upon which they could be united to resist. The increasing impatience with their more reserved approach and the British indifference however, led to a more aggressive and radical period of nationalism.

The Rise of Extremism (1905-1919): Aggressive Nationalism and Awakening of the Masses.

The beginning of the twentieth century was the turning point of Indian nationalism. The real trigger of the Extremism was the Partition of Bengal (1905) carried out by Lord Curzon. The partition was long perceived to be an attempt to separate both the Hindu and Muslim members of the Bengal population and disempower the nationalist movements, which was clearly not intended to be administered on the basis of administrative convenience. This incident was deeply felt and as a result the Swadeshi and Boycott Movements were born which marked a new beginning of action and mass involvement.

The Extremists headed by Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Bipin Chandra Pal and Lala Lajpat Rai did not believe in petitions and persuasion by the Moderates. They focused on Swaraj (self-rule), Swadeshi (use of local products), Boycott of British goods and National Education as the pillars of political action. The slogan of the generation of the young nationalists was Tilak and his well-known statement, swaraj is my birthright and I shall have it. The Extremists tried to wake

up the people using their cultural pride, religious icons, and historical heritage. Festivals like Ganapati and Shivaji Jayanti helped Tilak unite the people so as to mobilize them politically.

The Swadeshi Movement that originated in Bengal and spread rapidly to other parts of India did not just stop at economic self-reliance, but a cultural declaration of identity. The national schools were set up; the national industries were restored and the national songs and literature were written and read. Such leaders as Aurobindo Ghosh provided the movement with a spiritual aspect as it was a moral and divine mission. It also left women and youth to engage in the movement and this was the first time in Indian politics that the popular masses participated at large scale.

Nevertheless, the emergence of Extremism caused the internal division of the Congress as well. The ideological divide between constitutional reformism and revolutionary activism was revealed by the Surat Split (1907) between the Moderates and the Extremists. Although the Moderates were afraid that repression could come as a result of aggressive manoeuvres, the Extremists thought that without self-sacrifice and struggle, one would not get the real freedom. This split was abused by the British authorities who initiated a wave of oppressive actions, such as arrests, bans and deportations. In 1908, Tilak was thrown into prison and a lot of revolutionary groups were outlawed.

The Extremist phase was able to turn the nationalist movement that remained an elite phenomenon into a mass phenomenon despite the repression. It inspired an air of resistance and self-affirmation, closing the gap between the political theory and the popular action. The Extremists also encouraged the revolutionary formations like the Anushilan Samiti and the Jugantar which plunged in to the acts of armed resistance. These movements were localized but they were a representation of the increasing impatience in relation to the colonial rule.

The influence of Social and Cultural Forces.

This nationalism was not only transformed on a political front but was also heavily cultural. The vernacular press was the life line of the movement as it gathered the opinion and highlighted the British injustices. Such articles as Kesari, Bande Mataram, and Hindu Patriot turned out to be vehicles of ideology. Vande Mataram, the song based on the novel Anandamath by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee became a national song of resistance, which could make people unite regardless of the language or region.

At the same time, the Indian renaissance of literature, art, and philosophy gave greater moral foundations to nationalism. Other authors like Rabindranath Tagore and Aurobindo Ghash redefined nationalism in terms of spiritual search of collective self-realization. The Indian intelligentsia was inspired by the national traditions on the one hand, and the world movements on the other hand, specifically, the Irish Home Rule struggle, the Italian Risorgimiento, and the Japanese triumph over Russia (1905) to claim the right of nations to self-determination.

The involvement of women in the Swadeshi movement, the boycott movement, spinning and education indicated that nationalism was spreading to other spheres beyond the male dominated ones. Women like Sarala Devi Chaudhurani and Basanti Devi became the epitome of the new feminist aspect of the struggle. Accordingly, the Indian nationalism of this century came to be

a complex phenomenon politically, culturally, socially and morally based in the sense of the collective affirmation of identity and dignity.

Theoretical Approaches and International Situation.

As a theoretical perspective, the moderate-extremist politics transformation is the shift between the liberal nationalism and aggressive or militant nationalism and the process was similar to other colonized communities. Moderates were the liberal stage, which focused on reason, slow transformation, and moral persuasion of the colonizer. On the other hand, the Extremists represented the imagined community in action turning nationalism into a participatory, emotional, and mass experience as defined by political theorist; Benedict Anderson.

Indian nationalism was also formed in the global context. The anti-imperialist and nationalist movements emerged in Asia and Africa during the first half of the twentieth century. The victory of Japan in the Russo-Japanese War (1905) not only disproved the myth about the invincible Europeans but also motivated Asian nationalists. On the same note, the Young Turk Revolution (1908) and Chinese Revolution (1911) solidified the notion that colonialism could be contested using self-determination. Indian leaders also observed these developments keenly, deriving moral strength out of them.

Another change in the political scene was caused by the World War I (19141918). The involvement of the Indian soldiers, more than one million of them in the war, created hopes of political concessions by Britain. Yet, the disillusionment after the war, which was aggravated by economic hardship and Rowlatt Acts of 1919 left a lot of resentment. These trends preconditioned the appearance of Mahatma Gandhi who combined the constitutionalism of the Moderates and the moral zeal of the Extremists into a new pattern of mass disobedience.

Synthesis: The History of the Moderate-Extremist Transition.

By 1919, the ideological polarization between the Moderates and the Extremists had died down and, in its place, there was the more integrated nationalism. Indian politics had grown up and the maturity of politics was marked by the Lucknow Pact of 1916 that reunited the Congress factions and involved the collaboration with Muslim League. The self-reliance of the Extremists and the constitutionalism of the Moderates were combined into a united quest towards Swaraj. This amalgamation was the basis of the Gandhian age, which was the fusion of moral discipline, political strategy and mass mobilization.

The change that occurred between the Moderates and the Extremists was not a break then but a progression. The intellectual and institutional preparations were made by the Moderates, and the passion and mass energy were brought into the movement by the Extremists. The two of them turned Indian nationalism into a national crusade, which was previously an elite discourse.

Conclusion

The years 1885-1919 saw a radical and a dynamic shift in the Indian nationalism which had hitherto been a timid, elitist Mode of protest, shifting to a health mass struggle of self-assertion. Moderates provided the intellectual, institutional and discursive bedrock of nationalism: they

developed economic criticism (in the Drain Theory), defended representative institutions, and encouraged a constitutional culture of discourse. Due to their belief in British liberalism, they eventually succumbed to their disappointment following the insincere and oppressive responses by the government.

The swadeshi movement led to the Extremist phase that was facilitated by Partition of Bengal. The nationalism of the Lal-Bal-Pal triumvirate re-thought nationalism as a moral, cultural and popular movement, agitating toward Swaraj, boycott, and national education. Their use of emotionally appealing symbols, celebrations and the use of vernacular media united masses of the population. Even though the Extremist agenda did not reach its full potential due to internal fissures (as in the case of the Surat split) and colonial repression, their results were invaluable: they expanded the social foundation of nationalism and added energy and sense of purpose to what had so far been an elite project.

By 1919, the production of such tendencies was evident. The coming together of the Congress and the changing political environment, formed by the First World War and colonial excess (e.g. the Rowlatt Acts), provided an opportunity to a new type of leaders. The introduction of Mahatma Gandhi as an Indian politician can be explained as the combination of the Moderate belief in the constitutional approaches and the Extremist belief in the mass mobilization and moral courage. The arguments and conflicts between Moderates and Extremists, in effect, were not here dialectical phases in the development of Indian nationalism.

In prospect, the history of this development gives the future of postcolonial India its negotiating position between constitutional democracy and popular mobilization. The conflicts between the establishment and grassroots energy, between compromise and confrontation are still present in the Indian political culture. This period of formation is therefore continuing to be vital not only as a historical compendium reflection, but as an interpretative tool to the present-day issues of political legitimacy, mass mobilization, and ideological opposition in India.

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